DANTE

INFERNO

Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by Anthony Esolen

Illustrations by Gustave Doré



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Canto Three

Virgil and Dante enter the gates of **Hell.** *There they meet the* **small-souled,** *those unnamed spirits whose cowardice relegates them to the vestibule of the lower world. Passing onward, they come to the river* **Acheron,** *whose ferryman,* **Charon,** *ushers the gathered souls to their eternal misery.*

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE,
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL PAIN,
I AM THE WAY TO GO AMONG THE LOST.

JUSTICE CAUSED MY HIGH ARCHITECT TO MOVE:
DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE CREATED ME,
THE HIGHEST WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE.

BEFORE ME THERE WERE NO CREATED THINGS
BUT THOSE THAT LAST FOREVER—AS DO I.
ABANDON ALL HOPE YOU WHO ENTER HERE.

I saw these words of dark and harsh intent
engraved upon the archway of a gate.
"Teacher," I said, "their sense is hard for me."
And he to me, as one who read my thoughts:
"Here you must leave distrust and doubt behind,
here you must put all cowardice to death.
We have come to the place I spoke about,
where you would see the souls who dwell in pain,
for they have lost the good of intellect."
And after he had laid his hand on mine
with cheerful countenance, strengthening my resolve,
he led me to the secret things below.

There sighs and moans and utter wailing swept
  resounding through the dark and starless air.
  I heard them for the first time, and I wept.
Shuddering din of strange and various tongues,
  sorrowful words and accents pitched with rage,
  shrill and harsh voices, blows of hands with these
Raised up a tumult ever swirling round
  in that dark air untinted by a dawn,
  as sand-grains whipping when the whirlwind blows.
Said I—a blind of horror held my brain—
  "My Teacher, what are all these cries I hear?
  Who are these people conquered by their pain?"
And he to me: "This state of misery
  is clutched by those sad souls whose works in life
  merited neither praise nor infamy.
Here they're thrown in among that petty choir
  of angels who were for themselves alone,
  not rebels, and not faithful to the Lord.
Heaven drives them out—to keep its beauty pure,
  nor will the deep abyss receive their souls,
  lest they bring glory to the wicked there."
And I: "Teacher, what weighs upon their hearts?
  What grief is it that makes them wail so loud?"
  And he responded, "A few words will do.
These souls, immortal, have no hope for death,
  and their blind lives crept groveling so low
  they leer with envy at every other lot.
The world allows no rumor of them now.
  Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.
  Let's say no more about them. Look, and pass."
And I, beholding, saw a banner fly,
  whirling about and racing with such speed
  it seemed that it would scorn to stand, or pause,
And all behind that flag in a long file
  so numerous a host of people ran,
  I had not thought death had unmade so many.

When I had recognized a few of these,
I saw and knew at once the shade of him,
the craven one,° who made the great denial.
Immediately I understood the truth:
this was the low sect of those paltry souls
hateful to God and to his enemies.
These worthless wretches who had never lived
were pricked to motion now perpetually
by flies and wasps that stung their naked limbs
And ran the blood in furrows down their faces,
which, mingled with their tears, fell to their feet,
where loathsome maggots gathered up the rot.
When I had turned my gaze ahead, I saw
a band of people gathered at the banks
of a broad river. "Teacher, if you please,
Let me know of those people, and what law
makes them appear so eager to cross over,
from what I make out through the feeble light."
And he responded, "These things will be made
plain to you when we fix our steps upon
the melancholy shores of Acheron."°
Then with eyes fallen low and full of shame,
fearing that I had burdened him with talk,
I held my words until we reached the stream.
And look here—coming at us in a boat,
an old man, hair and lank skin white with age,
hollering, "Woe to you, you crooked souls!
Give up all hope to look upon the sky!
I come to lead you to the other shore,
into eternal darkness—fire and ice!
And as for you there, you the living soul,
get away from these others who are dead."
But when he saw that I would not depart

° *the craven one:* Some critics say it is Pontius Pilate; most agree that it is Pope Celestine V, who abdicated the papacy in 1294. See notes.

° *Acheron:* one of the five rivers of the classical underworld. Three others, Styx, Phlegethon, and Cocytus, Dante will encounter below. All are really stages of the same river (see 14.116–38). The other one, Lethe, he will cross at the top of the Mountain of Purgatory (*Purg.* 28.130).

He said, "Another way, another port
will bring your passage to the shore—not here.
A lighter boat° must carry you across."
"Quit grumbling, Charon," said my guide. "Be still!
No questions—only know that this is willed
where power is power to do whatever it will."
Then all at once the goatish jowls fell quiet,
those of the rower of that livid swamp,
whose furious eyes yet flashed with wheels of fire.
But when they heard the old man's cruel words
those naked and exhausted souls turned white,
gnashing their teeth with fury for their fate—
Hurled blasphemy at God and at their parents,
at the whole human race, the place, the time,
and the seed of their begetting and their birth.
Then all these people, wailing bitterly,
gathered upon the cursed riverbank
that awaits each man who does not fear the Lord.
Charon the demon, eyes of fiery coal,
signals them all to get into the boat—
smacks with his oar the soul that lags behind.
As in the fall when leaves are lifted off,
one drops—another—till the naked branch
sees all its garment lying on the earth,
So the bad seed of Adam one by one
toss themselves from the shore at Charon's sign,
as hawks returning to the master's call.
They cross the murky waters, and before
they disembark upon the farther side,
another throng has gathered at the shore.
My gracious Teacher spoke to me: "My son,
all souls that die beneath the wrath of God
from every nation here collect in one,
And they are prompt to cross the river, for
Justice Divine so goads and spurs them on,
that what they fear turns into their desire.

° *a lighter boat:* the ferry from the Tiber's shores to the Mountain of Purgatory (*Purg.* 2.100–5).

No good soul ever passes by these ways,
and so, if Charon rails about you, well—
you know how to interpret what he says."
He finished, and the gloomy plains of Hell
shook with such might that though the terror's past
it bathes me in a sweat to think of it.
That tear-drenched land heaved forth a sudden blast,
flashing a lightning bolt as red as fire
that vanquished all my senses, and I fell
As a man falls whom sleep has overcome.