

Canto III

the vestibule of hell

The Opportunists

The Poets pass the Gate of Hell and are immediately assailed by cries of anguish. Dante sees the first of the souls in torment. They are The Opportunists, those souls who in life were neither for good nor evil but only for themselves. Mixed with them are those outcasts who took no sides in the Rebellion of the Angels.¹ They are neither in Hell nor out of it. Eternally unclassified, they race round and round pursuing a wavering banner that runs forever before them through the dirty air; and as they run they are pursued by swarms of wasps and hornets, who sting them and produce a constant flow of blood and [putrid](#) matter which trickles down the bodies of the sinners and is feasted upon by loathsome worms and maggots who coat the ground.

The law of Dante's Hell is the law of symbolic retribution. As they sinned so are they punished. They took no sides, therefore they are given no place. As they pursued the ever-shifting illusion of their own advantage, changing their courses with every changing wind, so they pursue eternally an elusive, ever-shifting banner. As their sin was a darkness, so they move in darkness. As their own guilty conscience pursued them, so they are pursued by swarms of wasps and hornets. And as their actions were a moral filth, so they run eternally through the filth of worms and maggots which they themselves feed.

Dante recognizes several, among them Pope Celestine V, ² but without delaying to speak to any of these souls, the Poets move on to Acheron, ³ the first of the rivers of Hell. Here the newly arrived souls of the damned gather and wait for monstrous Charon⁴ to ferry them over to punishment. Charon recognizes Dante as a living man and angrily refuses him passage. Virgil forces Charon to serve them, but Dante swoons with terror, and does not reawaken until he is on the other side.

I am the way into the city of woe.	And he then as initiate to novice: ⁸
I am the way to a forsaken people.	“Here must you put by all division of spirit
I am the way into eternal sorrow.	15 and gather your soul against all cowardice.
sacred justice moved my architect.	This is the place I told you to expect.
5 I was raised here by divine omnipotence,	Here you shall pass among the fallen people,
primordial ⁵ love and ultimate intellect.	souls who have lost the good of intellect.”
only those elements time cannot wear ⁶	So saying, he put forth his hand to me,
were made before me, and beyond time I stand. ⁷	20 and with a gentle and encouraging smile
abandon all hope ye who enter here.	he led me through the gate of mystery.
10 These mysteries I read cut into stone	Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled
above a gate. And turning I said: “Master,	on the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.
what is the meaning of this harsh inscription?”	A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents
	toiled

25 in pain and anger. Voices hoarse and shrill
and sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised
tumult and pandemonium⁹ that still
whirls on the air forever dirty with it
as if a whirlwind sucked at sand. And I,
30 holding my head in horror, cried: "Sweet Spirit,
what souls are these who run through this black
haze?"
And he to me: "These are the nearly soulless
whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise.
They are mixed here with that [despicable](#) corps
35 of angels who were neither God nor Satan,
but only for themselves. The High Creator
scourged¹⁰ them from Heaven for its perfect
beauty,
and Hell will not receive them since the wicked
might feel some glory over them." And I:
40 "Master, what gnaws at them so hideously
their [lamentation](#) stuns the very air?"
"They have no hope of death," he answered me,
"and in their blind and unattaining state
their miserable lives have sunk so low
45 that they must envy every other fate.
No word of them survives their living season.
Mercy and Justice deny them even a name.
Let us not speak of them: look, and pass on."
I saw a banner there upon the mist.

50 Circling and circling, it seemed to [scorn](#) all
pause.
So it ran on, and still behind it pressed
a never-ending rout of souls in pain.
I had not thought death had undone so many
as passed before me in that mournful train.
55 And some I knew among them; last of all
I recognized the shadow of that soul
who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial.¹¹
At once I understood for certain: these
were of that retrograde¹² and faithless crew
60 hateful to God and to His enemies.

These wretches never born and never dead
ran naked in a swarm of wasps and hornets
that goaded them the more the more they fled,
and made their faces stream with bloody gout
65 of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet
to be swallowed there by loathsome worms and
maggots.
Then looking onward I made out a throng
assembled on the beach of a wide river,
whereupon I turned to him: "Master, I long
70 to know what souls these are, and what strange
usage
makes them as eager to cross as they seem to be
in this infected light." At which the Sage:

“All this shall be made known to you when we stand

on the joyless beach of Acheron.” And I

75 cast down my eyes, sensing a [reprimand](#)

in what he said, and so walked at his side

in silence and ashamed until we came

through the dead cavern to that sunless tide.

There, steering toward us in an ancient ferry

80 came an old man [13](#) with a white bush of hair,

bellowing: “Woe to you depraved souls! Bury

here and forever all hope of Paradise:

I come to lead you to the other shore,

into eternal dark, into fire and ice.

85 And you who are living yet, I say begone

from these who are dead.” But when he saw me stand

against his violence he began again:

“By other windings [14](#) and by other steerage

shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not here!

90 A lighter craft than mine must give you passage.”

And my Guide to him: “Charon, bite back your spleen:

this has been willed where what is willed must be,

and is not yours to ask what it may mean.” [15](#)

The steersman of that marsh of ruined souls,

95 who wore a wheel of flame around each eye,

stifled the rage that shook his woolly jowls.

But those unmanned and naked spirits there

turned pale with fear and their teeth began to chatter

at sound of his crude bellow. In despair

100 they blasphemed God, their parents, their time on earth,

the race of Adam, and the day and the hour

and the place and the seed and the womb that gave them birth.

But all together they drew to that grim shore

where all must come who lose the fear of God.

105 Weeping and cursing they come for evermore,

and demon Charon with eyes like burning coals

herds them in, and with a whistling oar

flails on the stragglers to his wake [16](#) of souls.

As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down

110 until the branch stands bare above its tatters

spread on the rustling ground, so one by one

the evil seed of Adam in its Fall [17](#)

cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore

and streamed away like birds who hear their call.

115 So they are gone over that shadowy water,

and always before they reach the other shore

a new noise stirs on this, and new throngs gather.

“My son,” the courteous Master said to me,

“all who die in the shadow of God’s wrath

120 converge to this from every clime and country.

And all pass over eagerly, for here

Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so

their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they
fear.[18](#)

No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing;

125 therefore if Charon rages at your presence

you will understand the reason for his cursing.”

When he had spoken, all the twilight country

shook so violently, the terror of it

bathes me with sweat even in memory:

130 the tear-soaked ground gave out a sigh of wind

that spewed itself in flame on a red sky,

and all my shattered senses left me. Blind,

like one whom sleep comes over in a swoon,[19](#)

I stumbled into darkness and went down.