

**LA DIVINA COMMEDIA**  
A New Translation by Vincent Di Stefano

**Inferno, Canto III**

“Through me you enter the tormented city,  
Through me you come to eternal pain,  
Through me you join with the desolate souls.

It was justice that moved the high One who made me  
I was brought into being by the power divine,  
By the sum of all knowledge, the wellspring of love.

Before me was no thing that was not eternal  
And I will endure throughout endless time  
Abandon all hope, all ye who now enter.”

These words written in tenebrous hues  
Suspended above a great arching doorway.  
I asked my Master: “What does this mean?”

He said to me then with clear-headed wisdom:  
“It is best now to put aside all of your doubt  
And put far behind you all faint-hearted fear.

We arrive at that place of which I have spoken  
Where you’ll see dire souls in deep agony  
Bereft of all reason, without understanding.”

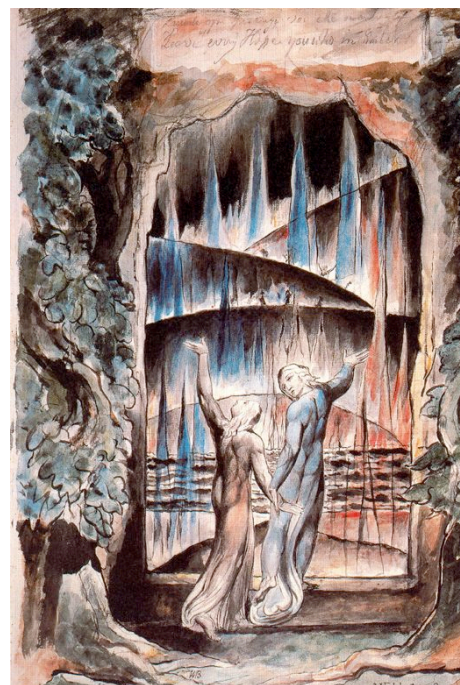
As he gently rested his hand upon mine  
And knowingly smiled, I found consolation  
And then came to know what had been concealed.

Sighing and wailing and deep grief resounded  
Echoing stark through the starless air  
Which brought me both sorrow and a streaming of tears.

Such a babble of tongues, of voices in terror  
Agonised words and the roarings of rage,  
Sounds of hands slapping, harsh rasping voices

All told of a tumult that rolled unrelenting  
Like sand whipped aloft by a whistling whirlwind  
All through the rank air in that place of despair.

With my head now bound in a shroud of confusion,  
I said: “My master, what do I hear?  
And what people are these so defeated by grief?”



William Blake, *The Portals of Hell*, ~1825

Then he said to me: "This miserable state  
Is the fate that now holds the pitiful souls  
Whose lives were worth neither praise nor disdain.

They are now merged with that wretched chorus  
Of half-hearted angels neither rebels nor true  
Who served only themselves, ignoring their maker.

They were thrown out of heaven that it be not tainted  
But the depths of hell refused to receive them  
Lest their presence incite the contempt of those there."

Then I said to him: "What weight is upon them  
That makes them lament so desolately?"  
He said: "I will tell you in very few words.

The ones that are here have no hope of dying  
And their visionless lives have become so debased  
That they simmer resentful of all other fates,

All trace of their lives is erased from men's memories  
They are spurned and despised by both justice and mercy  
So discuss them no further, just observe and pass by."

And as I beheld I saw a large banner  
Furling and whirling in turbulent motion  
That with every turn seemed to call out disdain

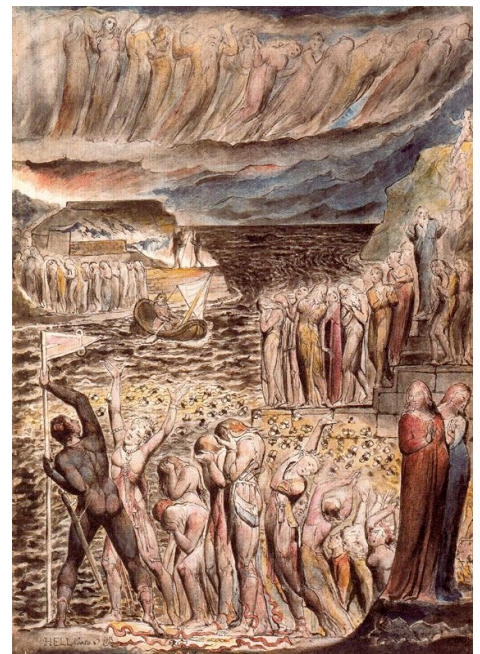
And stretching behind to the furthest horizon  
Were more souls than ever I deigned to imagine  
Undone and unmade by the coming of death.

And among them I saw some familiar faces  
Including the shade of a cowardly one  
Who dishonoured his life by a stubborn refusal.

It was then that I knew with the fullness of certainty  
That this was the tribe of villainous souls  
Despised by both God and by God's enemies.

These wretches who never had been truly human  
Now naked and tortured by hornets and wasps  
That surged and hovered and stormed all around them.

Their faces were streaked with black blood that flowed  
Then mingled with tears and fell to the ground  
To be sucked up by worms that were waiting below.



William Blake, *At the Banks of the Acheron*,  
~ 1825

And as I looked on past the ones there before me  
To the many more massed on the bank of a river  
I asked: “My master, grant me this query:

Who are these people I see in the twilight  
And what has compelled them to gather together  
Seemingly eager to cross the wide river?”

And he said to me: “I will answer your question  
Only after such time that our feet come to rest  
On the cheerless banks of the Acheron River.”

With downcast eyes and feeling uneasy  
Fearing my questions had deeply annoyed him  
I spoke not a word till we reached the broad river.

And behold on a boat that slowly moved closer  
A haggard old man with skin pale as death  
Screaming: “Woe be upon you, despicable souls!

Never again will you see a blue sky  
I come now to ferry you to the far shore  
To eternal darkness, to fire and to ice.

And you over there! You, who are living  
Go now! Withdraw from the ones who are dead.”  
But seeing me steadfast and standing my ground

He said: “By other ways and by other doors  
Elsewhere, not here, you may find a shore  
And lighter wood that will carry you over.”

My guide said to him: “Be calm now, Charon.  
Our coming was willed by the source of all will  
So hold your wild tongue and ask nothing more.”

Then the tough woolly cheeks of the fearsome steersman  
Of that misty marsh fell silent and still  
And wheels of fierce fire encircled his eyes.

But the naked and weary souls there before us  
Grew suddenly pale and clenched hard their teeth  
As they finally grasped his ruthless intent.

They cursed their God and they cursed their parents  
And they cursed that place and the whole human race  
And the passion that brought them to earthly birth.



Jose Benlliure y Gill, *The Barque of Charon*, 1919

Then they all retreated together as one  
Loudly bemoaning the vicious abyss  
That awaits every man who has no fear of God.

But the demonic Charon with his eyes of fire  
Drove and herded them on together  
Beating all who stalled with his weighty oar.

And as the dry leaves of autumn fall one on the other  
Till the naked branch sees its once-green mantle  
All spread out below on the waiting earth

So too fell the bad seeds of Adam  
One on the other at that desolate shore  
Like birds that attend to each other's call.

And so they rode o'er the misty waters  
But before even reaching the other side  
A new herd had arrived awaiting their turn.

"Dear son of mine," said my courtly master,  
"Those who have died in God's displeasure  
Are all gathered here from every land

And they are all ready to cross over this river  
Goaded relentless by justice divine  
Over-riding all fear of what may await them.

Since no noble soul has ever here rested  
Pay no heed to the ferryman's ranting  
As you now have knowledge of what drives him so."

And just as he said this, the dark land trembled  
So strongly that now at the very recall  
A sudden wet sweat breaks out over me.

The sorrowing earth exhaled a vast breath  
That billowed and grew with a reddening light  
Submerging completely all of my senses.

And I fell as one taken, abducted by sleep.



Gustav Dore, *Charon at the Acheron*, 1857