Canto III The vestibule of hell: The opportunists

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW.
SACRED JUSTICE MOVED MY ARCHITECT.
I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE, PRIMORDIAL LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLECT.
ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND. ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.

These mysteries I read cut into stone
Above a gate. And turning I sad: “Master, What is the meaning of this harsh inscription?”

And he then as initiate to novice:
“Here must you put by all division of spirit
And gather your soul against all cowardice.”

This is the place I told you to expect.
Here you shall pass among the fallen people. Souls who have lost the good of intellect.”

So saying, he put forth his hand to me,
And with a gentle and encouraging smile
He led me through the gate of mystery.

Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled On the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.
A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents toiled

In pain and anger, voices hoarse and shrill
And sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised Tumult and pandemonium that still

Whirls on the air forever dirty with it As if a whirlwind sucked at sand. And I,
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
Of angels who were neither for God nor Satan,
But only for themselves. The High Creator

Scourged them from Heaven for its perfect beauty, And Hell will not receive them since the wicked Might feel some glory over them.” And I:

“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 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. 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.

And some I knew among them; last of all
I recognized the shadow of that soul
Who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial.

At once I understood for certain: these
Were of that retrograde and faithless crew Hateful to God and to His enemies.

These wretches never born and never dear
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 gouts 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

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 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 us in an ancient ferry Came an old man 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.

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 and other steerage
Shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not here! A lighter craft than mine must give 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.”

The steersman of that marsh of ruined souls,
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

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. Weeping and cursing they come for evermore,

And demon Charon with eyes like burning coals Herds them on, and with the whistling oar Flails on the stragglers to his wake of souls.

As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down 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
Cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore
And streamed away like birds who hear their call.

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 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.

No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing; 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:

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, I stumbled into darkness and went down.

What to Annotate in your section:

* Difficult words (duh)
* Personification and overall meaning in the first three tercets
* Instances of intense imagery
* The location(s) it changes!
* People identified by name
* The epic simile in lines 112-117
* The allusion in lines 55-57
* The significance of the people damned to the vestibule