

Dante Alighieri

The Divine Comedy

Dante called his poem a comedy, he says, for two reasons: because it has a sad beginning and a cheerful ending, and because it is written in a "middle" style, treating alike of lowly and lofty things. Midway in life the poet finds himself lost in the forest of worldly cares, beset by the three beasts, Pride, Avarice, and Worldly Pleasure. Virgil, who is the embodiment of moral philosophy, appears and leads him through the Hell of worldly sin and suffering, through the Purgatory of repentance, to the calm of the earthly Paradise. Mere philosophy can go no further. The poet is here taken under the guidance of Beatrice, the embodiment of divine wisdom, who leads him through Paradise to the throne of God. Such, in the briefest form, is the argument of the *Divine Comedy*; this statement carries the actual story and the allegory side by side. The first division of the triple vision is the Inferno. Dante's Inferno is an inverted cone, having its mouth in a deep rugged valley, its sides sloping down to the center of the earth. When Lucifer fell from heaven the earth retired before him, making this hollow cone. This is divided into nine circles, in which the lost souls suffer. These souls are grouped into three main classes: the incontinent, the violent, and the fraudulent. The first circle of the Inferno is Limbo, where are the souls of children and the unbaptized; of the heathen philosophers and poets. They are neither in pain nor glory, they do not shriek nor groan but only sigh.

Inferno

Canto I The Three Beast, Virgill

Halfway through the journey we are living
I found myself deep in a darkened forest,
For I had lost all trace of the straight path.

5 Ah how hard it is to tell what it was like,
How wild the forest was, how dense and rugged!
To think of it still fills my mind with panic.

So bitter it is that death is hardly worse!
But to describe the good discovered there
I here will tell the other things I saw.

10 I cannot say clearly how I entered there,
So drowsy with sleep had I grown at that hour
When first I wandered off from the true way.

15 But when I had reached the base of a hill,
There at the border where the valley ended
That had cut my heart to the quick with panic,

I looked up at the hill and saw its shoulder
Mantled already with the planet's light
That leads all people straight by every road.

20 With that my panic quieted a little
After lingering on in the lake of my heart
Through the night I had so grievously passed.

And like a person who with panting breath
Struggles ashore out of the wide ocean
Only to glance back at the treacherous surf,

25 Just so my mind, racing on ahead,
Turned back to marvel at the pass no one
Ever before had issued from alive.

After resting awhile my worn-out body,
I pressed on up the wasted slope so that
30 I always had one firm foot on the ground.

But look! right near the upgrade of the climb
Loomed a fleet and nimble-footed leopard
With coat completely covered by dark spots!

He did not flinch or back off from my gaze,
35 But blocking the path that lay before me,
Time and again he forced me to turn around.

The hour was the beginning of the morning,
And the sun was rising with those stars
That first attended it when divine Love

40 Set these lovely creations round in motion,
So that the early hour and the pleasant season
Gave me good reason to keep up my hopes

Of that fierce beast there with his gaudy pelt.
But not so when — to add now to my fears —
45 In front of me I caught sight of a lion!

He appeared to be coming straight at me
With head held high and furious for hunger,
So that the air itself seemed to be shaking.

50 And then a wolf stalked, ravenously lean,
Seemingly laden with such endless cravings
That she had made many live in misery!

She caused my spirits to sink down so low,
From the dread I felt in seeing her there,
I lost all hope of climbing to the summit.

55 And just as a man, anxious for big winnings,
But the time comes instead for him to lose,
Cries and grieves the more he thinks about it,

60 So did the restless she-beast make me feel
When, edging closer toward me, step by step,
She drove me back to where the sun is silent.

While I was falling back to lower ground,
Before my eyes now came a figure forward
Of one grown feeble from long being mute.

65 When I saw him in that deserted spot,
"Pity me!" I shouted out to him,
"Whoever you are, a shade or living man."

"Not a man," he answered. "Once a man,
Of parents who had come from Lombardy;

Both of them were Mantuans by birth.

70 "I was born late in Julius's reign
And dwelt at Rome under the good Augustus
In the period of false and lying gods.

"A poet I was, and I sang of the just
Son of Anchises who embarked from Troy
75 After proud Ilium was burned to ashes.

"But why do you turn back to so much grief?
Why not bound up the delightful mountain
Which is the source and font of every joy?"

80 "Are you then Virgil and that wellspring
That pours forth so lush a stream of speech?"
Shamefacedly I responded to him.

"O glory and light of all other poets,
May the long study and the profound love
That made me search your work come to my aid!

85 "You are my mentor and my chosen author:
Alone you are the one from whom I have taken
The beautiful style that has brought me honor.

"Look at the beast that drove me to turn back!
Rescue me from her, celebrated sage,
90 For she causes my veins and pulse to tremble."

"You are destined to take another route,"
He answered, seeing me reduced to tears,
"If you want to be clear of this wilderness,

95 "Because this beast that forces you to cry out
Will not let anyone pass by her way
But harries him until she finally kills him.

"By nature she is so depraved and vicious
That her greedy appetite is never filled:
The more she feeds, the hungrier she grows.

100 "Many the animal she has mated with,
And will with more to come, until the Greyhound
That shall painfully slaughter her arrives.

"He shall not feast on property or pelf
But on wisdom, love, and manliness,
105 And he shall be born between Feltro and Feltro.

"He shall save low prostrated Italy
For which Nisus, Turnus, and Euryalus,
And the virgin Camilla died of wounds.

110 "He shall hunt the beast through every town
Until he chases her back down to hell
From which envy first had thrust her forth.

"I think and judge it best for you, then,

To follow me, for I will be your guide,
Directing you to an eternal place

115 "Where you shall listen to the desperate screams
And see the spirits of the past in torment,
As at his second death each one cries out;

"And you shall also see those who are happy
Even in flames, since they hope to come,
120 Whenever that may be, among the blessed.

"If you still wish to ascend to the blessed,
A soul worthier than I shall guide you:
On my departure I will leave you with her.

125 "For the Emperor who rules there above,
Since I lived in rebellion to his law,
Will not permit me to enter his city.

"Everywhere his kingdom comes: there he reigns,
There his heavenly city and high throne.
Oh happy the one elected to go there!"

130 And I said to him, "Poet, I entreat you,
By the God whom you have never known,
So may I flee from this and from worse evil,

"Lead me to the place you just described
That I may come to see Saint Peter's gate
135 And those you say are deeply sorrowful."

Then he moved on and I walked straight behind.

Canto IV The Poets in Limbo

A loud thunderclap shattered the deep
Sleep in my head, so that I started up
Like someone shaken forcibly awake.

5 Then, looking all around with rested eyes,
I stood straight up with a steady stare,
Attempting to discover where I was.

The truth is I found myself upon the edge
Of the chasm of the valley of salt tears
Which stores the clamor of unending crying.

10 Dark and deep and foggy was the valley:
So, when I strained my eyes to see the bottom,
I was not able to discern a thing.

"Now let us descend to the blind world
Below," the poet, pale as death, began:
15 "I will be first, and you shall follow me."

And I, observing the change in his color,

Asked, "How can I come if you are frightened,
You who strengthen me when I have doubts?"

20 And he told me, "The anguish of the people
Who are down here blanches my complexion
With the pity that you mistake for fear.

"Let us go on: the long road makes it urgent."
So he went down, and so he had me enter
The first circle ringing the abyss.

25 Here, as far as listening could tell,
The only lamentations were the sighs
That caused the everlasting air to tremble.

Suffering without torments drew these sighs
From crowds, multitudinous and vast,
30 Of babies and of women and of men.

My gracious teacher said, "Do you not question
Who these spirits are whom you observe?
Before you go on, I would have you know

35 "They did not sin: yet even their just merits
Were not enough, for they lacked baptism,
The gateway of the faith that you profess.

"And, if they lived before the Christian era,
They did not worship God in the right way:
And I myself am one of those poor souls.

40 "For this failure and for no other fault
Here we are lost, and our sole punishment
Is without hope to live on in desire."

Deep sorrow crushed my heart when I heard him,
Because both men and women of great worth
45 I knew to be suspended here in limbo.

"Tell me, my master, tell me, my good lord,"
I then began, wishing to be assured
Of that belief which conquers every error,

50 "Have any left here, either through their merits
Or someone else's, to be blessed later on?"
And he, grasping my unexpressed appeal,

Responded, "I was newly in this place
When I saw come down here a mighty One
Crowned with the symbol of his victory.

55 "He snatched away the shade of our first parent,
Of his son Abel, and the shade of Noah,
Of Moses, the obedient lawgiver,

60 "Of Abraham the patriarch, King David,
Israel with his father, with his children,
And with Rachel for whom he worked so hard,

"And many others, and he made them blessed.
But I would have you know, before these souls
No human being ever had been saved."

65 We did not keep from walking while he talked,
But all along we journeyed through the forest —
I mean the forest that was dense with spirits.

Our path had not yet led us far away
From where I'd slept, when I descried a fire
That overcame a hemisphere of shadows.

70 We were still a little distance from it
But close enough for me to dimly see
That honored people tenanted that place.

"O you, glory of the arts and sciences,
Who are these souls who here have the high honor
75 Of being kept distinct from all the rest?"

And he told me, "Their distinguished names
Which yet re-echo in your world above
Win for them heaven's grace which furthers them."

80 Meanwhile I could hear a voice that called,
"Honor to the most illustrious poet! (1)
His shade that had departed now returns."

After the voice had ceased and all was still,
I saw four lofty shades approaching us,
In their appearance neither sad nor joyful.

85 My worthy teacher now began by saying,
"Notice there the one with sword in hand,
Coming before the three others like a lord:

"That is Homer, the majestic poet.
The next who comes is Horace, the satirist;
90 Ovid is third, and Lucan last of all.

"Since each one shares with me the name of poet,
The name you heard the single voice call out,
They honor me, and they do well to do so."

95 So I saw that brilliant schola meeting
Under the master of sublimest song (2)
Who above all others soars like an eagle.

After conversing for some time together,
They turned to me with a cordial greeting:
With that, my master broke into a smile.

100 And then they showed me a still greater honor,
For they included me within their group,
So that I was the sixth among those minds.

This way we walked together toward the light,
Speaking of things as well unmentioned here
105 As there it was as well to speak of them.

We came up to the base of a royal castle,
Seven times encircled by high walls,
Moated all about by a beautiful stream.

110 This we crossed as if it were firm ground;
Through seven gates I entered with these sages
Until we reached a meadow of fresh grass.

People were here with slow and serious eyes,
Of great authority by their appearance.
They hardly spoke, with their gentle voices.

115 We moved along then over to one side,
Into an open clearing, bright and high up,
In order to view all the persons there.

120 Straight before me on the enameled green
Such eminent spirits were presented to me
That I exult in having witnessed them.

I saw Electra, with many companions, (3)
Among whom I noted Hector and Aeneas,
And Caesar, in armor, with his falcon eyes.

125 I saw Camilla and Penthesilea, (4)
And on the other side I saw King Latinus (5)
Who sat with his daughter Lavinia.

I saw that Brutus who banished the Tarquin, (6)
Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia, (7)
And by himself, I noticed Saladin. (8)

130 When I lifted up my eyes a little higher,
I saw Aristotle, the master-knower, (9)
Seated with the family of philosophers.

All look up to him, all do him honor;
There also I saw Socrates and Plato,
Nearest to him, in front of all the rest;

135 Democritus, who ascribes the world to chance,
Diogenes, Thales, Anaxagoras,
Empedocles, Zeno, and Heraclitus.

140 I saw the worthy categorizer of herbs,
Dioscorides, I mean; and I saw Orpheus, (10)
Tully, Linus, Seneca the moralist, (11)

Euclid the geometer, Ptolemy, (12)
Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna, (13)
And Averroes, who wrote the Commentary. (14)

145 I cannot here describe them all in full,
For my lengthy theme so presses me forward
That often words fall short of the occasion.

The company of six drops down to two.
My knowing guide leads me another way,

150 Out of the quiet, into the quavering air,

And I come to a scene where nothing shines.

(1) The bard sublime--Virgil.

(2) The monarch of sublimest song--Homer.

(3) Electra, mother of Dardanus the founder of Troy, was a forbear of Hector and Aeneas.

(4) Camilla was killed by the Trojans in Italy; Penthesilea, an Amazon queen, by Achilles at Troy.

(5) Latinus, an Italian leader, supported Aeneas, and his daughter Lavinia married the Trojan hero.

(6) Lucius Junius Brutus, founder of the Roman Republic, led the revolt in 510 B. C. against Tarquin, last of Rome's kings.

(7) Lucretia (a suicide), Julia (Caesar's daughter), Marcia (Cato of Utica's wife), and Cornelia (Scipio Africanus' wife) are all types of virtuous women.

(8) Saladin (d. 1193), a Muslim sultan, opposed Richard the Lion-Heart, but won the admiration of the Third Crusade for his generosity.

(9) Aristotle, with Socrates and Plato, were Greek philosophers; Democritus and the others were pre-Socratic thinkers.

(10) Dioscorides, a first-century A. D. scientist, is the father of pharmacy. Orpheus and Linus are mythical poets.

(11) Cicero (106-43 B.C.) was a Roman statesman and author; Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.) was a writer of tragedies.

(12) Euclid, a fourth-century B.C. mathematician, wrote on geometry; Ptolemy, a second century A.D. astronomer, pictured the universe as earth-centered with nine orbiting spheres.

(13) Hippocrates, in the fourth century B.C., began the study of medicine, practiced by Galen in the second century A.D. and the Arabian philosopher Avicenna (980-1037).

(14) Averroes (d. 1198), Arabian scholar, wrote a commentary on Aristotle.

From Limbo the poet descends into the second circle, where the sin of lust is punished. The souls in this circle are driven forever round in a tyrannous gust of wind. They see Cleopatra and Helen and Paris and Tristan and many others whom Virgil names to the poet. Finally he sees two spirits approaching, whom he asks permission to address.

Canto V Meeting with Paolo and Francesca (1)

(1) Francesca da Polenta was given in marriage by her father to Gianciotto da Rimini, a man brave, but deformed. His brother Paolo, who was exceedingly handsome, won her affections.

They were both put to death by Gianciotto.

So I descended from the first circle
Into the second, encompassing less space
But sharper pain which spurs the wailing on...

[...]

25 Now the notes of suffering begin
To reach my hearing; now I am arrived
At where the widespread wailing hammers me.

I come to a place where all light is muted,
Which rumbles like the sea beneath a storm
30 When waves are buffeted by warring squalls.

The windblast out of hell, forever restless,
Thrusts the spirits onward with its force,
Swirling and mauling and harassing them.

35 When they alight upon this scene of wreckage,
Screams, reproaches, and bemoanings rise
As souls call down their curses on God's power.

I learned that to this unending torment
Have been condemned the sinners of the flesh,
Those who surrender reason to self-will.

40 And as the starlings are lifted on their wings
In icy weather to wide and serried flocks,
So does the gale lift up the wicked spirits,

Flinging them here and there and down and up:
No hope whatever can ever comfort them,
45 Neither of rest nor of less punishment.

And as the cranes fly over, chanting lays,
Forming one long line across the sky,
So I saw come, uttering their cries,

Shades wafted onward by these winds of strife,
50 To make me ask him, "Master, who are those
People whom the blackened air so punishes?"

[...]

I began, "Poet, I would most willingly
Address those two who pass together there (1)
75 And appear to be so light upon the wind,"

And he told me, "You will see when they draw
Closer to us that, if you petition them
By the love that propels them, they will come."

80 As soon as the gust curved them near to us,
I raised my voice to them, "O wind-worn souls,
Come speak to us if it is not forbidden."

Just as the doves when homing instinct calls them
To their sweet nest, on steadily lifted wings
Glide through the air, guided by their longing,

85 So those souls left the covey where Dido lies,
Moving toward us through the malignant air,
So strong was the loving-kindness in my cry.

"O mortal man, gracious and tenderhearted,
Who through the somber air come to visit
90 The two of us who stained the earth with blood,

"If the King of the universe were our friend,
We would then pray to him to bring you peace,
Since you show pity for our wretched plight.

95 "Whatever you please to hear and speak about
We will hear and speak about with you
While the wind, as it is now, is silent.

"The country of my birth lies on that coast (2)
Where the river Po with its tributaries
Flows downhill to its place of final rest.

100 "Love which takes quick hold in a gentle heart
Seized this man for the beauty of the body
Snatched from me — how it happened galls me!

105 "Love which pardons no one loved from loving
Seized me so strongly with my pleasure in him
That, as you see, it still does not leave me.

"Love led the two of us to a single death:
Caina awaits him who snuffed out our lives." (3)
These were the words conveyed from them to us.

110 When I had heard those grief-stricken souls,
I bowed my head and held it bowed down low
Until the poet asked, "What are you thinking?"

When I replied, I ventured, "O misery,
How many the sweet thoughts, how much yearning
Has led these two to this heartbroken pass!"

115 Then I turned round again to speak to them,
And I began, "Francesca, your sufferings
Move my heart to tears of grief and pity.

120 "But tell me, in the season of sweet sighs,
By what signs did love grant to you the favor
Of recognizing your mistrustful longings?"

And she told me, "Nothing is more painful
Than to recall the time of happiness
In wretchedness: this truth your teacher knows.

125 "If, however, to learn the initial root
Of our own love is now your deep desire,
I will speak here as one who weeps in speaking.

"One day for our own pleasure we were reading
Of Lancelot and how love pinioned him. (4)
We were alone and innocent of suspicion.

130 "Several times that reading forced our eyes
To meet and took the color from our faces.
But one solitary moment conquered us.

135 "When we read there of how the longed-for smile
Was being kissed by that heroic lover,
This man, who never shall be severed from me,

"Trembling all over, kissed me on the mouth.
That book — and its author — was a pander!
In it that day we did no further reading."

140 While the one spirit spoke these words, the other
Wept so sadly that pity swept over me
And I fainted as if face to face with death,

And I fell just as a dead body falls.

(1)The two are Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta her brother-in-law.

They became lovers and were slain by Francesca's husband, Gianciotto.

(2) The land that gave me birth--Ravenna

(3) Caina, the place to which murderers are doomed.

(4) Lancelot, one of the knights of the Round Table, the lover of Queen Guinevere.

The poet and his guide descend through the third circle where the sin of gluttony is punished; through the fourth, where they find the prodigal and avaricious; through the fifth where immersed in a filthy pool are the souls of the irascible. The sixth circle is the city of Dis, with walls of heated iron, filled within with open fiery tombs from which issue the groans of the heretics who are punished here. With two of these, Farinata degli Uberti, a Florentine of great military ability, a leader of the Ghibelline, or imperial, party and Cavaleante Cavaleanti, a Florentine, of the Guelph, or Papal, party, Dante holds converse.

Canto VIII The City of Dis

Moving on, I say that long before
We came to the base of that high tower (1)
Our eyes were drawn up to its pinnacle

5 By two flares which we saw positioned there
While still a third responded to the signal
From so far off the eye could scarcely see it.

And I turned to that sea of all perception;
I asked, "What does this mean? What answer
Does the other make? And who is doing this?"

10 And he told me, "Above the filthy waves
Already you can sight what waits for us,
Unless the swamp's thick vapors hide it from you."

[...]

The kindly master said, "Now, my dear son,
The city known as Dis approaches near
With its grave citizens and mighty hosts."

70 And I: "Master, already I see clearly
There in the valley its mosques glowing
Bright red as if just lifted from the fire."

And he said to me, "The eternal flame,
Burning within, shows them rosy-red,
75 As you discern, here in this lower hell."

We arrived at last inside the deep ditch
Which moated round that melancholy city,
The walls appearing to me like cast iron.

80 After we had first made a great circuit,
We came to a spot where the boatman loudly
Cried, "Get out — this is the entry way!"

I saw above the gates more than a thousand (2)
Of those poured out from heaven; they wrathfully
Called, "Who is this one who without dying

85 "Passes through the kingdom of the dead?"
Then my thoughtful master gave a signal
Of his wish to speak to them in confidence.

At that they barely checked their high disdain
And said, "You come along — let that one go
90 Who so boldly enters through this realm.

"Let him return alone on his fool's path —
Try, if he can! For you are staying here
Who guided him into so dark a country."

Reflect, reader, how I lost my courage
95 When I heard them speak the awful curse,
For I did not think I ever would go back.

"O my dear guide who more than seven times
Brought me back to safety and who drew me
From the deep peril that stood in my way,

100 "Don't let me be forsaken so!" I cried,
"And if we are denied to pass on further,
Quickly let us retrace our steps together."

And that lord who had led me to this spot
Said to me, "Have no fear; our passage here
105 No one can take from us: such is the Donor. [...]"

(1) The tower belongs to the walls of the city of Dis, the sixth circle, ruled by the fallen angels.

(2) These devils were once angels in heaven. They fell as they were defeated in their rebellion against God.

Canto X Farinata

Now, by a hidden passageway that wound
Between the rack and ramparts of the city,
My master travels and I after him.

5 "O highest virtue who through these arrant rings
Lead me around as you please," I began,
"Speak to me and satisfy my yearnings:

"The people here who lie within the tombs,
Can they be seen? Already all the lids
Are raised off and no one is standing guard,"

10 And he responded, "They shall all be sealed
When they come back here from Jehosaphat (1)
With the bodies that they have left up there.

"In this section is found the cemetery
Of Epicurus and his followers, (2)
15 All those who claim the soul dies with the body.

"So the question that you have put to me
Soon shall be satisfied while we are here,
As shall the wish that you have kept from me." (3)

20 And I: "Good guide, I do not hide my heart:
I only want now to have less to say

As more than once before you prompted me."

"O Tuscan, passing through the fiery city
Alive and speaking with such frank decorum,
Be kind enough to pause now in this place.

25 "Your way of talking makes it clear you come
Of the stock born of that same noble city
To which I was perhaps too troublesome."

30 So suddenly had this sound issued from
One of the coffins there that I trembled
And drew a little closer to my guide.

"Turn around," he said. "What are you doing?
Look here at Farinata straightening up! (4)
From waist high you will see the whole of him."

35 I had already fixed my eyes on his
While he emerged with his forehead and chest,
Looking as though he held hell in contempt.

The quick, assuring hands of my leader
Pushed me toward him between the sepulchers —
He said, "Suit your words to the occasion."

40 When I had come up nearer to his tomb,
He stared a moment and then, disdainfully,
Questioned me, "Who were your ancestors?"

45 I who was anxious to be dutiful
Kept nothing back but told him everything.
At this he raised his brows ever so slightly,

Then said, "They were so fiercely inimical
To me and to my forebears and my party
That twice I had to send them scampering."

50 "Though they were driven out, yet from all sides
At both times they came back," I said to him;
"But your men never really learned that art."

At that there rose before my sight a shade (5)
Beside him — visible down to his chin —
I guess he raised himself up on his knees.

55 He gazed all around me, as though intent
To see if I were there with someone else,
But when his hope had been completely dashed,

60 Tearfully he said, "If you journey through
This blind prison by reason of high genius,
Where is my son? Why is he not with you?"

I answered, "I do not journey on my own:
He who awaits there leads me through this place —
Perhaps your Guido had felt scorn for him." (6)

His question and his form of punishment

65 Allowed me already to read his name;
On that account, my answer was so full.

Suddenly he stood and cried out, "How?
You said 'had felt'? Is he not still alive?
Does not the lovely light still strike his eyes?"

70 And when he had observed my hesitation
Before I answered him, he shrank back down
And would not show his face to me again.

That noble-hearted shade at whose request
I'd halted my steps did not change his look
75 Or bow his head or bend his body down,

But, picking up once more our first exchange,
He said, "If they have poorly learned that art,
That fact torments me far more than this bed.

"Not fifty times, however, shall the face
80 Of the lady reigning here rekindle light (7)
Before you know how heavy that art weighs.

"And, so may you return to the sweet world,
Tell me why those people are so unjust
In all the laws they pass against my kindred?"

85 Then I replied, "The rout and massacre (8)
Which stained the stream of the Arbia red
Inspires such petitions in our temple."

At that he sighed, shook his head, and said,
"In that harsh action I was not alone:
90 Surely with cause I joined in with the others;

"But there I was alone where all concurred (9)
To topple Florence to the ground, the only
One to stand up for her openly."

"Ah, as you wish your seed to find true peace,"
95 I answered, "help me to unravel the knot
That has so tangled up my thinking here.

"It seems, if I am right, that you can see
Beforehand what time bears along with it,
But what the present holds you cannot grasp."

100 "We see, like someone suffering poor vision,
Those things," he said, "that are far off from us:
Such light the Sovereign Lord still proffers us.

"When things approach or happen, our intellect
Is useless; unless others inform us here
105 We would know nothing of your human state.

"So you can comprehend how wholly dead
Shall be our knowledge at that moment when
The door of the future has slammed shut."

110 Then, as though in sorrow for my failure,
I said, "Now will you tell that fallen man
That his son is still there among the living.

"And if, before, I remained silent
To his response, inform him I was thinking
About the problem you have just cleared up."

115 Already my master was calling me back,
And so I begged that spirit with fresh haste
To tell me who were with him in the tombs.

"Here lie with me more than a thousand,"
He said; "Here is Frederick the Second, (10)
120 And the Cardinal. . . , but I name no more."

With that he vanished, and I turned my steps
Toward the ancient poet while I pondered
Those words that seemed so threatening to me.

125 He moved along, and then as we two walked,
He questioned me, "Why are you so perturbed?"
And I satisfied him with my answer.

"Store in your mind what you have heard set forth
Against yourself," that sage commanded me.
"Now pay attention," and he raised a finger:

130 "When you shall stand before the gentle beams
Of her whose beautiful eyes see everything, (11)
From her you'll learn the journey of your life."

135 With that he turned his steps off to the left.
We quit the wall and headed toward the center
Along a path that strikes down to a valley

Which, even there, sickened us with its stench.

(1) Jehosaphat. It was a common opinion that the general judgment would be held in the valley of Josaphat, or Jehoshaphat. Joel iii., 2.

(2) Epicurus, the Greek philosopher (342-270 B.C.), is assigned to the sixth circle of the heretics because he denied the immortality of the soul.

(3) The wish-Dante's wish was to speak with the followers of Epicurus, of whom were Farinata and Cavalcante.

(4) Farinata degli Uberti (d. 1264) led the Ghibelline faction which defeated the Guelphs in 1248 and 1260. Both times the Guelphs returned to power a few years later.

(5) A shade--Cavalcante.

(6) Guido, thy son had in contempt--Guido the son of Cavalcante Cavalcanti, a Tuscan poet, the friend of Dante. But being fonder of philosophy than of poetry was perhaps not an admirer of Virgil.

(7) The lady Hecate, or Proserpine, was considered a moon-goddess.

(8) Farinata is referring to the defeat suffered at Montaperti. So much blood was spilled that the Arbia turned red.

(9) During the council of Empoli, it was decided that Florence be destroyed. Only Farinata was opposed, and he convinced the others to spare the city.

(10) Frederick II (1194-1250) was King of Sicily. The Cardinal is Ottaviano degli Ubaldini (d. 1273).

(11) Dante will learn from Beatrice what Virgil can't tell him now.

In the seventh circle, which is divided into three rounds, or *gironi*, the violent are tormented.

The eighth circle is divided into ten concentric fosses, or gulfs, in each of which some variety of fraudulent sinner is punished. In the sixth gulf are the hypocrites. When the poets reach the ninth and last circle they see the souls of traitors lying in a frozen lake and in the midst Lucifer, the fallen archangel, in the very center of the earth. They slide down his icy sides, and begin to ascend to the earth's surface through a cavern "and thence come forth to see the stars again."

Canto XXVIII Mohammed

Who could ever, even in straight prose
And after much retelling, tell in full
The bloodletting and wounds that I now saw?

5 Each tongue that tried would certainly trip up
Because our speaking and remembering
Cannot comprehend the scope of pain.

Were all those men gathered again together
Who once in the fateful land of Apulia
Mourned the lifeblood spilled by the Trojans,

10 And those who shed their blood in the long war (1)
In which the spoils were a mound of golden rings,
As Livy has unerringly informed us,

15 And those also who felt the painful gashes
In the onslaught against Robert Guiscard,
And those others whose bones are still stacked up

At Ceperano where all the Apulians
Turned traitors, and those too from Tagliacozzo
Where old Alardo conquered without weapons,

20 And those who show their limbs run through and those
With limbs hacked off — they all could not have matched
The ninth pocket's degraded state of grief.

Even a cask with bottom or sides knocked out
Never cracked so wide as one soul I saw
Burst open from the chin to where one farts.

25 His guts were hanging out between his legs;
His pluck gaped forth and that disgusting sack
Which turns to shit what throats have gobbled down.

30 While I was all agog with gazing at him,
He stared at me and, as his two hands pulled
His chest apart, cried, "Look how I rip myself!

"Look at how mangled is Mohammed here!
In front of me, Ali treks onward, weeping, (2)
His face cleft from his chin to his forelock.

35 "And all the others whom you see down here
Were sowers of scandal and schism while
They lived, and for this they are rent in two.

"A devil goes in back here who dresses us
So cruelly by trimming each one of the pack

With the fine cutting edge of his sharp sword

40 "Whenever we come round this forlorn road:
Because by then our old wounds have closed up
Before we pass once more for the next blow.

"But who are you, moping upon that ridge
Perhaps to put off facing the penalty
45 Pronounced on you by your own accusations?"

"Death has not yet reached him, nor guilt led him
To the torture here," — my master answered,
"But, to offer him the full experience,

"I who am dead am destined to guide him
50 From circle to circle down here into hell,
And, as surely as I speak to you, it's true."

More than a hundred, when they heard him, halted
Inside the ditch to peer at me in wonder,
Forgetting their torments for the moment.

55 "Tell Brother Dolcino then, you who perhaps (3)
Shortly shall see the sun, to arm himself
With food — unless he wants to follow me

"Here promptly — so that the weight of snow
Does not bring victory to the Novarese
60 Who otherwise would not find winning easy."

With one foot lifted in the air to go,
Mohammed addressed these words to me,
Then set the foot back on the ground and left. [...]

(1) The wars summed up in these opening stanzas range from the wars of the early Romans (here "Trojans") against the Samnites (343-290 B.C.) and the Punic Wars (264-146 B.C.) which included the battle of Cannae in 216 where Romans were slaughtered (l. 11) to Robert Guiscard's battles from 1059 to 1090 against the Greeks and Saracens in southern Italy and Sicily, as well as the Apulian treachery which turned the pass of Ceperano (l. 16) over to Manfred's foes in 1266, and Charles of Anjou's stratagem which enabled him to defeat Manfred's nephew Conradin at the battle of Tagliacozzo in 1268. Alardo (l. 18) is Charles' general Erard de Valery.

(2) Ali. The disciple of Mohammed.

3) Fra Dolcino in 1300 headed the Apostolic Brothers, an outlawed religious sect that was forcibly suppressed; he was burned at the stake in 1307.

Canto XXXIV Lucifer

"The Banners of the King of Hell Advance'
Closer to us," my master said; "so look
Straight ahead and see if you can spot them."

5 Just as when a thick fog starts to settle
Or when evening darkens all our hemisphere,
Far-off a windmill appears to be rotating,

So I thought I saw such a structure there.
Then out of the wind I stepped back behind
My guide, because there was no other shelter.

10 I was now — and with fear I set it down
In verse — where the shades were wholly sealed
And yet showed through below like straws in glass.

Some of them lie flat, some stand upright,
One on his head and one upon his soles;
15 Another, like a bow, bends face to foot.

When we had made our way so far forward
That my master sensed it time to show me
The creature who was once so beautiful,

He took a step aside and made me stop;
20 "Look at Dis," he said, "look at the place (1)
Where you must arm yourself with steadfastness."

How faint and frozen, reader, I grew then
Do not inquire: I shall not write it down,
Since all my words would be too few and weak.

25 I did not die and still I did not live.
Think for yourself — should you possess the talent —
What I became, robbed of both life and death!

The emperor of the kingdom of despair
Rose up from mid-chest out of the sheer ice;
30 And I come closer to a giant's height

Than giants match the size of his huge arms:
See now how large the whole of him must be
If it's proportionate to that one part!

35 Were he once as beautiful as now he's ugly (2)
(And yet he raised his fist against his Maker!)
Well may all our grief come down from him!

Oh how much wonder was it for me when
I saw that on his head he had three faces: (3)
One in front — and it was fiery red —

40 And two others, which joined onto this one
Above the center of his shoulder blades,
And all three came together at his crown.

The right face seemed halfway white and yellow
While the left one looked the color of the race
45 That lives close to the source of the Nile.

Beneath each face there sprouted two large wings,
Suitably massive for such a bird of prey:
I never sighted sails so broad at sea. (4)

50 They had no feathers but looked just like a bat's,
And he kept flapping these wings up and down
So that three winds moved out from in around him:

This was the cause Cocytus was all iced.
With six eyes he wept, and from his three chins

Dripped down the teardrops and a bloody froth.

55 In each mouth he mashed up a separate sinner
With his sharp teeth, as if they were a grinder,
And in this way he put the three through torture.

For the one in front, the biting was as nothing
Compared to the clawing, for at times his back
60 Remained completely stripped bare of its skin.

"That soul up there who suffers the worst pain,"
My master said, "is Judas Iscariot —
His head within, he kicks his legs outside.

"Of those other two, with their heads hung down,
65 The one who hangs from the black snout is Brutus:
Look how he writhes and mutters not a word!

"That other one is Cassius, who seems brawny. (5)
But nightfall rises once again, and we now (6)
Must take our leave, since we have seen the whole."

70 As he requested, I held him round the neck,
And then he waited the right time and place,
And when the wings spread open wide enough

He caught firm hold of Satan's shaggy flanks.
Downward from shock to shock he climbed below
75 Between the matted hair and frozen crust.

When we were at the point at which the thigh
Revolves, right where the hip widens out,
My guide, by straining and agonizing effort,

80 Turned his head round to where his legs had been
And grabbed the hair, like a man climbing up,
So that I thought we'd headed back to hell!

"Hold tight! these are the only stairs to take us
Out of this sin-filled hole," said my master,
Panting, like a man worn out, for breath.

85 Then he squeezed through the crevice of a rock
And raised me up onto its rim to sit,
And afterward reached me with one wary step.

I lifted up my eyes, thinking I'd see
Lucifer as I had left him — instead (7)
90 I found him with his legs suspended upward!

And if at that time I became confused
Let dull minds judge: those who do not see
What point it was that I must just have passed.

"Stand up!" my master said, "Up on your feet!
95 The way is long and the path strenuous.
The sun once more turns back to middle tierce." (8)

It was no palace hall, the place where we

Had come, but a natural stone cavern
With scanty lighting and a treacherous floor.

100 "Before we uproot ourselves from this abyss,
My master," said I when I stood up straight,
"Talk to me a bit to clear my error:

"Where is the ice? And how can he be fixed
Upside-down like that? And how in so short time
105 Has the sun moved from dusk to morning?"

And he told me, "You picture yourself still
On the other side of center where I caught
The hair of the vile worm that pierced the earth.

"You were there as long as I climbed downward.
110 When I turned myself round you passed the point
To which all weight on every side pulls down.

"And now you come under the hemisphere (9)
Opposite that which domes the vast dry land:
There, beneath its pinnacle of sky,

115 "The Man, sinless in birth and life, was slain.
Your feet stand on a little sphere, a spot
That marks the other side of Judecca.

"Here it is morning when it is evening there,
And he whose hair supplied our ladder down
120 Is still stuck fast, as he was from the first.

"He fell down straight from heaven on this side,
And the land, which once had bulged out here,
In fright at his fall cloaked itself with sea

"And rushed up toward our hemisphere; perhaps,
125 What you see on this side, to flee from him,
Left this space vacant here and spurted upward. (10)

"Below, as far away from Beelzebub
As the limit of his tomb, there is a place (11)
Which is known not by sight but by the sound

130 "Of a small stream that courses down this way (12)
Along the hollow of a rock it wore
Away with winding flow and trickling fall."

Along that hidden path my guide and I
Started out to return to the bright world.
135 And without a thought for any resting-stops,

We bounded up, he first and I second,
Until, through a round opening, I saw
Some of the lovely things the heavens hold:

From there we came out to see once more the stars.

(1) Dis is another name that Dante uses for Lucifer. He is also addressed as Satan in I. 73.

(2) Lucifer (a word derived from Latin, meaning "bearer of light") was beautiful before he rebelled against God.

(3) Three faces. It can scarcely be doubted but that Milton derived his description of Satan in those lines,

Each passion dimm'd his face

Thrice chang'd with pale, ire, envy, and despair.

P. L. b. iv. 114.

from this passage, coupled with the remark of Vellutello upon it:

"The first of these sins is anger which he signifies by the red face; the second, represented by that between pale and yellow is envy and not, as others have said, avarice; and the third, denoted by the black, is a melancholy humour that causes a man's thoughts to be dark and evil, and averse from all joy and tranquillity." (Carey)

(4) Sails

--His sail-broad vans

He spreads for flight.

Milton, P. L. b. ii. 927. (Carey)

(5) Cassius looks brawny because, with his skin chewed away, the muscles are exposed.

(6) It is the evening of Holy Saturday. When the poet passes the center point of the earth, it will be twelve hours earlier (l. 96).

(7) Lucifer (a word derived from Latin, meaning "bearer of light") was beautiful before he rebelled against God.

(8) The poet uses the Hebrew manner of computing the day, according to which the third hour answers to our twelve o'clock at noon. (Carey)

(9) Lucifer fell headfirst from heaven through the southern hemisphere. All the land on that side of the globe rushed to the north, except for a mound caused by the impact of his fall: the Mount of Purgatory.

(10) The mountain of Purgatory.

(11) "La tomba." This word is used to express the whole depth of the infernal region. (Carey)

(12) The stream of Lethe runs down from the Garden of Paradise on the top of purgatory.

Paradiso

Canto XXXIII The Visible Presence. The Final Vision

[...]

O highest Light, lifted up so far
Above all mortal thinking, lend my mind,
Once more, a little of what you were like,

70 And grant my tongue such powerful expression
That it may leave behind a single spark
Of glory for a people still to come.

75 For by returning some spark to my mind
And sounding out a little in these lines,
Your triumph shall be thought of more profoundly.

I think I would have been lost in a daze
With the dazzling I endured from that live beam
If my eyes once had turned away from it.

80 I remember I grew bolder for this reason
In bearing up with it, until I merged
My gazing with the infinite Goodness.

O grace abounding, by which I have dared
To fix my eyes through the eternal Light
So deeply that my sight was spent in it!

85 Within its depths I saw gathered together,
Bound by love into a single volume,
Leaves that lie scattered through the universe.

Substance and accidents and their relations
I saw as though they fused in such a way
90 That what I say is but a gleam of light.

The universal pattern of this knot
I believe I saw, because in telling this,
I feel my gladness growing ever larger.

One moment made more slip my memory than
95 Twenty-five centuries reft from the adventure
That awed Neptune with the shadow of the Argo.

So my mind, held in absolute suspense, (1)
Was staring fixed, intent, and motionless,
And by its staring grew the more inflamed.

100 Within that Light a person is so changed
It is impossible to give consent
Ever to turn from it to other sights

Because the Good, the object of the will,
Is gathered all in it, and out of it
105 The thing that there is perfect has some flaw.

Now shall my telling of what I remember
Fall far below the babbling of a baby
Still bathing its tongue at the mother's breast.

Not that there is more than a single semblance
110 Within that living Light on which I looked
And which is always what it was before,

But by the sight that gathered strength in me
As I gazed on, what was One in appearance
Was altering for me as I was changing.

115 In the profound and shining-clear Existence
Of the deep Light appeared to me three circles
Of one dimension and three different colors. (2)

One seemed to be reflected by the other,
Rainbow by rainbow, while the third seemed fire
120 Breathed equally from one and from the other.

O how pale now is language and how paltry
For my conception! And for what I saw
My words are not enough to call them meager.

O everlasting Light, you dwell alone
125 In yourself, know yourself alone, and known
And knowing, love and smile upon yourself!

That middle circle which appeared in you (3)
To be conceived as a reflected light,

After my eyes had studied it a while,
130 Within itself and in its coloring
Seemed to be painted with our human likeness
So that my eyes were wholly focused on it.

As the geometer who sets himself
To square the circle and who cannot find,
135 For all his thought, the principle he needs,

Just so was I on seeing this new vision
I wanted to see how our image fuses
Into the circle and finds its place in it,

Yet my wings were not meant for such a flight —
140 Except that then my mind was struck by lightning
Through which my longing was at last fulfilled.

Here powers failed my high imagination:
But by now my desire and will were turned,
Like a balanced wheel rotated evenly,

145 By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

(1) So overwhelming is Dante's vision that he forgets more of it in an instant than has been lost in the account of the Argonauts through twenty-five centuries. Neptune, the god of the ocean, here looks up in amazement to see the Argo, first boat ever built, sailing above him.

(2) The Trinity

(3) Dante reaches his final vision of Christ, his third in Paradise and fourth in the poem (see Cantos XIV, ll. 94-129; XXIII, ll. 28-45; and; *Purgatorio* XXXI, ll. 118-126). The vision takes him into the mystery of human nature in the Being of God, the Son mirroring the Father and the Love of the Holy Spirit between them both. His final epic simile compares his effort to that of squaring the circle, reconciling humanity with Godhood (ll. 133-135). For the poet, as for the geometer, it is not achieving the impossible that finally matters, but attempting that harmony. Dante does discover the secret in the last lines as he moves in harmony with the spheres, with God, and with himself.

Translated by James Finn Cotter. Divine Comedy Selections and notes (unless where noted from <http://www.italianstudies.org/comedy/index.htm>)

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