

her how to serve God and live the religious life of the order. They prayed for the salvation of Eliduc's soul, and in his turn he prayed for both of them. He found out by messengers how they were, how they comforted each other. All three tried in their own ways to love God with true faith; and in the end, by the mercy of God in whom all truth reposes, each died a peaceful death.

The noble Celts composed this story long ago to enshrine the strange adventure of these three. May it never be forgotten!

DANTE ALIGHIERI

1265–1321

The greatest poem of the Middle Ages, called by its author a comedy and designated in later centuries *The Divine Comedy* (*La divina commedia*), was written in the early fourteenth century. The poet, Dante Alighieri, was born in late May 1265, in Florence, Italy. In 1291 he married Gemma Donati, by whom he had two sons and one or two daughters. In 1295 he was a member of the "people's council" of Florence and in 1300 served for two months, the usual term, as one of the six priors, or magistrates, of Florence. In 1302 the Blacks, opponents of the Whites (a political group with which Dante was affiliated), seized power in Florence, and he, with other White leaders, was exiled. Dante had gone to Rome on a mission to Pope Boniface in 1301, and as the decree of banishment was soon coupled with a condemnation to execution by fire (on false charges of corruption in office), he never returned to his native city. The last twenty years of his life were spent in exile in various parts of Italy and possibly elsewhere. He died at Ravenna in September 1321.

The New Life (*Vita nuova*) was probably written about 1292. It consists of sonnets and odes with a prose account and running commentary by the poet; the poems were mostly inspired by Beatrice Portinari (1266–1290), Dante's first love, who appears in the *Commedia* as a heavenly guide whose name signifies blessedness or salvation. *The Banquet* (of uncertain date and unfinished) is a work of encyclopedic scope in the form of a prose commentary on a series of the poet's odes (*canzoni*). *On the Vernacular Language*, in Latin prose (of uncertain date and unfinished), is an essay on language and poetry, especially on the dialects of Italy and Provence; it is of great linguistic and literary interest. *On Single Government* (of uncertain date), in Latin prose, presents a closely reasoned defense of world government, together with an attempt to demonstrate the independent status of the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy.

The Divine Comedy (begun ca. 1301) was apparently finished shortly before Dante's death in 1321. The poem is in many ways both the supreme and the centrally representative expression of the medieval mind in European imaginative literature. But to appreciate the poem adequately in this light the reader must know it in its entirety, since it is an organic whole designed with the utmost symmetry. The selection printed here includes the entire *Inferno*. It will be best to look rapidly at the general plan and then concentrate on the part included here.

The three great divisions of the poem—*Hell* (*Inferno*), *Purgatory* (*Purgatorio*), and *Paradise* (*Paradiso*)—are of identical length; each of the last two has thirty-three cantos, and the first, the *Inferno*, has thirty-four; but the opening canto is a

prologue to the entire poem. The total, one hundred, is the square of ten, regarded in the thought of the time as a perfect number. The three divisions correspond in number to the Trinity. Nine, the square of three, figures centrally in the interior structure of each of the three divisions. In Hell, the lost souls are arranged in three main groups and occupy nine circles. Most of the circles are themselves subdivided. Hell itself is a funnel-shaped opening in the earth extending from the surface to the center. Dante's journey thus takes him steadily downward through the nine concentric circles. The progression is from the least to the greatest types of evil; all the souls are irrevocably condemned, but all are not intrinsically equal in the degree or nature of their sin. Thus, as we follow Dante in his descent, we find first an ante-Hell, the abode of those who refused to choose between right and wrong; then the boundary river, Acheron; then a circle for virtuous pagans who did not know Christ; and then a series of circles occupied by those guilty of sins of self-indulgence, or Incontinence, of all kinds. These include the illicit lovers, the gluttons, the hoarders and spendthrifts, and those of violent or sullen disposition. Comparable classes and subclasses are found within the other two main groups of sinners, those guilty respectively of Violence and of Fraud, the latter including treachery and treason. At the bottom is the fallen Angel, Satan, or Lucifer.

Purgatory is situated on a lofty mountain rising on an island in the sea. It is divided into the ante-Purgatory, which is the lower half of the mountain; Purgatory proper, just above; and the Earthly Paradise, or Garden of Eden, at the summit. Purgatory proper is arranged in a series of seven ledges encircling the mountain, each devoted to the purification of souls from particular kinds of sinful disposition—Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Illicit Love. These seven divisions, plus the ante-Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise, make a total of nine.

The *Paradise* takes us, in ascending order, through the circles of the seven planets of medieval astronomy, the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn; then through the circles of the fixed stars and the *primum mobile*, or outermost circle, which moves the others; and finally to the Empyrean, or Heaven itself, the abode of God, the angels, and the redeemed souls. Again we have nine circles, besides the Empyrean, inclusion of which would give a total of ten. Such is the vast design and scope of *The Divine Comedy* as a whole.

INFERNO

The poem itself begins with action, not outline; explanations appear in suitable places; they are part of the traveler's experience. We shall do well to follow the hint. The incidents recounted in Canto I of the *Inferno* are concrete and definite; their literal meaning is perfectly plain. As critics have often said, Dante is a highly visual poet; he gives us clear pictures or images. Beginning with a man lost in a wood, hindered by three beasts from escape by his own effort, the canto might well be the start of a tale of unusual but quite earthly adventures. But when the stranger Dante meets identifies himself as the shade of the poet Virgil and offers to conduct him through realms that, though not named, can only be Hell and Purgatory, we realize that there is a meaning beyond the one that appears on the surface. We recognize that the wood, the mountain, the sun, and the three beasts, though casually introduced, are not casual features of the scene. They represent something other than themselves; they are symbols. In the light of the entire poem, it is usually possible to determine, at least in a general sense, what they signify, and in this volume the headnotes and footnotes identify them. Occasionally, however, there is doubt. What do the three beasts stand for? A lack of certainty is not a serious disadvantage to readers; they should regard it as a challenge to reach a decision for themselves. Indeed, if they go on to read the entire poem, they may

arrive at an identification that seems sounder and more consistent with the work as a whole than those proposed here. Meanwhile, there is no ambiguity about the animals themselves; they are the satisfying and specific images of poetry.

The simple style of this first canto may surprise readers who have been told that *The Divine Comedy* is one of the five or six great poems of European literature, especially if they assume that it will sound like an epic. For Dante begins with neither the splendor of Homer nor the stateliness of Virgil nor the grandeur of Milton. Indeed, except for the use of verse, Canto I seems more like a narrative by Daniel Defoe or Jonathan Swift, particularly at the outset. It is quiet, factual, economical; it convinces us by its air of serious simplicity. Dante called the poem a comedy, in accordance with the use of the term in his day, not only because it began in misery and ended in happiness but also because in that literary form a sustained loftiness of style was not requisite. In other words, he is free to use the whole range of style, from the humblest, including the colloquial and the humorous, to the highest. There is, indeed, a great variety of tone in the poem. Yet readers will doubtless eventually agree that Dante strikes the right note for him at the beginning. Variation will result chiefly from change in intensity, achieved by differing degrees of concentration and repetition—rather than from a shift to the “grand style.” This unpretentious manner is, we see, most suitable to a prolonged work of serious fiction in which the author is the central character. For *The Divine Comedy* is not primarily a Cook’s tour of the world of the dead; it is an account of the effect of such a journey on the man who takes it—Dante. It is a record of his moral and spiritual experience of illumination, regeneration, and beatitude. We are interested partly because of the unique and individual character of the traveler—Dante as the man he was, the man revealed in the poem—and partly because the experience of the author is imaginatively available and meaningful to all of us.

In Canto IV we come to the first of the nine concentric circles of Hell. Here are the noble heroes, wise philosophers, and inspired poets of the ancient—and medieval—pagan world. They are excluded from Heaven because they knew nothing of Christ and His religion. This fate may seem harsh to us, but the orthodox view recognized only one gate to Heaven. These spirits suffer no punishment, Virgil (who is one of them) tells Dante, only “without hope, we live on in desire.” Here Dante’s fervent pity and sympathy at once nourish and mirror the reader’s; but there is no rebellion against God’s decree. Further explanation, and thereby justification, in Dante’s view, will come as the poem progresses toward its goal.

With Canto V we reach the second circle, the first of those containing souls guilty of active sin unrepented at the time of death. Here, therefore, is found the contemptuous and monstrous judge Minos, another figure taken from classical myth and freely adapted to Dante’s purposes. The souls assigned to the second circle are those guilty of unlawful love. The poet’s method here, as throughout the journey, is first to point out a number of prominent figures who would be familiar to his fourteenth-century readers, and then to concentrate attention on a very few, one or two in each circle, telling more about them and eliciting their stories. In general, Dante lets the place and condition in which the sinners are found serve as a minimum essential of information. For the penalties in the various circles are of many different kinds. Their fundamental characteristic is appropriateness to the particular sin; this is one of the principal differences between the punishments in Dante’s Hell and the miscellaneous and arbitrary horrors of many accounts of the place. In Dante the penalties symbolize the sin. Thus the illicit lovers of the second circle are continually blown about by storm winds, for their sin consisted in the surrender of reason to lawless passions.

Here we find Paolo and Francesca, the best-known figures of the entire *Divine Comedy*. Like all the human beings presented in the poem, they actually existed.

They lived in Italy about the time of Dante’s childhood and early youth, and were slain by Francesca’s husband, a brother of Paolo. Dante’s method, it is hence clear, is not to build up an allegorical cast of personified abstractions. Instead of, say, Passion and Rebellion, he portrays Paolo and Francesca. They represent, or symbolize, sinful love by example. They show how an intrinsically noble emotion, love, if contrary to God’s law, can bring two essentially fine persons to damnation and spiritual ruin. The tenderness and the sympathy with which the story is told are famous. But its pathos, and Dante’s personal response of overwhelming pity, should not blind us to the *justice* of the penalty. The poet who describes himself as fainting at the end of Francesca’s recital is the same man who consigned her to Hell. His purpose is partly to portray the attractiveness of sin, an especially congenial theme when *this* is the sin involved—both for Dante and for most readers. But although Dante allows the lovers the bitter sweetness of inseparability in Hell, the modern “romantic” idea that union anywhere is sufficient happiness for lovers does not even occur to him. Paolo and Francesca indeed have their love; but they have lost God and thus corrupted their personalities—their inmost selves—from order into anarchy; they can hardly be considered happy. In a sense, they have what they wanted; they continue in the lawless condition that they chose on earth. But that condition, seen from the point of view of eternity, is not bliss.

In Canto X we are among the heretics in their flaming tomb in the sixth circle. Situated within the walled city of Dis—the capital, as it were, of Hell—this circle is a kind of border between the upper Hell (devoted to punishments for Incontinence) and the lower (concerned with Violence and Fraud). Here Dante portrays the proud aristocrat Farinata and his associate, the elder Cavalcante, father of Dante’s closest friend. Their crime is heresy, a flagrant aspect of intellectual pride. But there is a nobility in Farinata’s pride; Dante, like the reader, admires the splendid self-sufficiency of a man who, in this situation, can seem “to hold all Hell in disrespect.” And the essence of the aristocratic nature is distilled in his address to Dante as “the great soul stared almost contemptuously, / before he asked: ‘Of what line do you come?’” and in his abrupt resumption of the conversation interrupted by Cavalcante. Alongside the haughtiness of Farinata, Dante sets the pathetic—and mistaken—grief of Cavalcante for his son; each portrait gains in effect by the extreme contrast.

Canto XIII shows us one group of those guilty of Violence; for the suicides have been violent against themselves. Here they are turned into monstrous trees, their misery finding expression when a bough is torn or plucked. In the eyes of the Church, suicide was murder, in no way diminished by the fact that the slayer and the victim were the same. By representing in Pier delle Vigne a man who had every human motive to end his life, Dante achieves the deepest pathos and evokes our shuddering pity. As Francesca displays in her dramatic monologue the charm and the potential weakness of her character, as Farinata’s manner of speech reveals his nature, so Pier delle Vigne by his exact and legal-sounding language lets us see the careful, methodical counselor whose sense of logic and sense of justice were so outraged that he saw no point in enduring life any longer. His judgment is still unimpaired; he does not reproach his king, only the jealous courtiers who misled him. The Wood of the Suicides is one of the greatest—among many admirable—examples of landscape in Hell assimilated to theme and situation.

Canto XV describes the meeting of Dante and his venerable teacher and adviser, the scholar Brunetto Latini. We are in another ring of the seventh circle, among more of those who have sinned through Violence. The impact of this scene results from the contrast between the dignity of the man and the indignity of his condition in hell, and by the tact with which both he and Dante ignore it for the moment. Brunetto, with the others guilty of homosexual “vice,” must move continually along a sandy desert under a rain of fire. Dante accords him the utmost

respect and expresses his gratitude in the warmest terms; and something like their earthly relationship of teacher and pupil is reenacted, for Brunetto is keenly interested in Dante's prospects in life. In the final image of Brunetto running, not like the loser, but like the winner of a race, Dante extracts dignity and victory out of indignity itself.

The presence of such people as these will remind the reader that Hell is not reserved exclusively for arrant scoundrels. They are there, of course; but so are many charming, and some noble and great, men and women. These are in Hell because they preferred something else—no matter what—to God; at the moment of death they were therefore in rebellion against Him. God and Heaven would not be congenial to them, *as they are and as He is*; and there is no acceptable repentance after death. Hence they go on unchanged—only now experiencing the harsher aspects of the sin in which they chose to live.

In Canto XVII the travelers are carried on the back of the flying monster Geryon down the deep descent from the seventh to the eighth circle. With the face of a just man and the body of a serpent, Geryon symbolizes Fraud. He is one of the most exciting figures in Hell. In an age before Ferris wheels and airplanes, he gives our poets a ride that anticipates some of the terrifying thrill that a young child may feel in an airplane journey. The eighth circle is subdivided into ten chasms or trenches (*Malebolge*), each with its own kind of sinners: seducers and panderers, flatterers, simoniacs (buyers and sellers of appointments in the Church), sorcerers, grafters, hypocrites, thieves, evil counselors, troublemakers, forgers, and impostors.

Most readers will agree that the punishments fit the crimes of the eighth circle. It is a long catalog of iniquity; much, but not all, is sordid. Dante has avoided monotony not only by the vividness and intensity of the separate scenes but also by their ingenious variety and by the frequent changes of pace in the narrative. The satirical situation and fierce denunciation of the simoniacs is followed by the quiet horror of the sorcerers with twisted necks. The hilarious episode of the grafters precedes the encounter with the solemn, slow-walking hypocrites; and these are succeeded by the macabre serpent-transformations of the thieves. Nevertheless, our slow descent in Hell gradually produces a sense of oppressiveness. This is appropriate and deliberate; it is a part of Dante's total design. But he recognizes the need of momentary relief, a breath of fresh air, a reminder of the world above. These he provides, for example, in the long simile describing the shipyard in Venice (the opening of Canto XXI) or the picture of the peasant and his two sallies outside on a winter morning (the opening of Canto XXIV).

The episode of the grafters (Cantos XXI and XXII) probably has biographical relevance for Dante. During his absence from Florence on business of state, the opposing political party seized power and sentenced Dante to death if he should return to Florence. The quite unfounded charge against him was misappropriation of public funds. In these cantos Dante cuts a ludicrous figure: fearful, cowering, in constant danger from the demons. He escapes their clutches, first by a distraction and then by belated vigilance. The whole sequence affords an oblique and amusing view of an actual episode. It is worth noting also that here, and here only, in the poem, we find ourselves in the kind of Hell known in popular lore and anecdote, with winged devils playing rough jokes on their human prey. Scenes, style, and language alike here show one extreme of the range of the poem—the "low" comic. Dante very unobtrusively indicates his awareness of this by the contrasting allusions found in Canto XX.113 and Canto XXI.2.

Cantos XXVI and XXVII take us among the wicked counselors, who occupy the eighth chasm, or subdivision, of the eighth circle. Appearing at a distance like fireflies in a summer valley, these souls are wrapped in individual, or occasionally

twin, flames. Fire is a fit punishment for those who used the flame of intellect to accomplish evil. When the two poets approach more closely, Virgil identifies one flame as that of Ulysses (Odysseus) and Diomedes, who burn together. Among the deceptions devised by Ulysses was the wooden horse, which made possible the capture of Troy. It will strike the reader as strange that a man should suffer for his powers as a military tactician. But the Greeks were enemies of the Trojans, whom the Romans and later most of the nations of western Europe regarded as their ancestors. Ulysses was on the wrong side and was responsible for his deeds, but Dante mingles with his condemnation an admiration of the man's mental powers. Ulysses remains aloof; he does not converse with Dante, like most of the souls we have met. Instead, as Dorothy Sayers puts it in the notes to her translation of the poem, Virgil conjures the flame into monologue. Thus we are told how Ulysses determined not to return home after the Trojan War but to explore the western ocean instead. In this narrative, apparently invented by Dante, Ulysses becomes the type of the adventuring and searching spirit of man; the voyage is an act of the mind and soul as well as the body. When he has sailed within sight of a mountainous island, his ship is wrecked by a storm and he perishes. Since, as other parts of the poem indicate, this is the island of Purgatory, the episode clearly has symbolic significance. On this island is the Earthly Paradise, or Garden of Eden, lost to us by the sin of Adam. People, unassisted by divine grace—pagans, represented by Ulysses—cannot regain it by their own intelligence, although the effort toward that end is noble in itself.

The other evil counselor, Guido da Montefeltro, speaks fluently in Canto XXVII; he shows a quite earthly eagerness for news, crafty, garrulous old intriguer that he is. It is a neat irony that, in spite of Guido's deserved reputation for cleverness, Dante shows him twice deceived: first on earth, as he himself relates, and now in Hell—he does not want his story known and is convinced that Dante will never return to earth to tell it. He sketches in detail, with recollective acidity, the steps by which the pope led him, an aging and reformed man, to return for a moment to his old ways. He even includes the contest of St. Francis and the Devil for his soul at his death, along with the Devil's bitter witticism: you didn't think I was a logician, perhaps!

In Cantos XXXII and XXXIII the poet reaches the ninth and last circle, where the traitors are immersed in ice that symbolizes their unfeeling hearts. At the end of one canto we are shown the horror of Ugolino gnawing the skull of his enemy Ruggieri, both partly fastened in the ice. Dante does not concentrate on the acts that have put either man in Hell. Instead he lets Ugolino tell us, in the next canto, why his hatred of Ruggieri is so implacable. The fearful pathos, the power, and at the same time the restraint and compression of this narrative make it one of the finest episodes in the poem.

The last canto, Canto XXXIV, shows us the enormous shape of the fallen Angel, Satan, fixed at the bottom of Hell, where the motion of his wings freezes the ice in which we have found the traitors immersed. In one of his three mouths he holds Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ; in the other two are Brutus and Cassius, who plotted the assassination of Julius Caesar. Dante did not regard them, as we generally do today, as perhaps misguided patriots; to him they were the destroyers of a providentially ordained ruler. Readers who remember John Milton's *Paradise Lost* may be surprised at the absence of any interior presentation of Satan. One critic regrets that his suffering is not shown as different from that of the other inhabitants of Hell. But the fact is that his suffering is not presented at all; he is not a person, to Dante, but an object, a part of the machinery and geography of Hell. For *The Divine Comedy* is occupied exclusively with human sin, human redemption, and human beatitude.

DANTE IN ITALIAN

The translator of the selections printed here is the American poet John Ciardi. As with some other poems in this volume, the reader may find it interesting to have a brief look at the original text, so here are the opening lines of the *Inferno* in the Italian.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ah, quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!

Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'io vi trovai,
dirò dell'altre cose ch'ì v'ho scorte.

Io non so ben ridir com'io v'entrai,
tant'era pieno di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai.

The individual lines are metrically similar to most lines in Chaucer and Shakespeare; they regularly have five metrical feet, each consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, or vice versa, with the possibility of an additional unstressed syllable or two somewhere within the line. But the most notable metrical feature of the *Divine Comedy* is the pattern of rhymes, or the *terza rima*. Thus the lines form groups of three: *vita* in the first line rhymes with the last two syllables of *smarrita* in the third line, while *oscura* in the second line rhymes with *dura* in line four and *paura* in line six of the next group. The groups are independent units interlocked by the sequence of rhymes. This overall structure reminds the reader of the Christian Trinity: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; it is one expression of the poet's religious devotion. In his translation Ciardi maintains the separation into groups of three lines: *astray* in the first line rhymes with *I say* in the third. But he does not keep the interlocking rhyme scheme: *myself* in line two of the first group does not rhyme with *drear* and *fear* in the second group. The sound structure of the Italian language makes Dante's rhyme patterns easier than this arrangement would be in an English poem. Attempts to reproduce it entirely have not been very successful in English.

For biographical information, the general reader will find Michele Barbi, *Life of Dante* (1954), readable and convenient. Also helpful for background is Dorothy Sayers, *Introductory Papers on Dante* (1954), as well as her *Further Papers on Dante* (1957). T. G. Bergin, *Dante's Divine Comedy* (1971), is a valuable overall account. The series of *Dante Studies* (1956) by Charles S. Singleton is intensive and demanding. Important studies of particular topics are Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (1961) and John Freccero, ed., *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1965). Freccero is also the author of *Dante, The Poetics of Conversion* (1986). The most helpful introduction for the newcomer to the *Inferno* is Wallace Fowlie, *A Reading of Dante's Inferno* (1981).

A broader context of study and interpretation is attempted in K. Vossler, *Medieval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and his Times* (1929), and E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953). A still broader context can be found in George Santayana, "Dante," in *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910), and T. S. Eliot, "Dante," in *Selected Essays* (1932).

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables and stress accents to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

Alessio: <i>ah-les'-syoh</i>	Jacopo: <i>yah'-coh-poh</i>
Arezzo: <i>ah-rets'-soh</i>	luce: <i>loo'-chay</i>
Argenti: <i>ar-jen'-tee</i>	Puccio: <i>poo'-chyoh</i>
Bacchiglione: <i>bahk-kee-yoh'-nay</i>	Pugliese: <i>poo-lyay'-zay</i>
Beatrice: <i>bay-ah-tree'-chay</i>	Rusticucci: <i>roo-stee-koo'-chee</i>
Borsiere: <i>bor-syeh'-ray</i>	Schicchi: <i>skee'-kee</i>
Brescia: <i>bre'-shah</i>	Sciancato: <i>shahn-kah'-toh</i>
Casalodi: <i>cah-zah-loh'-dee</i>	Tegghiaio: <i>teg-gyai'-oh</i>
Cecina: <i>chay-chee'-nah</i>	Verruchio: <i>vehr-roo'-chyoh</i>
Chiarentana: <i>kyahr-en-tah'-nah</i>	Zanche: <i>tsahn'-kay</i>
Ciacco: <i>chahk'-koh</i>	

From The Divine Comedy¹

Inferno

CANTO I

The Dark Wood of Error

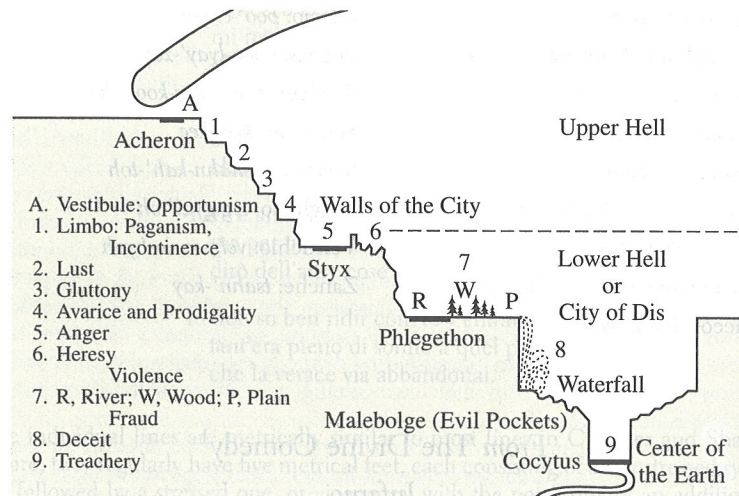
Midway in his allotted threescore years and ten, Dante comes to himself with a start and realizes that he has strayed from the True Way into the Dark Wood of Error (Worldliness). As soon as he has realized his loss, Dante lifts his eyes and sees the first light of the sunrise (the Sun is the Symbol of Divine Illumination) lighting the shoulders of a little hill (The Mount of Joy). It is the Easter Season, the time of resurrection, and the sun is in its equinoctial rebirth. This juxtaposition of joyous symbols fills Dante with hope and he sets out at once to climb directly up the Mount of Joy, but almost immediately his way is blocked by the Three Beasts of Worldliness: The Leopard of Malice and Fraud, The Lion of Violence and Ambition, and The She-Wolf of Incontinence. These beasts, and especially the She-Wolf, drive him back despairing into the darkness of error. But just as all seems lost, a figure appears to him. It is the shade of Virgil, Dante's symbol of Human Reason.

Virgil explains that he has been sent to lead Dante from error. There can, however, be no direct ascent past the beasts: the man who would escape them must go a longer and harder way. First he must descend through Hell (The Recognition of Sin), then he must ascend through Purgatory (The Renunciation of Sin), and only then may he reach the pinnacle of joy and come to the Light of God. Virgil offers to guide Dante, but only as far as Human Reason can go. Another guide (Beatrice, symbol

1. Translated, with notes and commentary, by John Ciardi.

of Divine Love) must take over for the final ascent, for Human Reason is self-limited. Dante submits himself joyously to Virgil's guidance and they move off.

The Slope of Hell



Hell is entirely below the surface of the earth; Dante moves steadily downward until he reaches earth's center at the bottom of hell. There is a corresponding gradation or hierarchy of evil—from bad to worse to worst.

Midway in our life's journey,² I went astray
from the straight road and woke to find myself
alone in a dark wood. How shall I say
what wood that was! I never saw so drear,
so rank, so arduous a wilderness!
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.
Death could scarce be more bitter than that place!
But since it came to good, I will recount
all that I found revealed there by God's grace.
How I came to it I cannot rightly say,
so drugged and loose with sleep had I become
when I first wandered there from the True Way.
But at the far end of that valley of evil
whose maze had sapped my very heart with fear,
I found myself before a little hill
and lifted up my eyes. Its shoulders glowed
already with the sweet rays of that planet³
whose virtue leads men straight on every road,
and the shining strengthened me against the fright
whose agony had wracked the lake of my heart
through all the terrors of that piteous night.
Just as a swimmer, who with his last breath

2. The biblical life span is three-score years and ten (seventy years). The action opens in Dante's thirty-fifth year, i.e., 1300 A.D. 3. The sun. Ptolemaic astronomers considered it a planet. It is also symbolic of God as He who lights the way.

flounders ashore from perilous seas, might turn
to memorize the wide water of his death—
so did I turn, my soul still fugitive
from death's surviving image, to stare down
that pass that none had ever left alive.
And there I lay to rest from my heart's race
till calm and breath returned to me. Then rose
and pushed up that dead slope at such a pace
each footfall rose above the last.⁴ And lo!
almost at the beginning of the rise
I faced a spotted Leopard, all tremor and flow
and gaudy pelt. And it would not pass, but stood
so blocking my every turn that time and again
I was on the verge of turning back to the wood.
This fell at the first widening of the dawn
as the sun was climbing Aries with those stars
that rode with him to light the new creation.⁵
Thus the holy hour and the sweet season
of commemoration did much to arm my fear
of that bright murderous beast with their good omen.
Yet not so much but what I shook with dread
at sight of a great Lion that broke upon me
raging with hunger, its enormous head
held high as if to strike a mortal terror
into the very air. And down his track,
a She-Wolf drove upon me, a starved horror
ravening and wasted beyond all belief.⁶
She seemed a rack for avarice, gaunt and craving.
Oh many the souls she has brought to endless grief!
She brought such heaviness upon my spirit
at sight of her savagery and desperation,
I died from every hope of that high summit.
And like a miser—eager in acquisition
but desperate in self-reproach when Fortune's wheel
turns to the hour of his loss—all tears and attrition
I wavered back; and still the beast pursued,
forcing herself against me bit by bit
till I slid back into the sunless wood.
And as I fell to my soul's ruin, a presence
gathered before me on the discolored air,
the figure of one who seemed hoarse from long silence.
At sight of him in that friendless waste I cried:

4. The literal rendering would be: "So that the fixed foot was ever the lower." "Fixed" has often been translated "right" and an ingenious reasoning can support that reading, but a simpler explanation offers itself and seems more competent: Dante is saying that he climbed with such zeal and haste that every footfall carried him above the last despite the steepness of the climb. At a slow pace, on the other hand, the rear foot might be brought up only as far as the forward foot. 5. The medieval tradition had it that the sun was in Aries at the time of the Creation. The significance of the astronomical and religious conjunction is an important part of Dante's intended allegory. It is just before dawn of Good Friday 1300 A.D. when he awakens in the Dark Wood. Thus his new life begins under Aries, the sign of creation, at dawn (rebirth) and in the Easter season (resurrection). Moreover the moon is full and the sun is in the equinox, conditions that did not fall together on any Friday of 1300. Dante is obviously constructing poetically the perfect Easter as a symbol of his new awakening. 6. These three beasts undoubtedly are taken from Jeremiah v, 6. Many additional and incidental interpretations have been advanced for them, but the central interpretation must remain as noted. They foreshadow the three divisions of Hell (incontinence, violence, and fraud) which Virgil explains at length in Canto XI, 16–111.

"Have pity on me, whatever thing you are,
 whether shade or living man." And it replied:
 "Not man, though man I once was, and my blood
 was Lombard, both my parents Mantuan.
 I was born, though late, *sub Julio*,⁷ and bred
 in Rome under Augustus in the noon
 of the false and lying gods. I was a poet
 and sang of old Anchises' noble son⁸
 who came to Rome after the burning of Troy.
 But you—why do *you* return to these distresses
 instead of climbing that shining Mount of Joy
 which is the seat and first cause of man's bliss?"
 "And are you then that Virgil and that fountain
 of purest speech?" My voice grew tremulous:
 "Glory and light of poets! now may that zeal
 and love's apprenticeship that I poured out
 on your heroic verses serve me well!
 For you are my true master and first author,
 the sole maker from whom I drew the breath
 of that sweet style whose measures have brought me honor.
 See there, immortal sage, the beast I flee.
 For my soul's salvation, I beg you, guard me from her,
 for she has struck a mortal tremor through me."
 And he replied, seeing my soul in tears:
 "He must go by another way who would escape
 this wilderness, for that mad beast that fleers
 before you there, suffers no man to pass.
 She tracks down all, kills all, and knows no glut,
 but, feeding, she grows hungrier than she was.
 She mates with any beast, and will mate with more
 before the Greyhound⁹ comes to hunt her down.
 He will not feed on lands nor loot, but honor
 and love and wisdom will make straight his way.
 He will rise between Feltro and Feltro, and in him
 shall be the resurrection and new day
 of that sad Italy for which Nisus died,
 and Turnus, and Euryalus, and the maid Camilla.¹
 He shall hunt her through every nation of sick pride
 till she is driven back forever to Hell
 whence Envy first released her on the world.
 Therefore, for your own good, I think it well
 you follow me and I will be your guide
 and lead you forth through an eternal place.
 There you shall see the ancient spirits tried
 in endless pain, and hear their lamentation
 as each bemoans the second death² of souls.
 Next you shall see upon a burning mountain

7. In the reign of Julius Caesar. 8. Aeneas. 9. Almost certainly refers to Can Grande della Scala (1290–1329), great Italian leader born in Verona, which lies between the towns of Feltre and Montefeltro. 1. All were killed in the war between the Trojans and the Latians when, according to legend, Aeneas led the survivors of Troy into Italy. Nisus and Euryalus (*Aeneid* IX) were Trojan comrades-in-arms who died together. Camilla (*Aeneid* XI) was the daughter of the Latian king and one of the warrior women. She was killed in a horse charge against the Trojans after displaying great gallantry. Turnus (*Aeneid* XII) was killed by Aeneas in a duel. 2. Damnation. "This is the second death, even the lake of fire" (Revelation xx, 14).

souls in fire and yet content in fire,
 knowing that whensoever it may be
 they yet will mount into the blessed choir.
 To which, if it is still your wish to climb,
 a worthier spirit shall be sent to guide you.
 With her shall I leave you, for the King of Time,
 who reigns on high, forbids me to come there
 since, living, I rebelled against his law.³
 He rules the waters and the land and air
 and there holds court, his city and his throne.
 Oh blessed are they he chooses!" And I to him:
 "Poet, by that God to you unknown,
 lead me this way. Beyond this present ill
 and worse to dread, lead me to Peter's gate⁴
 and be my guide through the sad halls of Hell."
 And he then: "Follow." And he moved ahead
 in silence, and I followed where he led.

CANTO II

The Descent

It is evening of the first day (Friday). Dante is following Virgil and finds himself tired and despairing. How can he be worthy of such a vision as Virgil has described? He hesitates and seems about to abandon his first purpose.

To comfort him Virgil explains how Beatrice descended to him in Limbo and told him of her concern for Dante. It is she, the symbol of Divine Love, who sends Virgil to lead Dante from error. She has come into Hell itself on this errand, for Dante cannot come to Divine Love unaided; Reason must lead him. Moreover Beatrice has been sent with the prayers of the Virgin Mary (Compassion), and of Saint Lucia (Divine Light). Rachel (The Contemplative Life) also figures in the heavenly scene which Virgil recounts.

Virgil explains all this and reproaches Dante: how can he hesitate longer when such heavenly powers are concerned for him, and Virgil himself has promised to lead him safely?

Dante understands at once that such forces cannot fail him, and his spirits rise in joyous anticipation.

The light was departing. The brown air drew down
 all the earth's creatures, calling them to rest
 from their day-roving, as I, one man alone,
 prepared myself to face the double war
 of the journey and the pity, which memory
 shall here set down, nor hesitate, nor err.

3. Salvation is only through Christ in Dante's theology. Virgil lived and died before the establishment of Christ's teachings in Rome, and cannot therefore enter Heaven. 4. The gate of Purgatory. (*Purgatorio* IX, 76 ff.) The gate is guarded by an angel with a gleaming sword. The angel is Peter's vicar (Peter, the first Pope, symbolized all Popes; i.e., Christ's vicar on earth) and is entrusted with the two great keys. Some commentators argue that this is the gate of Paradise, but Dante mentions no gate beyond this one in his ascent to Heaven. It should be remembered, too, that those who pass the gate of Purgatory have effectively entered Heaven.

O Muses! O High Genius! Be my aid!
 O Memory, recorder of the vision,
 here shall your true nobility be displayed!
 Thus I began: "Poet, you who must guide me,
 before you trust me to that arduous passage,
 look to me and look through me—can I be worthy?
 You sang how the father of Sylvius,⁵ while still
 in corruptible flesh won to that other world,
 crossing with mortal sense the immortal sill.
 But if the Adversary of all Evil
 weighing his consequence and who and what
 should issue from him, treated him so well—
 that cannot seem unfitting to thinking men,
 since he was chosen father of Mother Rome
 and of her Empire by God's will and token.
 Both, to speak strictly, were founded and foreknown
 as the established Seat of Holiness
 for the successors of Great Peter's throne.
 In that quest, which your verses celebrate,
 he learned those mysteries from which arose
 his victory and Rome's apostolate.
 There later came the chosen vessel, Paul,
 bearing the confirmation of that Faith
 which is the one true door to life eternal.
 But I—how should I dare? By whose permission?
 I am not Aeneas. I am not Paul.
 Who could believe me worthy of the vision?
 How, then, may I presume to this high quest
 and not fear my own brashness? You are wise
 and will grasp what my poor words can but suggest."
 As one who unwill's what he wills, will stay
 strong purposes with feeble second thoughts
 until he spells all his first zeal away—
 so I hung back and balked on that dim coast
 till thinking had worn out my enterprise,
 so stout at starting and so early lost.
 "I understand from your words and the look in your eyes,"
 that shadow of magnificence answered me,
 "your soul is sunken in that cowardice
 that bears down many men, turning their course
 and resolution by imagined perils,
 as his own shadow turns the frightened horse.
 To free you of this dread I will tell you all

5. Aeneas. Lines 13–30 are a fair example of the way in which Dante absorbed pagan themes into his Catholicism. According to Virgil, Aeneas is the son of mortal Anchises and of Venus. Venus, in her son's interest, secures a prophecy and a promise from Jove to the effect that Aeneas is to found a royal line that shall rule the world. After the burning of Troy, Aeneas is directed by various signs to sail for the Latian lands (Italy) where his destiny awaits him. After many misadventures, he is compelled (like Dante) to descend to the underworld of the dead. There he finds his father's shade, and there he is shown the shades of the great kings that are to stem from him. (*Aeneid* VI, 921 ff.) Among them are Romulus, Julius Caesar, and Augustus Caesar. The full glory of the Roman Empire is also foreshadowed to him.

Dante, however, continues the Virgilian theme and includes in the predestination not only the Roman Empire but the Holy Roman Empire and its Church. Thus what Virgil presented as an arrangement of Jove, a concession to the son of Venus, becomes part of the divine scheme of the Catholic God, and Aeneas is cast as a direct forerunner of Peter and Paul.

of why I came to you and what I heard
 when first I pitied you. I was a soul
 among the souls of Limbo,⁶ when a Lady
 so blessed and so beautiful, I prayed her
 to order and command my will, called to me.
 Her eyes were kindled from the lamps of Heaven.
 Her voice reached through me, tender, sweet, and low.
 An angel's voice, a music of its own:
 'O gracious Mantuan whose melodies
 live in earth's memory and shall live on
 till the last motion ceases in the skies,
 my dearest friend, and fortune's foe, has strayed
 onto a friendless shore and stands beset
 by such distresses that he turns afraid
 from the True Way, and news of him in Heaven
 rumors my dread he is already lost.
 I come, afraid that I am too-late risen.
 Fly to him and with your high counsel, pity,
 and with whatever need be for his good
 and soul's salvation, help him, and solace me.
 It is I, Beatrice, who send you to him.
 I come from the blessed height for which I yearn.
 Love called me here. When amid Seraphim
 I stand again before my Lord, your praises
 shall sound in Heaven.' She paused, and I began:
 'O Lady of that only grace that raises
 feeble mankind within its mortal cycle
 above all other works God's will has placed
 within the heaven of the smallest circle;⁷
 so welcome is your command that to my sense,
 were it already fulfilled, it would yet seem tardy.
 I understand, and am all obedience.
 But tell me how you dare to venture thus
 so far from the wide heaven of your joy
 to which your thoughts yearn back from this abyss.'
 'Since what you ask,' she answered me, 'probes near
 the root of all, I will say briefly only
 how I have come through Hell's pit without fear.
 Know then, O waiting and compassionate soul,
 that is to fear which has the power to harm,
 and nothing else is fearful even in Hell.
 I am so made by God's all-seeing mercy
 your anguish does not touch me, and the flame
 of this great burning has no power upon me.
 There is a Lady in Heaven so concerned
 for him I send you to, that for her sake

6. See Canto IV, lines 31–45, where Virgil explains his state in Hell. 7. The moon. "Heaven" here is used in its astronomical sense. All within that circle is the earth. According to the Ptolemaic system the earth was the center of creation and was surrounded by nine heavenly spheres (nine heavens) concentrically placed around it. The moon was the first of these, and therefore the smallest. A cross section of this universe could be represented by drawing nine concentric circles (at varying distances about the earth as a center). Going outward from the center these circles would indicate, in order, the spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, The Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, The Fixed Stars, The Primum Mobile. Beyond the Primum Mobile lies the Empyrean.

the strict decree is broken. She has turned
 and called Lucia⁸ to her wish and mercy
 saying: 'Thy faithful one is sorely pressed;
 in his distresses I commend him to thee.'
 Lucia, that soul of light and foe of all 100
 cruelty, rose and came to me at once
 where I was sitting with the ancient Rachel,⁹
 saying to me: 'Beatrice, true praise of God,
 why dost thou not help him who loved thee so
 that for thy sake he left the vulgar crowd? 105
 Dost thou not hear his cries? Canst thou not see
 the death he wrestles with beside that river
 no ocean can surpass for rage and fury?'
 No soul of earth was ever as rapt to seek
 its good or flee its injury as I was— 110
 when I had heard my sweet Lucia speak—
 to descend from Heaven and my blessed seat
 to you, laying my trust in that high speech
 that honors you and all who honor it.'
 She spoke and turned away to hide a tear 115
 that, shining, urged me faster. So I came
 and freed you from the beast that drove you there,
 blocking the near way to the Heavenly Height.
 And now what ails you? Why do you lag? Why
 this heartsick hesitation and pale fright 120
 when three such blessed Ladies lean from Heaven
 in their concern for you and my own pledge
 of the great good that waits you has been given?"
 As flowerlets drooped and puckered in the night
 turn up to the returning sun and spread 125
 their petals wide on his new warmth and light—
 just so my wilted spirits rose again
 and such a heat of zeal surged through my veins
 that I was born anew. Thus I began:
 "Blesséd be that Lady of infinite pity, 130
 and blesséd be thy taxed and courteous spirit
 that came so promptly on the word she gave thee.
 Thy words have moved my heart to its first purpose.
 My Guide! My Lord! My Master! Now lead on:
 one will shall serve the two of us in this." 135
 He turned when I had spoken, and at his back
 I entered on that hard and perilous track.

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. They are neither in Hell nor out of it.

8. Allegorically she represents Divine Light. Her name in Italian inevitably suggests *luce* (light), and she is the patron saint of eyesight. 9. Represents the Contemplative Life.

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, but without delaying to speak to any of these souls, the Poets move on to Acheron, the first of the rivers of Hell. Here the newly-arrived souls of the damned gather and wait for monstrous Charon 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.

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 WEAR¹

WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND.²

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.³

These mysteries I read cut into stone

above a gate. And turning I said: "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

1. The angels, the Empyrean, and the First Matter are the elements time cannot wear, for they will last to all time. Man, however, in his mortal state, is not eternal. The Gate of Hell, therefore, was created before man. 2. So odious is sin to God that there can be no end to its just punishment. 3. The admonition, of course, is to the damned and not to those who come on Heaven-sent errands.

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.⁴
 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 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 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

4. This is almost certainly intended to be Celestine V, who became Pope in 1294. He was a man of saintly life, but allowed himself to be convinced by a priest named Benedetto that his soul was in danger since no man could live in the world without being damned. In fear for his soul he withdrew from all worldly affairs and renounced the papacy. Benedetto promptly assumed the mantle himself and became Boniface VIII, a Pope who became for Dante a symbol of all the worst corruptions of the Church. Dante also blamed Boniface and his intrigues for many of the evils that befell Florence. We shall learn in Canto XIX that the fires of Hell are waiting for Boniface in the pit of the Simoniacs, and we shall be given further evidence of his corruption in Canto XXVII. Celestine's great guilt is that his cowardice (in selfish terror for his own welfare) served as the door through which so much evil entered the Church.

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 toward us in an ancient ferry
 came an old man⁵ 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 by other steerage
 shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not here!
 A lighter craft than mine must give you passage."⁶
 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,⁷ 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 in, and with a 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.

5. Charon. He is the ferryman of dead souls across the Acheron in all classical mythology. 6. Charon recognizes Dante not only as a living man but as a soul in grace, and knows, therefore, that the Infernal Ferry was not intended for him. He is probably referring to the fact that souls destined for Purgatory and Heaven assemble not at his ferry point, but on the banks of the Tiber, from which they are transported by an angel. 7. The souls of the damned are not permitted to repent, for repentance is a divine grace.

And all pass over eagerly, for here
 Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so
 their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear.⁸
 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 shuttered senses left me. Blind,
 like one whom sleep comes over in a swoon,
 I stumbled into darkness and went down.⁹

CANTO IV

Circle One: Limbo The Virtuous Pagans

Dante wakes to find himself across Acheron. The Poets are now on the brink of Hell itself, which Dante conceives as a great funnel-shaped cave lying below the northern hemisphere with its bottom point at the earth's center. Around this great circular depression runs a series of ledges, each of which Dante calls a *Circle*. Each circle is assigned to the punishment of one category of sin.

As soon as Dante's strength returns, the Poets begin to cross the First Circle. Here they find the Virtuous Pagans. They were born without the light of Christ's revelation, and, therefore, they cannot come into the light of God, but they are not tormented. Their only pain is that they have no hope.

Ahead of them Dante sights a great dome of light, and a voice trumpets through the darkness welcoming Virgil back, for this is his eternal place in Hell. Immediately the great Poets of all time appear—Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. They greet Virgil, and they make Dante a sixth in their company.

With them Dante enters the Citadel of Human Reason and sees before his eyes the Master Souls of Pagan Antiquity gathered on a green, and illuminated by the radiance of Human Reason. This is the highest state man can achieve without God, and the glory of it dazzles Dante, but he knows also that it is nothing compared to the glory of God.

A monstrous clap of thunder broke apart
 the swoon that stuffed my head; like one awakened
 by violent hands, I leaped up with a start.
 And having risen; rested and renewed,

8. Hell (allegorically Sin) is what the souls of the damned really wish for. Hell is their actual and deliberate choice, for divine grace is denied to none who wish for it in their hearts. The damned must, in fact, deliberately harden their hearts to God in order to become damned. Christ's grace is sufficient to save all who wish for it. 9. This device (repeated at the end of Canto V) serves a double purpose. The first is technical: Dante uses it to cover a transition. We are never told how he crossed Acheron, for that would involve certain narrative matters he can better deal with when he crosses Styx in Canto VII. The second is to provide a point of departure for a theme that is carried through the entire descent: the theme of Dante's emotional reaction to Hell. These two swoons early in the descent show him most susceptible to the grief about him. As he descends, pity leaves him, and he even goes so far as to add to the torments of one sinner. The allegory is clear: we must harden ourselves against every sympathy for sin.

I studied out the landmarks of the gloom
 to find my bearings there as best I could.
 And I found I stood on the very brink of the valley
 called the Dolorous Abyss, the desolate chasm
 where rolls the thunder of Hell's eternal cry,
 so depthless-deep and nebulous and dim
 that stare as I might into its frightful pit
 it gave me back no feature and no bottom.
 Death-pale,¹ the Poet spoke: "Now let us go
 into the blind world waiting here below us.
 I will lead the way and you shall follow."
 And I, sick with alarm at his new pallor,
 cried out, "How can I go this way when you
 who are my strength in doubt turn pale with terror?"
 And he: "The pain of these below us here,
 drains the color from my face for pity,
 and leaves this pallor you mistake for fear.
 Now let us go, for a long road awaits us."
 So he entered and so he led me in
 to the first circle and ledge of the abyss.
 No tortured wailing rose to greet us here
 but sounds of sighing rose from every side,
 sending a tremor through the timeless air,
 a grief breathed out of untormented sadness,
 the passive state of those who dwelled apart,
 men, women, children—a dim and endless congress.
 And the Master said to me: "You do not question
 what souls these are that suffer here before you?
 I wish you to know before you travel on
 that these were sinless. And still their merits fail,
 for they lacked Baptism's grace, which is the door
 of the true faith you were born to. Their birth fell
 before the age of the Christian mysteries,
 and so they did not worship God's Trinity
 in fullest duty. I am one of these.
 For such defects are we lost, though spared the fire
 and suffering Hell in one affliction only:
 that without hope we live on in desire."
 I thought how many worthy souls there were
 suspended in that Limbo, and a weight
 closed on my heart for what the noblest suffer.
 "Instruct me, Master and most noble Sir,"
 I prayed him then, "better to understand
 the perfect creed that conquers every error:
 has any, by his own or another's merit,
 gone ever from this place to blessedness?"
 He sensed my inner question and answered it:
 "I was still new to this estate of tears
 when a Mighty One² descended here among us,

1. Virgil is most likely affected here by the return to his own place in Hell. "The pain of these below," then (line 19), would be the pain of his own group in Limbo (the Virtuous Pagans) rather than the total of Hell's suffering. 2. Christ. His name is never directly uttered in Hell. *Descended here*: the legend of the Harrowing of Hell is Apocryphal. It is based on I Peter iii, 19: "He went and preached unto the spirits in prison." The legend is that Christ in the glory of His resurrection descended into Limbo and took with Him to Heaven the first human souls to be saved. The event would, accordingly, have occurred in 33 or 34 A.D.. Virgil died in 19 B.C.

crowned with the sign of His victorious years.
 He took from us the shade of our first parent,³
 of Abel, his pure son, of ancient Noah,
 of Moses, the bringer of law, the obedient.
 Father Abraham, David the King,
 Israel⁴ with his father and his children,
 Rachel,⁵ the holy vessel of His blessing,
 and many more He chose for elevation
 among the elect. And before these, you must know,
 no human soul had ever won salvation."
 We had not paused as he spoke, but held our road
 and passed meanwhile beyond a press of souls
 crowded about like trees in a thick wood.
 And we had not traveled far from where I woke
 when I made out a radiance before us
 that struck away a hemisphere of dark.
 We were still some distance back in the long night,
 yet near enough that I half-saw, half-sensed,
 what quality of souls lived in that light.
 "O ornament of wisdom and of art,
 what souls are these whose merit lights their way
 even in Hell. What joy sets them apart?"
 And he to me: "The signature of honor
 they left on earth is recognized in Heaven
 and wins them ease in Hell out of God's favor."
 And as he spoke a voice rang on the air:
 "Honor the Prince of Poets; the soul and glory
 that went from us returns. He is here! He is here!"
 The cry ceased and the echo passed from hearing;
 I saw four mighty presences come toward us
 with neither joy nor sorrow in their bearing.
 "Note well," my Master said as they came on,
 "that soul that leads the rest with sword in hand
 as if he were their captain and champion.
 It is Homer, singing master of the earth.
 Next after him is Horace, the satirist,
 Ovid is third, and Lucan is the fourth.
 Since all of these have part in the high name
 the voice proclaimed, calling me Prince of Poets,
 the honor that they do me honors them."
 So I saw gathered at the edge of light
 the masters of that highest school whose song
 outsoars all others like an eagle's flight.
 And after they had talked together a while,
 they turned and welcomed me most graciously,
 at which I saw my approving Master smile.
 And they honored me far beyond courtesy,
 for they included me in their own number,
 making me sixth in that high company.
 So we moved toward the light, and as we passed
 we spoke of things as well omitted here

3. Adam. 4. Another name for Jacob; his father was Isaac. 5. Wife of Jacob.

as it was sweet to touch on there. At last
 we reached the base of a great Citadel
 circled by seven towering battlements
 and by a sweet brook flowing round them all.⁶
 This we passed over as if it were firm ground.⁷
 Through seven gates I entered with those sages
 and came to a green meadow blooming round.
 There with a solemn and majestic poise
 stood many people gathered in the light,
 speaking infrequently and with muted voice.
 Past that enameled green we six withdrew
 into a luminous and open height
 from which each soul among them stood in view.
 And there directly before me on the green
 the master souls of time were shown to me.
 I glory in the glory I have seen!⁸
 Electra stood in a great company
 among whom I saw Hector and Aeneas
 and Caesar in armor with his falcon's eye.
 I saw Camilla, and the Queen Amazon
 across the field. I saw the Latian King
 seated there with his daughter by his throne.
 And the good Brutus who overthrew the Tarquin:
 Lucrezia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia;
 and, by himself apart, the Saladin.
 And raising my eyes a little I saw on high
 Aristotle, the master of those who know,
 ringed by the great souls of philosophy.

6. The most likely allegory is that the Citadel represents philosophy (that is, human reason without the light of God) surrounded by seven walls which represent the seven liberal arts, or the seven sciences, or the seven virtues. Note that Human Reason makes a light of its own, but that it is a light in darkness and forever separated from the glory of God's light. The *sweet brook flowing round them all* has been interpreted in many ways. Clearly fundamental, however, is the fact that it divides those in the Citadel (those who wish to know) from those in the outer darkness. 7. Since Dante still has his body, and since all others in Hell are incorporeal shades, there is a recurring narrative problem in the *Inferno* (and through the rest of the *Commedia*): how does flesh act in contact with spirit? In the *Purgatorio* Dante attempts to embrace the spirit of Casella and his arms pass through him as if he were empty air. In the Third Circle, below (Canto VI, 34-36), Dante steps on some of the spirits lying in the slush and his foot passes right through them. (The original lines offer several possible readings of which I have preferred this one.) And at other times Virgil, also a spirit, picks Dante up and carries him bodily.

It is clear, too, that Dante means the spirits of Hell to be weightless. When Virgil steps into Phlegyas's bark (Canto VIII) it does not settle into the water, but it does when Dante's living body steps aboard. There is no narrative reason why Dante should not sink into the waters of this stream and Dante follows no fixed rule in dealing with such phenomena, often suiting the physical action to the allegorical need. Here, the moat probably symbolizes some requirement (The Will to Know) which he and the other poets meet without difficulty. 8. The inhabitants of the Citadel fall into three main groups: 1. *The heroes and heroines*: All of these it must be noted were associated with the Trojans and their Roman descendants. . . . The Electra Dante mentions here is not the sister of Orestes (see Euripides' *Electra*) but the daughter of Atlas and the mother of Dardanus, the founder of Troy. 2. *The philosophers*: Most of this group is made up of philosophers whose teachings were, at least in part, acceptable to church scholarship. Democritus, however, "who ascribed the world to chance," would clearly be an exception. The group is best interpreted, therefore, as representing the highest achievements of Human Reason unaided by Divine Love. *Plato and Aristotle*: Through a considerable part of the Middle Ages Plato was held to be the fountainhead of all scholarship, but in Dante's time practically all learning was based on Aristotelian theory as interpreted through the many commentaries. *Linus*: the Italian is "Lino" and for it some commentators read "Livio" (Livy). 3. *The naturalists*: They are less well known today. In Dante's time their place in scholarship more or less corresponded to the role of the theoretician and historian of science in our universities. *Avicenna* (his major work was in the eleventh century) and *Averrhoës* (twelfth century) were Arabian philosophers and physicians especially famous in Dante's time for their commentaries on Aristotle. *Great Commentary*: has the force of a title, i.e., The Great Commentary as distinguished from many lesser commentaries. *The Saladin*: This is the famous Saladin who was defeated by Richard the Lion-Heart, and whose great qualities as a ruler became a legend in medieval Europe.

All wait upon him for their honor and his.
 I saw Socrates and Plato at his side
 before all others there. Democritus
 who ascribes the world to chance, Diogenes,
 and with him there Thales, Anaxagoras,
 Zeno, Heraclitus, Empedocles.
 And I saw the wise collector and analyst—
 Dioscorides I mean. I saw Orpheus there,
 Tully, Linus, Seneca the moralist,
 Euclid the geometer, and Ptolemy,
 Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna,
 and Averrhoës of the Great Commentary.
 I cannot count so much nobility;
 my longer theme pursues me so that often
 the word falls short of the reality.
 The company of six is reduced by four.
 My Master leads me by another road
 out of that serenity to the roar
 and trembling air of Hell. I pass from light
 into the kingdom of eternal night.

CANTO V

Circle Two The Carnal

The Poets leave Limbo and enter the Second Circle. Here begin the torments of Hell proper, and here, blocking the way, sits Minos, the dread and semi-bestial judge of the damned who assigns to each soul its eternal torment. He orders the Poets back; but Virgil silences him as he earlier silenced Charon, and the Poets move on.

They find themselves on a dark ledge swept by a great whirlwind, which spins within it the souls of the Carnal, those who betrayed reason to their appetites. Their sin was to abandon themselves to the tempest of their passions: so they are swept forever in the tempest of Hell, forever denied the light of reason and of God. Virgil identifies many among them. Semiramis is there, and Dido, Cleopatra, Helen, Achilles, Paris, and Tristan. Dante sees Paolo and Francesca swept together, and in the name of love he calls to them to tell their sad story. They pause from their eternal flight to come to him, and Francesca tells their history while Paolo weeps at her side. Dante is so stricken by compassion at their tragic tale that he swoons once again.

So we went down to the second ledge alone;
 a smaller circle⁹ of so much greater pain
 the voice of the damned rose in a bestial moan.
 There Minos¹ sits, grinning, grotesque, and hale.

9. The pit of Hell tapers like a funnel. The circles of ledges accordingly grow smaller as they descend.
 1. The son of Europa and of Zeus, who descended to her in the form of a bull. Minos became a mythological king of Crete, so famous for his wisdom and justice that after death his soul was made judge of the dead. Virgil presents him fulfilling the same office at Aeneas' descent to the underworld. Dante, however, transforms him into an irate and hideous monster with a tail. The transformation may have been suggested by the form Zeus assumed for the rape of Europa—the monster is certainly bullish enough here—but the obvious purpose of the brutalization is to present a figure symbolic of the guilty conscience of the wretches who come before it to make their confessions.

He examines each lost soul as it arrives
 and delivers his verdict with his coiling tail.
 That is to say, when the ill-fated soul
 appears before him it confesses all,
 and that grim sorter of the dark and foul
 decides which place in Hell shall be its end,
 then wraps his twitching tail about himself
 one coil for each degree it must descend.
 The soul descends and others take its place:
 each crowds in its turn to judgment, each confesses,
 each hears its doom and falls away through space.
 "O you who come into this camp of woe,"
 cried Minos when he saw me turn away
 without awaiting his judgment, "watch where you go
 once you have entered here, and to whom you turn!
 Do not be misled by that wide and easy passage!"
 And my Guide to him: "That is not your concern;
 it is his fate to enter every door.
 This has been willed where what is willed must be,
 and is not yours to question. Say no more."
 Now the choir of anguish, like a wound,
 strikes through the tortured air. Now I have come
 to Hell's full lamentation, sound beyond sound.
 I came to a place stripped bare of every light
 and roaring on the naked dark like seas
 wracked by a war of winds. Their hellish flight
 of storm and counterstorm through time foregone,
 sweeps the souls of the damned before its charge.
 Whirling and battering it drives them on,
 and when they pass the ruined gap of Hell²
 through which we had come, their shrieks begin anew.
 There they blaspheme the power of God eternal.
 And this, I learned, was the never ending flight
 of those who sinned in the flesh, the carnal and lusty
 who betrayed reason to their appetite.
 As the wings of wintering starlings bear them on
 in their great wheeling flights, just so the blast
 wherries these evil souls through time foregone.
 Here, there, up, down, they whirl and, whirling, strain
 with never a hope of hope to comfort them,
 not of release, but even of less pain.
 As cranes go over sounding their harsh cry,
 leaving the long streak of their flight in air,
 so come these spirits, wailing as they fly.
 And watching their shadows lashed by wind, I cried:
 "Master, what souls are these the very air
 lashes with its black whips from side to side?"
 "The first of these whose history you would know,"
 he answered me, "was Empress of many tongues.³
 Mad sensuality corrupted her so

2. See note to Canto IV, 53. At the time of the Harrowing of Hell a great earthquake shook the underworld shattering rocks and cliffs. Ruins resulting from the same shock are noted in Canto XII, 34, and Canto XXI, 112 ff. At the beginning of Canto XXIV, the Poets leave the *bolgia* of the Hypocrites by climbing the ruined slabs of a bridge that was shattered by this earthquake.
 3. Semiramis, a legendary queen of Assyria who assumed full power at the death of her husband, Ninus.

that to hide the guilt of her debauchery 55
 she licensed all depravity alike,
 and lust and law were one in her decree.
 She is Semiramis of whom the tale is told
 how she married Ninus and succeeded him
 to the throne of that wide land the Sultans hold. 60
 The other is Dido;⁴ faithless to the ashes
 of Sichaeus, she killed herself for love.
 The next whom the eternal tempest lashes
 is sense-drugged Cleopatra. See Helen⁵ there,
 from whom such ill arose. And great Achilles,⁶ 65
 who fought at last with love in the house of prayer.
 And Paris. And Tristan." As they whirled above
 he pointed out more than a thousand shades
 of those torn from the mortal life by love.
 I stood there while my Teacher one by one 70
 named the great knights and ladies of dim time;
 and I was swept by pity and confusion.
 At last I spoke: "Poet, I should be glad
 to speak a word with those two swept together
 so lightly on the wind and still so sad."⁷ 75
 And he to me: "Watch them. When next they pass,
 call to them in the name of love that drives
 and damns them here. In that name they will pause."
 Thus, as soon as the wind in its wild course
 brought them around, I called: "O wearied souls!
 if none forbid it, pause and speak to us." 80
 As mating doves that love calls to their nest
 glide through the air with motionless raised wings,
 borne by the sweet desire that fills each breast—
 Just so those spirits turned on the torn sky 85
 from the band where Dido whirls across the air;
 such was the power of pity in my cry.
 "O living creature, gracious, kind, and good,
 going this pilgrimage through the sick night,
 visiting us who stained the earth with blood, 90
 were the King of Time our friend, we would pray His peace
 on you who have pitied us. As long as the wind
 will let us pause, ask of us what you please.
 The town where I was born lies by the shore

4. Queen and founder of Carthage. She had vowed to remain faithful to her husband, Sichaeus, but she fell in love with Aeneas. When Aeneas abandoned her she stabbed herself on a funeral pyre she had had prepared. According to Dante's own system of punishments, she should be in the Seventh Circle (Canto XIII) with the suicides. The only clue Dante gives to the tempering of her punishment is his statement that "she killed herself for love." Dante always seems readiest to forgive in that name.
 5. She was held responsible for the Trojan War; the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta, she ran away with the visiting Prince Paris from Troy.
 6. He is placed among this company because of his passion for Polyxena, the daughter of Priam. For love of her, he agreed to desert the Greeks and to join the Trojans, but when he went to the temple for the wedding (according to the legend Dante has followed) he was killed by Paris.
 7. Paolo and Francesca. In 1275 Giovanni Malatesta of Rimini, called Giovanni the Lame, a somewhat deformed but brave and powerful warrior, made a political marriage with Francesca, daughter of Guido da Polenta of Ravenna. Francesca came to Rimini and there an amour grew between her and Giovanni's younger brother Paolo. Despite the fact that Paolo had married in 1269 and had become the father of two daughters by 1275, his affair with Francesca continued for many years. It was sometime between 1283 and 1286 that Giovanni surprised them in Francesca's bedroom and killed both of them.

Around these facts the legend has grown that Paolo was sent by Giovanni as his proxy to the marriage, that Francesca thought he was her real bridegroom and accordingly gave him her heart irrevocably at first sight. The legend obviously increases the pathos, but nothing in Dante gives it support.

where the Po descends into its ocean rest 95
 with its attendant streams in one long murmur.
 Love, which in gentlest hearts will soonest bloom
 seized my lover with passion for that sweet body
 from which I was torn unshriven to my doom.
 Love, which permits no loved one not to love, 100
 took me so strongly with delight in him
 that we are one in Hell, as we were above.⁸
 Love led us to one death. In the depths of Hell
 Caïna waits for him⁹ who took our lives."
 This was the piteous tale they stopped to tell. 105
 And when I had heard those world-offended lovers
 I bowed my head. At last the Poet spoke:
 "What painful thoughts are these your lowered brow covers?"
 When at length I answered, I began: "Alas!
 What sweetest thoughts, what green and young desire 110
 led these two lovers to this sorry pass."
 Then turning to those spirits once again,
 I said: "Francesca, what you suffer here
 melts me to tears of pity and of pain.
 But tell me: in the time of your sweet sighs 115
 by what appearances found love the way
 to lure you to his perilous paradise?"
 And she: "The double grief of a lost bliss
 is to recall its happy hour in pain.
 Your Guide and Teacher knows the truth of this. 120
 But if there is indeed a soul in Hell
 to ask of the beginning of our love
 out of his pity, I will weep and tell:
 On a day for dalliance we read the rhyme
 of Lancelot,¹ how love had mastered him. 125
 We were alone with innocence and dim time.²
 Pause after pause that high old story drew
 our eyes together while we blushed and paled;
 but it was one soft passage overthrew
 our caution and our hearts. For when we read 130
 how her fond smile was kissed by such a lover,
 he who is one with me alive and dead
 breathed on my lips the tremor of his kiss.
 That book, and he who wrote it, was a pander.³
 That day we read no further." As she said this, 135
 the other spirit, who stood by her, wept

8. At many points of the *Inferno* Dante makes clear the principle that the souls of the damned are locked so blindly into their own guilt that none can feel sympathy for another, or find any pleasure in the presence of another. The temptation of many readers is to interpret this line romantically: *i.e.*, that the love of Paolo and Francesca survives Hell itself. The more Dantean interpretation, however, is that they add to one another's anguish (a) as mutual reminders of their sin, and (b) as insubstantial shades of the bodies for which they once felt such great passion.
 9. Giovanni Malatesta was still alive at the writing. His fate is already decided, however, and upon his death, his soul will fall to Caïna, the first ring of the last circle (Canto XXXII), where lie those who performed acts of treachery against their kin.
 1. The story of Lancelot and Guinevere (of Arthurian legend) exists in many forms. The details Dante makes use of are from an Old French version.
 2. The original simply reads "We were alone, suspecting nothing." "Dim time" is rhyme-forced, but not wholly outside the legitimate implications of the original, I hope. The old courtly romance may well be thought of as happening in the dim ancient days. The apology, of course, comes after the fact: one does the possible then argues for justification, and there probably is none.
 3. "Galeotto," the Italian word for "pander," is also the Italian rendering of the name of Gallehaut, who, in the French Romance Dante refers to here, urged Lancelot and Guinevere on to love.

so piteously, I felt my senses reel
and faint away with anguish. I was swept
by such a swoon as death is, and I fell,
as a corpse might fall, to the dead floor of Hell.

140

CANTO VI

Circle Three The Gluttons

Dante recovers from his swoon and finds himself in the Third Circle. A great storm of putrefaction falls incessantly, a mixture of stinking snow and freezing rain, which forms into a vile slush underfoot. Everything about this Circle suggests a gigantic garbage dump. The souls of the damned lie in the icy paste, swollen and obscene, and Cerberus, the ravenous three-headed dog of Hell, stands guard over them, ripping and tearing them with his claws and teeth.

These are the Gluttons. In life they made no higher use of the gifts of God than to wallow in food and drink, producers of nothing but garbage and offal. Here they lie through all eternity, themselves like garbage, half-buried in fetid slush, while Cerberus slavers over them as they in life slavered over their food.

As the Poets pass, one of the speakers sits up and addresses Dante. He is Ciacco, The Hog, a citizen of Dante's own Florence. He recognizes Dante and asks eagerly for news of what is happening there. With the foreknowledge of the damned, Ciacco then utters the first of the political prophecies that are to become a recurring theme of the *Inferno*. The poets then move on toward the next Circle, at the edge of which they encounter the monster Plutus.

My senses had reeled from me out of pity
for the sorrow of those kinsmen and lost lovers.

Now they return, and waking gradually,
I see new torments and new souls in pain
about me everywhere. Wherever I turn
away from grief I turn to grief again.

5

I am in the Third Circle of the torments.

Here to all time with neither pause nor change
the frozen rain of Hell descends in torrents.

10

Huge hailstones, dirty water, and black snow
pour from the dismal air to putrefy
the putrid slush that waits for them below.

Here monstrous Cerberus,⁴ the ravening beast,
howls through his triple throats like a mad dog
over the spirits sunk in that foul paste.

15

His eyes are red, his beard is greased with phlegm,
his belly is swollen, and his hands are claws
to rip the wretches and flay and mangle them.

And they, too, howl like dogs in the freezing storm,

4. In classical mythology Cerberus appears as a three-headed dog. His master was Pluto, king of the Underworld. Cerberus was placed at the Gate of the Underworld to allow all to enter, but none to escape. His three heads and his ravenous disposition make him an apt symbol of gluttony. *Like a mad dog*: Dante seems clearly to have visualized him as a half-human monster. The beard (line 16) suggests that at least one of his three heads is human, and many illuminated manuscripts so represent him.

turning and turning from it as if they thought
one naked side could keep the other warm.

20

When Cerberus discovered us in that swill
his dragon-jaws yawned wide, his lips drew back
in a grin of fangs. No limb of him was still.

My Guide bent down and seized in either fist
a clod of the stinking dirt that festered there
and flung them down the gullet of the beast.

25

As a hungry cur will set the echoes raving
and then fall still when he is thrown a bone,
all of his clamor being in his craving,

30

so the three ugly heads of Cerberus,
whose yowling at those wretches deafened them,
choked on their putrid sops and stopped their fuss.

We made our way across the sodden mess
of souls the rain beat down, and when our steps
fell on a body, they sank through emptiness.

35

All those illusions of being seemed to lie
drowned in the slush; until one wraith among them
sat up abruptly and called as I passed by:

"O you who are led this journey through the shade
of Hell's abyss, do you recall this face?"

40

You had been made before I was unmade."⁵

And I: "Perhaps the pain you suffer here
distorts your image from my recollection.

I do not know you as you now appear."

45

And he to me: "Your own city, so rife
with hatred that the bitter cup flows over
was mine too in that other, clearer life.

Your citizens nicknamed me Ciacco, The Hog:

gluttony was my offense, and for it
I lie here rotting like a swollen log.

50

Nor am I lost in this alone; all these
you see about you in this painful death
have wallowed in the same indecencies."

I answered him: "Ciacco, your agony
weighs on my heart and calls my soul to tears;

55

But tell me, if you can, what is to be
for the citizens of that divided state,

and whether there are honest men among them,
and for what reasons we are torn by hate."

60

And he then: "After many words given and taken
it shall come to blood; White shall rise over Black
and rout the dark lord's force, battered and shaken.

Then it shall come to pass within three suns
that the fallen shall arise, and by the power
of one now gripped by many hesitations

65

Black shall ride on White for many years,
loading it down with burdens and oppressions
and humbling of proud names and helpless tears.

Two are honest, but none will heed them. There,

70

5. That is, "you were born before I died." The further implication is that they must have seen one another in Florence, a city one can still walk across in twenty minutes, and around in a very few hours. Dante certainly would have known everyone in Florence.

pride, avarice, and envy are the tongues
 men know and heed, a Babel of despair."⁶
 Here he broke off his mournful prophecy.
 And I to him: "Still let me urge you on
 to speak a little further and instruct me: 75
 Farinata and Tegghiaio, men of good blood,
 Jacopo Rusticucci, Arrigo, Mosca,⁷
 and the others who set their hearts on doing good—
 where are they now whose high deeds might be-gem
 the crown of kings? I long to know their fate. 80
 Does Heaven soothe or Hell envenom them?"
 And he: "They lie below in a blacker lair.
 A heavier guilt draws them to greater pain.
 If you descend so far you may see them there.
 But when you move again among the living, 85
 oh speak my name to the memory of men!⁸
 Having answered all, I say no more." And giving
 his head a shake, he looked up at my face
 cross-eyed, then bowed his head and fell away
 among the other blind souls of that place. 90
 And my Guide to me: "He will not wake again
 until the angel trumpet sounds the day
 on which the host shall come to judge all men.
 Then shall each soul before the seat of Mercy
 return to its sad grave and flesh and form 95
 to hear the edict of Eternity."
 So we picked our slow way among the shades
 and the filthy rain, speaking of life to come.
 "Master," I said, "when the great clarion fades
 into the voice of thundering Omniscience, 100
 what of these agonies? Will they be the same,
 or more, or less, after the final sentence?"
 And he to me: "Look to your science⁹ again
 where it is written: the more a thing is perfect
 the more it feels of pleasure and of pain. 105
 As for these souls, though they can never soar
 to true perfection, still in the new time
 they will be nearer it than they were before."

6. This is the first of the political prophecies that are to become a recurring theme of the *Inferno*. (It is the second if we include the political symbolism of the Greyhound in Canto I.) Dante is, of course, writing after these events have all taken place. At Easter time of 1300, however, the events were in the future. The Whites and the Blacks of Ciacco's prophecy should not be confused with the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The internal strife between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines ended with the total defeat of the Ghibellines. By the end of the 13th century that strife had passed. But very shortly a new feud began in Florence between White Guelphs and Black Guelphs. A rather gruesome murder perpetrated by Focaccio de' Cancellieri became the cause of new strife between two branches of the Cancellieri family. On May 1 of 1300 the White Guelphs (Dante's party) drove the Black Guelphs from Florence in bloody fighting. Two years later, however ("within three suns"), the Blacks, aided by Dante's detested Boniface VIII, returned and expelled most of the prominent Whites, among them Dante; for he had been a member of the Priorate (City Council) that issued a decree banishing the leaders of both sides. This was the beginning of Dante's long exile from Florence. 7. Farinata will appear in Canto X among the Heretics; Tegghiaio and Jacopo Rusticucci, in Canto XVI with the homosexuals, Mosca in Canto XXVIII with the sowers of discord. Arrigo does not appear again and he has not been positively identified. Dante probably refers here to Arrigo (or Oderigo) dei Fifanti, one of those who took part in the murder of Buondelmonte (Canto XXVIII, line 107, note). 8. Excepting those shades in the lowest depths of Hell whose sins are so shameful that they wish only to be forgotten, all of the damned are eager to be remembered on earth. The concept of the family name and of its survival in the memories of men were matters of first importance among Italians of Dante's time, and expressions of essentially the same attitude are common in Italy today. 9. "Science" to the learned of Dante's time meant specifically "the writings of Aristotle and the commentaries upon them."

And so we walked the rim of the great ledge
 speaking of pain and joy, and of much more 110
 that I will not repeat, and reached the edge
 where the descent begins. There, suddenly,
 we came on Plutus, the great enemy.

CANTO VII

Circle Four The Hoarders and the Wasters
Circle Five The Wrathful and the Sullen

Plutus menaces the Poets, but once more Virgil shows himself more powerful than the rages of Hell's monsters. The Poets enter the Fourth Circle and find what seems to be a war in progress.

The sinners are divided into two raging mobs, each soul among them straining madly at a great boulder-like weight. The two mobs meet, clashing their weights against one another, after which they separate, pushing the great weights apart, and begin over again.

One mob is made up of the Hoarders, the other of the Wasters. In life, they lacked all moderation in regulating their expenses; they destroyed the light of God within themselves by thinking of nothing but money. Thus in death, their souls are encumbered by dead weights (mundanity) and one excess serves to punish the other. Their souls, moreover, have become so dimmed and awry in their fruitless rages that there is no hope of recognizing any among them.

The Poets pass on while Virgil explains the function of Dame Fortune in the Divine Scheme. As he finishes (it is past midnight now of Good Friday) they reach the inner edge of the ledge and come to a Black Spring which bubbles murkily over the rocks to form the Marsh of Styx, which is the Fifth Circle, the last station of the Upper Hell.

Across the marsh they see countless souls attacking one another in the foul slime. These are the Wrathful and the symbolism of their punishment is obvious. Virgil also points out to Dante certain bubbles rising from the slime and informs him that below that mud lie entombed the souls of the Sullen. In life they refused to welcome the sweet light of the Sun (Divine Illumination) and in death they are buried forever below the stinking waters of the Styx, gargling the words of an endless chant in a grotesque parody of singing a hymn.

"Papa Satán, Papa Satán, aleppy,"¹

Plutus² clucked and stuttered in his rage;
 and my all-knowing Guide, to comfort me:

1. Virgil, the all-knowing, may understand these words, but no one familiar with merely human languages has deciphered them. In Canto XXXI the monster Nimrod utters a similar meaningless jargon, and Virgil there cites it as evidence of the dimness of his mind. Gibberish is certainly a characteristic appropriate to monsters, and since Dante takes pains to make the reference to Satan apparent in the gibberish, it is obviously infernal and debased, and that is almost certainly all he intended. The word "papa" as used here probably means "Pope" rather than "father." "Il papa santo" is the Pope. "Papa Satán" would be his opposite number. In the original the last word is "aleppe." On the assumption that jargon translates jargon I have twisted it a bit to rhyme with "me." 2. In Greek mythology, Plutus was the God of Wealth. Many commentators suggest that Dante confused him with Pluto, the son of Saturn and God of the Underworld. But in that case, Plutus would be identical with Lucifer himself and would require a central place in Hell, whereas the classical function of Plutus as God of Material Wealth makes him the ideal overseer of the miserly and the prodigal.