

The Comedy of
Dante Alighieri

The Florentine

Cantica I

Hell

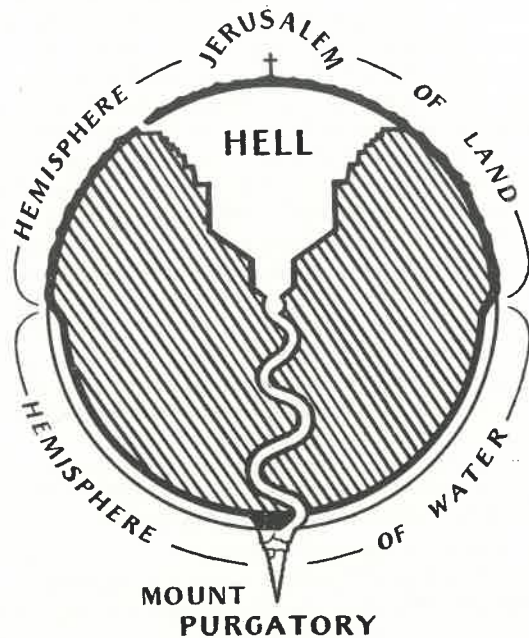
(l'Inferno)

Translated by DOROTHY L. SAYERS

PENGUIN BOOKS

CANTO I

THE STORY. Dante finds that he has strayed from the right road and is lost in a Dark Wood. He tries to escape by climbing a beautiful Mountain, but is turned aside, first by a gambolling Leopard, then by a fierce Lion, and finally by a ravenous She-Wolf. As he is fleeing back into the wood, he is stopped by the shade of Virgil, who tells him that he cannot hope to pass the Wolf and ascend the Mountain by that road. One day a Greyhound will come and drive the Wolf back to Hell; but the only course at present left open to Dante is to trust himself to Virgil, who will guide him by a longer way, leading through Hell and Purgatory. From there, a worthier spirit than Virgil (Beatrice) will lead him on to see the blessed souls in Paradise. Dante accepts Virgil as his “master, leader, and lord”, and they set out together.



Midway this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

Ay me! how hard to speak of it – that rude
And rough and stubborn forest! the mere breath
Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood;

It is so bitter, it goes nigh to death;
Yet there I gained such good, that, to convey
The tale, I'll write what else I found therewith.

How I got into it I cannot say,
Because I was so heavy and full of sleep
When first I stumbled from the narrow way;

But when at last I stood beneath a steep
Hill's side, which closed that valley's wandering maze
Whose dread had pierced me to the heart-root deep,

Then I looked up, and saw the morning rays
Mantle its shoulder from that planet bright
Which guides men's feet aright on all their ways;

And this a little quieted the affright
That lurking in my bosom's lake had lain
Through the long horror of that piteous night.

CANTO 1] *Dark Wood – The Mountain: The Three Beasts:*

22 And as a swimmer, panting, from the main
 Heaves safe to shore, then turns to face the drive
 Of perilous seas, and looks, and looks again,

25 So, while my soul yet fled, did I contrive
 To turn and gaze on that dread pass once more
 Whence no man yet came ever out alive.

28 Weary of limb I rested a brief hour,
 Then rose and onward through the desert hied,
 So that the fixed foot always was the lower;

31 And see! not far from where the mountain-side
 First rose, a Leopard, nimble and light and fleet,
 Clothed in a fine furred pelt all dapple-dyed,

34 Came gambolling out, and skipped before my feet,
 Hindering me so, that from the forthright line
 Time and again I turned to beat retreat.

37 The morn was young, and in his native sign
 The Sun climbed with the stars whose glitterings
 Attended on him when the Love Divine

40 First moved those happy, prime-created things:
 So the sweet season and the new-born day
 Filled me with hope and cheerful augurings

43 Of the bright beast so speckled and so gay;
 Yet not so much but that I fell to quaking
 At a fresh sight – a Lion in the way.

46 I saw him coming, swift and savage, making
 For me, head high, with ravenous hunger raving
 So that for dread the very air seemed shaking.

49 And next, a Wolf, gaunt with the famished craving
 Lodged ever in her horrible lean flank,
 The ancient cause of many men's enslaving; –

52 She was the worst – at that dread sight a blank
 Despair and whelming terror pinned me fast,
 Until all hope to scale the mountain sank.

55 Like one who loves the gains he has amassed,
 And meets the hour when he must lose his loot,
 Distracted in his mind and all aghast,

Virgil – Good Friday Evening

Even so was I, faced with that restless brute 58
 Which little by little edged and thrust me back,
 Back, to that place wherein the sun is mute.

Then, as I stumbled headlong down the track, 61
 Sudden a form was there, which dumbly crossed
 My path, as though grown voiceless from long lack

Of speech; and seeing it in that desert lost, 64
 "Have pity on me!" I hailed it as I ran,
 "Whate'er thou art – or very man, or ghost!"

It spoke: "No man, although I once was man; 67
 My parents' native land was Lombardy
 And both by citizenship were Mantuan.

Sub Julio born, though late in time, was I, 70
 And lived at Rome in good Augustus' days,
 When the false gods were worshipped ignorantly.

Poet was I, and tuned my verse to praise 73
 Anchises' righteous son, who sailed from Troy
 When Ilium's pride fell ruined down ablaze.

But thou – oh, why run back where fears destroy 76
 Peace? Why not climb the blissful mountain yonder,
 The cause and first beginning of all joy?"

"Canst thou be Virgil? thou that fount of splendour 79
 Whence poured so wide a stream of lordly speech?"
 Said I, and bowed my awe-struck head in wonder;

"O honour and light of poets all and each, 82
 Now let my great love stead me – the bent brow
 And long hours pondering all thy book can teach!

Thou art my master, and my author thou, 85
 From thee alone I learned the singing strain,
 The noble style, that does me honour now.

See there the beast that turned me back again – 88
 Save me from her, great sage – I fear her so,
 She shakes my blood through every pulse and vein."

"Nay, by another path thou needs must go 91
 If thou wilt ever leave this waste," he said,
 Looking upon me as I wept, "for lo!

- 94 The savage brute that makes thee cry for dread
Lets no man pass this road of hers, but still
Trammels him, till at last she lays him dead.
- 97 Vicious her nature is, and framed for ill;
When crammed she craves more fiercely than before;
Her raging greed can never gorge its fill.
- 100 With many a beast she mates, and shall with more,
Until the Greyhound come, the Master-hound,
And he shall slay her with a stroke right sore.
- 103 He'll not eat gold nor yet devour the ground;
Wisdom and love and power his food shall be,
His birthplace between Feltro and Feltro found;
- 106 Saviour he'll be to that low Italy
For which Euryalus and Nisus died,
Turnus and chaste Camilla, bloodily.
- 109 He'll hunt the Wolf through cities far and wide,
Till in the end he hunt her back to Hell,
Whence Envy first of all her leash untied.
- 112 But, as for thee, I think and deem it well
Thou take me for thy guide, and pass with me
Through an eternal place and terrible
- 115 Where thou shalt hear despairing cries, and see
Long-parted souls that in their torments dire
Howl for the second death perpetually.
- 118 Next, thou shalt gaze on those who in the fire
Are happy, for they look to mount on high,
In God's good time, up to the blissful quire;
- 121 To which glad place, a worthier spirit than I
Must lead thy steps, if thou desire to come,
With whom I'll leave thee then, and say good-bye;
- 124 For the Emperor of that high Imperium
Wills not that I, once rebel to His crown,
Into that city of His should lead men home.
- 127 Everywhere is His realm, but there His throne,
There is His city and exalted seat:
Thrice-blest whom there He chooses for His own!"

- Then I to him: "Poet, I thee entreat,
By that great God whom thou didst never know,
Lead on, that I may free my wandering feet
130
- From these snares and from worse; and I will go
133 Along with thee, St Peter's Gate to find,
And those whom thou portray'st as suffering so."
So he moved on; and I moved on behind.
136

THE IMAGES. *The Dark Wood* is the image of Sin or Error – not so much of any specific act of sin or intellectual perversion as of that spiritual condition called "hardness of heart", in which sinfulness has so taken possession of the soul as to render it incapable of turning to God, or even knowing which way to turn.

The Mountain, which on the mystical level is the image of the Soul's Ascent to God, is thus on the moral level the image of Repentance, by which the sinner returns to God. It can be ascended directly from "the right road", but not from the *Dark Wood*, because there the soul's cherished sins have become, as it were, externalized, and appear to it like demons or "beasts" with a will and power of their own, blocking all progress. Once lost in the *Dark Wood*, a man can only escape by so descending into himself that he sees his sin, not as an external obstacle, but as the will to chaos and death within him (Hell). Only when he has "died to sin" can he repent and purge it. Mount Purgatory and the Mountain of Canto I are, therefore, really one and the same mountain, as seen on the far side, and on this side, of the "death unto sin".

The Beasts. These are the images of sin. They may be identified with Lust, Pride, and Avarice respectively, or with the sins of Youth, Manhood, and Age; but they are perhaps best thought of as the images of the three *types* of sin which, if not repented, land the soul in one or other of the three main divisions of Hell (v. Canto XI).

The gay *Leopard* is the image of the self-indulgent sins – *Incontinence*; the fierce *Lion*, of the violent sins – *Bestiality*; the *She-Wolf* of the malicious sins, which involve *Fraud*.

The Greyhound has been much argued about. I think it has both an historical and a spiritual significance. Historically, it is perhaps the

image of some hoped-for political saviour who should establish the just World-Empire. Spiritually, the Greyhound, which has the attributes of God ("wisdom, love, and power"), is probably the image of the reign of the Holy Ghost on earth – the visible Kingdom of God for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer (cf. *Purg.* xi. 7-9).

NOTES. l. 1: *midway*: i.e. at the age of 35, the middle point of man's earthly pilgrimage of three-score and ten years.

l. 17: *that planet bright*: the Sun. In medieval astronomy, the Earth was looked upon as being the centre of the universe, and the sun counted as a planet. In the *Comedy*, the Sun is often used as a figure for "the spiritual sun, which is God". (Dante: *Convivio*, iv. 12.)

l. 27: *whence no man yet came ever out alive*: Dante, as we shall see, is by no means "out" as yet; nor will he be, until he has passed through the "death unto sin".

l. 30: *so that the fixed foot always was the lower*: i.e. he was going uphill. In walking, there is always one fixed foot and one moving foot; in going uphill, the moving foot is brought *above*, and in going downhill *below*, the fixed foot.

l. 37: *in his native sign*: According to tradition, the Sun was in the Zodiacal sign of Aries (the Ram) at the moment of the creation. The Sun is in Aries from 21 March to 21 April: therefore the "sweet season" is that of spring. Later, we shall discover that the day is Good Friday, and that the moon was full on the previous night. These indications do not precisely correspond to the actual Easter sky of 1300; Dante has merely described the astronomical phenomena typical of Eastertide.

ll. 63-4: *as though grown voiceless from long lack of speech*: i.e. the form is trying to speak to Dante, but cannot make itself heard. From the point of view of the *story*, I think this means that, being in fact that of a ghost, it cannot speak until Dante has established communication by addressing it first. *Allegorically*, we may take it in two ways: (1) on the historical level, it perhaps means that the wisdom and poetry of the classical age had been long neglected; (2) on the spiritual level, it undoubtedly means that Dante had sunk so deep into sin that the voice of reason, and even of poetry itself, had become faint and almost powerless to recall him.

l. 70: *sub Julio*: under Julius (Caesar). Virgil was born in 70 B.C. and had published none of his great poems before the murder of Julius in 44 B.C., so that he never enjoyed his patronage.

l. 87: *the noble style*: Dante, in 1300, was already a poet of consider-

able reputation for his love-lyrics and philosophic odes, though he had not as yet composed any narrative verse directly modelled upon the *Aeneid*. When he says that he owes to Virgil the "*bello stilo* which has won him honour", he can scarcely be referring to the style of his own prose works, whether in Latin or Italian, still less to that of the as yet unwritten *Comedy*. Presumably he means that he had studied to imitate, in his poems written in the vernacular, the elegance, concise power, and melodious rhythms of the Virgilian line.

l. 105: *between Feltro and Feltro*: This is a much-debated line. If the Greyhound represents a political "saviour", it may mean that his birthplace lies between Feltre in Venetia and Montefeltro in Romagna (i.e. in the valley of the Po). But some commentators think that "feltro" is not a geographical name at all, but simply that of a coarse cloth (felt, or frieze); in which case Dante would be expecting salvation to come from among those who wear the robe of poverty, and have renounced "gold and ground" – i.e. earthly possessions. We should perhaps translate: "In cloth of frieze his people shall be found".

l. 106: *low Italy*: The Italian word is *umile*, humble, which may mean either "low-lying", as opposed to "high Italy" among the Alps, or "humiliated", with reference to the degradation to which the country had been brought. In either case, the classical allusions which follow show that Dante meant Rome.

l. 114: *an eternal place and terrible*: Hell.

l. 117: *the second death*: this might mean "cry for a second death to put an end to their misery", but more probably means "cry out because of the pains of hell", in allusion to *Rev.* xx. 14.

ll. 118-19: *those who in the fire are happy*: the redeemed in Purgatory.

l. 134: *St Peter's Gate*: the gate by which redeemed souls are admitted to Purgatory (*Purg.* ix. 76 *sqq.*); not the gate of Heaven.

CANTO II

THE STORY. *Dante’s attempts to climb the Mountain have taken the whole day and it is now Good Friday evening. Dante has not gone far before he loses heart and “begins to make excuse”. To his specious arguments Virgil replies flatly: “This is mere cowardice;” and then tells how Beatrice, prompted by St Lucy at the instance of the Virgin Mary herself, descended into Limbo to entreat him to go to Dante’s rescue. Thus encouraged, Dante pulls himself together, and they start off again.*

Day was departing and the dusk drew on,
Loosing from labour every living thing
Save me, in all the world; I – I alone –

4 Must gird me to the wars – rough travelling,
And pity’s sharp assault upon the heart –
Which memory shall record, unfaltering;

7 Now, Muses, now, high Genius, do your part!
And Memory, faithful scrivener to the eyes,
Here show thy virtue, noble as thou art!

10 I soon began: “Poet – dear guide – ’twere wise
Surely, to test my powers and weigh their worth
Ere trusting me to this great enterprise.

13 Thou sayest, the author of young Silvius’ birth,
Did to the world immortal, mortal go,
Clothed in the body of flesh he wore on earth –

16 Granted; if Hell’s great Foeman deigned to show
To *him* such favour, seeing the vast effect,
And what and who his destined issue – no,

19 That need surprise no thoughtful intellect,
Since to Rome’s fostering city and empery
High Heaven had sealed him as the father-elect;

22 Both these were there established, verily,
To found that place, holy and dedicate,
Wherein great Peter’s heir should hold his See;

So that the deed thy verses celebrate
Taught him the road to victory, and bestowed
The Papal Mantle in its high estate. 25

Thither the Chosen Vessel, in like mode, 28
Went afterward, and much confirmed thereby
The faith that sets us on salvation’s road.

But how should I go there? Who says so? Why? 31
I’m not Aeneas, and I am not Paul!
Who thinks me fit? Not others. And not I.

Say I submit, and go – suppose I fall 34
Into some folly? Though I speak but ill,
Thy better wisdom will construe it all.”

As one who wills, and then unwill his will, 37
Changing his mind with every changing whim,
Till all his best intentions come to nil,

So I stood havoring in that moorland dim, 40
While through fond rifts of fancy oozed away
The first quick zest that filled me to the brim.

“If I have grasped what thou dost seem to say,” 43
The shade of greatness answered, “these doubts breed
From sheer black cowardice, which day by day

Lays ambushes for men, checking the speed 46
Of honourable purpose in mid-flight,
As shapes half-seen startle a shying steed.

Well then, to rid thee of this foolish fright, 49
Hear why I came, and learn whose eloquence
Urged me to take compassion on thy plight.

While I was with the spirits who dwell suspense, 52
A Lady summoned me – so blest, so rare,
I begged her to command my diligence.

Her eyes outshone the firmament by far 55
As she began, in her own gracious tongue,
Gentle and low, as tongues of angels are:

‘O courteous Mantuan soul, whose skill in song 58
Keeps green on earth a fame that shall not end
While motion rolls the turning spheres along!

CANTO II] *Dark Wood – Virgil and Beatrice: The*

- 61 A friend of mine, who is not Fortune's friend,
Is hard beset upon the shadowy coast;
Terrors and snares his fearful steps attend,
- 64 Driving him back; yea, and I fear almost
I have risen too late to help – for I was told
Such news of him in Heaven – he's too far lost.
- 67 But thou – go thou! Lift up thy voice of gold;
Try every needful means to find and reach
And free him, that my heart may rest consoled.
- 70 Beatrice am I, who thy good speed beseech;
Love that first moved me from the blissful place
Whither I'd fain return, now moves my speech.
- 73 Lo! when I stand before my Lord's bright face
I'll praise thee many a time to Him.' Thereon
She fell on silence; I replied apace:
- 76 'Excellent lady, for whose sake alone
The breed of men exceeds all things that dwell
Closed in the heaven whose circles narrowest run
- 79 To do thy bidding pleases me so well
That were't already done, I should seem slow;
I know thy wish, and more needs not to tell.
- 82 Yet say – how can thy blest feet bear to know
This dark road downward to the dreadful centre,
From that wide room which thou dost yearn for so?'
- 85 'Few words will serve (if thou desire to enter
Thus far into our mystery),' she said,
'To tell thee why I have no fear to venture.
- 88 Of hurtful things we ought to be afraid,
But of no others, truly, inasmuch
As these have nothing to give cause for dread;
- 91 My nature, by God's mercy, is made such
As your calamities can nowise shake,
Nor these dark fires have any power to touch.
- 94 Heaven hath a noble Lady, who doth take
Ruth of this man thou goest to disensnare
Such that high doom is cancelled for her sake.

Three Blessed Ladies – Good Friday 6 p.m.

- She summoned Lucy to her side, and there
Exhorted her: "Thy faithful votary
Needs thee, and I commend him to thy care." 97
- Lucy, the foe to every cruelty,
Ran quickly and came and found me in my place
Beside ancestral Rachel, crying to me: 100
- "How now, how now, Beatrice, God's true praise!
No help for him who once thy liegeman was,
Quitting the common herd to win thy grace? 103
- Dost thou not hear his piteous cries, alas?
Dost thou not see death grapple him, on the river
Whose furious rage no ocean can surpass?" 106
- When I heard that, no living wight was ever
So swift to seek his good or flee his fear
As I from that high resting-place to sever 109
- And speed me down, trusting my purpose dear
To thee, and to thy golden rhetoric
Which honours thee, and honours all who hear.' 112
- She spoke; and as she turned from me the quick
Tears starred the lustre of her eyes, which still
Spurred on my going with a keener prick. 115
- Therefore I sought thee out, as was her will,
And brought thee safe off from that beast of prey
Which barred thee from the short road up the hill. 118
- What ails thee then? Why, why this dull delay?
Why bring so white a liver to the deed?
Why canst thou find no manhood to display 121
- When three such blessed ladies deign to plead
Thy cause at that supreme assize of right,
And when my words promise thee such good speed?" 124
- As little flowers, which all the frosty night
Hung pinched and drooping, lift their stalks and fan
Their blossoms out, touched by the warm white light, 127
- So did my fainting powers; and therewith ran
Such good, strong courage round about my heart
That I spoke boldly out like a free man: 130

- 133 "O blessed she that stooped to take my part!
O courteous thou, to obey her true-discerning
Speech, and thus promptly to my rescue start!
- 136 Fired by thy words, my spirit now is burning
So to go on, and see this venture through.
I find my former stout resolve returning.
- 139 Forward! henceforth there's but one will for two,
Thou master, and thou leader, and thou lord."
I spoke; he moved; so, setting out anew,
- 142 I entered on that savage path and froward.

THE IMAGES. *Mary, The Blessed Virgin*, whom the Church calls *Theotokos* (Mother of God), is the historical and universal God-bearer, of whom Beatrice, like any other God-bearing image, is a particular type. Mary is thus, in an especial and supreme manner, the vessel of Divine Grace, as experienced in, and mediated through, the redeemed creation. (Note that the name of Mary, like the name of Christ, is never spoken in Hell.)

Lucia (St Lucy), a virgin martyr of the third century, is the patron saint of those with weak sight, and chosen here as the image of Illuminating Grace. Mary, Beatrice, and Lucia are a threefold image of Divine Grace in its various manifestations.

Virgil's Mission. Dante is so far gone in sin and error that Divine Grace can no longer move him directly; but there is still something left in him which is capable of responding to the voice of poetry and of human reason; and this, under Grace, may yet be used to lead him back to God. In this profound and beautiful image, Dante places Religion, on the one hand, and human Art and Philosophy, on the other, in their just relationship.

NOTES. l. 7: Canto I forms, as it were, a prologue to the whole *Divine Comedy*. The actual *Inferno* (Hell) begins with Canto II; and here we have the invocation which, in each of the three books, prefaces the journey to Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise respectively. It is addressed, in the classic manner, to the Muses, to Genius, and to Memory, the Mother of the Muses. (As the story proceeds, Dante will invoke higher, and still higher aid; till the final invocation, towards the end of the *Paradiso*, is made to God, the "supreme light" Himself.)

l. 13: *the author of young Silvius' birth*: Aeneas; the allusion is to the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, which describes how Aeneas visits Hades and is told that he is to settle in Italy and so bring about the foundation of Rome, the seat both of the Empire and the Papacy.

l. 16: *Hell's great Foeman*: God.

l. 28: *the Chosen Vessel*: St Paul (*Acts ix. 15*). His vision of Hell is described in the fourth-century apocryphal book known as *The Apocalypse of Paul*, which Dante had evidently read. (See M. R. James: *The Apocryphal New Testament*.) There is probably also an allusion to 2 *Cor. xii. 2*.

l. 52: *the spirits who dwell suspense*: those of the virtuous pagans, who taste neither the bliss of salvation nor the pains of damnation, but dwell forever suspended between the two, in Limbo, the uppermost circle of Hell. (We shall meet them in Canto IV.)

l. 70: Of all this passage, Charles Williams says: "Beatrice has to ask [Virgil] to go; she cannot command him, though she puts her trust in his 'fair speech'. Religion itself cannot order poetry about; the grand art is wholly autonomous... We should have been fortunate if the ministers of religion and poetry had always spoken to each other with such courtesy as these." (*The Figure of Beatrice*, p. 112.)

l. 78: *the heaven whose circles narrowest run*: The heaven of the Moon, the smallest and nearest to the Earth. (See note on *Dante's Universe*, p. 292.)

l. 91: *my nature, by God's mercy, is made such*: The souls of the blessed can still pity the self-inflicted misery of the wicked, but they can no longer be hurt or infected by it: "the action of pity will live for ever; the passion of pity will not". (C. S. Lewis: *The Great Divorce*, p. 111, where the subject is handled in a very illuminating way.)

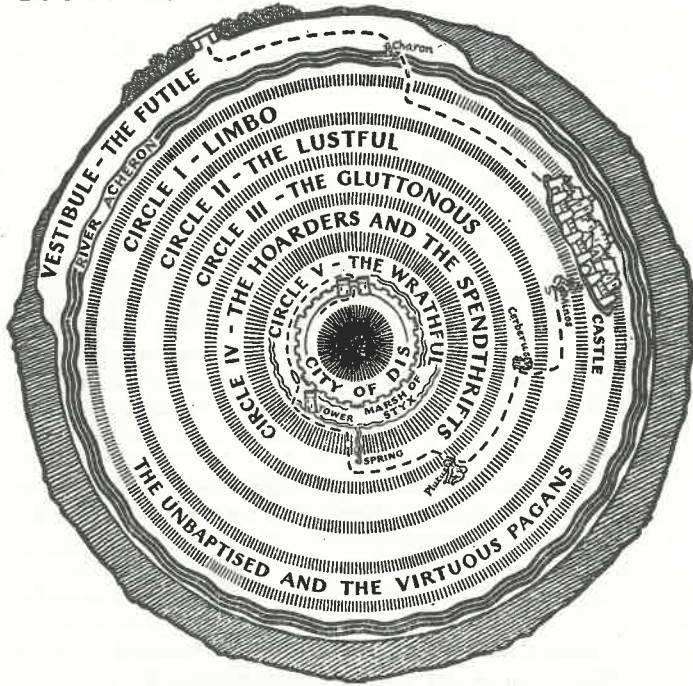
l. 102: *ancestral Rachel*: Leah and Rachel, the two wives of Jacob, figure respectively the active and the contemplative life.

l. 107: *the river*: no literal river is intended; it is only a metaphor for human life.

l. 120: *the short road up the hill*: this line shows clearly that the "blissful Mountain" and Mount Purgatory are in reality one and the same; since the Beasts prevent Dante from taking "the short road", he is obliged to go by the long road – i.e. through Hell – to find the mountain again on the other side of the world.

CANTO III

UPPER HELL



INCONTINENCE - THE SINS OF THE LEOPARD

THE STORY. Arriving at the gate of Hell, the Poets read the inscription upon its lintel. They enter and find themselves in the Vestibule of Hell, where the Futile run perpetually after a whirling standard. Passing quickly on, they reach the river Acheron. Here the souls of all the damned come at death to be ferried across by Charon, who refuses to take the living body of Dante till Virgil silences him with a word of power. While they are watching the departure of a boatload of souls the river banks are shaken by an earthquake so violent that Dante swoons away.

THROUGH ME THE ROAD TO THE CITY OF DESOLATION,
THROUGH ME THE ROAD TO SORROWS DIUTURNAL,
THROUGH ME THE ROAD AMONG THE LOST CREATION.

JUSTICE MOVED MY GREAT MAKER; GOD ETERNAL
WROUGHT ME: THE POWER, AND THE UNSEARCHABLY
HIGH WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE SUPERNAL.

NOTHING ERE I WAS MADE WAS MADE TO BE
SAVE THINGS ETERNE, AND I ETERNE ABIDE;
LAY DOWN ALL HOPE, YOU THAT GO IN BY ME.

These words, of sombre colour, I descried
Writ on the lintel of a gateway; "Sir,
This sentence is right hard for me," I cried.

And like a man of quick discernment: "Here
Lay down all thy distrust," said he, "reject
Dead from within thee every coward fear;

We've reached the place I told thee to expect,
Where thou shouldst see the miserable race,
Those who have lost the good of intellect."

He laid his hand on mine, and with a face
So joyous that it comforted my quailing,
Into the hidden things he led my ways.

Here sighing, and here crying, and loud railing
Smote on the starless air, with lamentation,
So that at first I wept to hear such wailing.

- 25 Tongues mixed and mingled, horrible execration,
Shrill shrieks, hoarse groans, fierce yells and hideous blether
And clapping of hands thereto, without cessation
- 28 Made tumult through the timeless night, that hither
And thither drives in dizzying circles sped,
As whirlwind whips the spinning sands together.
- 31 Whereat, with horror flapping round my head:
“Master, what ’s this I hear? Who can they be,
These people so distraught with grief?” I said.
- 34 And he replied: “The dismal company
Of wretched spirits thus find their guerdon due
Whose lives knew neither praise nor infamy;
- 37 They’re mingled with that caitiff angle-crew
Who against God rebelled not, nor to Him
Were faithful, but to self alone were true;
- 40 Heaven cast them forth – their presence there would dim
The light; deep Hell rejects so base a herd,
Lest sin should boast itself because of them.
- 43 Then I: “But, Master, by what torment spurred
Are they driven on to vent such bitter breath?”
He answered: “I will tell thee in a word:
- 46 This dreary huddle has no hope of death,
Yet its blind life trails on so low and crass
That every other fate it envieth.
- 49 No reputation in the world it has,
Mercy and doom hold it alike in scorn –
Let us not speak of these; but look, and pass.”
- 52 So I beheld, and lo! an ensign borne
Whirling, that span and ran, as in disdain
Of any rest; and there the folk forlorn
- 55 Rushed after it, in such an endless train,
It never would have entered in my head
There were so many men whom death had slain.
- 58 And when I’d noted here and there a shade
Whose face I knew, I saw and recognised
The coward spirit of the man who made

- The great refusal; and that proof sufficed;
Here was that rabble, here without a doubt,
Whom God and whom His enemies despised. 61
- This scum, who’d never lived, now fled about 64
Naked and goaded, for a swarm of fierce
Hornets and wasps stung all the wretched rout
- Until their cheeks ran blood, whose slubbered smears, 67
Mingled with brine, around their footsteps fell,
Where loathly worms licked up their blood and tears.
- Then I peered on ahead, and soon quite well 70
Made out the hither bank of a wide stream,
Where stood much people. “Sir,” said I, “pray tell
- Who these are, what their custom, why they seem 73
So eager to pass over and be gone –
If I may trust my sight in this pale gleam.”
- And he to me: “The whole shall be made known; 76
Only have patience till we stay our feet
On yonder sorrowful shore of Acheron.”
- Abashed, I dropped my eyes; and, lest unmeet 79
Chatter should vex him, held my tongue, and so
Paced on with him, in silence and discreet,
- To the riverside. When from the far bank lo! 82
A boat shot forth, whose white-haired boatman old
Bawled as he came: “Woe to the wicked! Woe!
- Never you hope to look on Heaven – behold! 85
I come to ferry you hence across the tide
To endless night, fierce fires and shramming cold.
- And thou, the living man there! stand aside 88
From these who are dead!” I budged not, but abode;
So, when he saw me hold my ground, he cried:
- “Away with thee! for by another road 91
And other ferries thou shalt make the shore,
Not here; a lighter skiff must bear thy load.”
- Then said my guide: “Charon, why wilt thou roar 94
And chafe in vain? Thus it is willed where power
And will are one; enough; ask thou no more.”

- 97 This shut the shaggy mouth up of that sour
 Infernal ferryman of the livid wash,
 Only his flame-ringed eyeballs rolled a-glower.
- 100 But those outwearied, naked souls – how gash
 And pale they grew, chattering their teeth for dread,
 When first they felt his harsh tongue's cruel lash.
- 103 God they blaspheme, blaspheme their parents' bed,
 The human race, the place, the time, the blood,
 The seed that got them, and the womb that bred;
- 106 Then, huddling hugger-mugger, down they scud,
 Dismally wailing, to the accursed strand
 Which waits for every man that fears not God.
- 109 Charon, his eyes red like a burning brand,
 Thumps with his oar the lingerers that delay,
 And rounds them up, and beckons with his hand.
- 112 And as, by one and one, leaves drift away
 In autumn, till the bough from which they fall
 Sees the earth strewn with all its brave array,
- 115 So, from the bank there, one by one, drop all
 Adam's ill seed, when signalled off the mark,
 As drops the falcon to the falconer's call.
- 118 Away they're borne across the waters dark,
 And ere they land that side the stream, anon
 Fresh troops this side come flocking to embark.
- 121 Then said my courteous master: "See, my son,
 All those that die beneath God's righteous ire
 From every country come here every one.
- 124 They press to pass the river, for the fire
 Of heavenly justice stings and spurs them so
 That all their fear is changed into desire;
- 127 And by this passage, good souls never go;
 Therefore, if Charon chide thee, do thou look
 What this may mean – 'tis not so hard to know."
- 130 When he thus said, the dusky champaign shook
 So terribly that, thinking on the event,
 I feel the sweat pour off me like a brook.

- The sodden ground belched wind, and through the rent 133
 Shot the red levin, with a flash and sweep
 That robbed me of my wits, incontinent;
- And down I fell, as one that swoons on sleep. 136

THE IMAGES. *Hell-Gate*. High and wide and without bars (*Inf.* viii. 126), the door "whose threshold is denied to none" (*Inf.* xiv. 87) always waits to receive those who are astray in the Dark Wood. Anyone may enter if he so chooses, but if he does, he must abandon hope, since it leads nowhere but to the *Città Dolente*, the City of Desolation. In the *story*, Hell is filled with the souls of those who died with their wills set to enter by that gate; in the *allegory*, these souls are the images of sin in the self or in society.

The *Vestibule* was presumably suggested to Dante by the description in *Aeneid* vi. (where, however, it is tenanted by rather a different set of people). It does not, I think, occur in any previous Christian eschatology. Heaven and Hell being states in which choice is permanently fixed, there must also be a state in which the refusal of choice is itself fixed, since to refuse choice is in fact to choose indecision. The *Vestibule* is the abode of the weather-cock mind, the vague tolerance which will neither approve nor condemn, the cautious cowardice for which no decision is ever final. The spirits rush aimlessly after the aimlessly whirling banner, stung and goaded, as of old, by the thought that, in doing anything definite whatsoever, they are missing doing something else.

Acheron, "the joyless", first of the great rivers of Hell whose names Dante took from Virgil and Virgil from Homer. (See map, p. 84.)

Charon, the classical ferryman of the dead. Most of the monstrous organisms by which the functions of Hell are discharged are taken from Greek and Roman mythology. They are neither devils nor damned souls, but the images of perverted appetites, presiding over the circles appropriate to their natures.

NOTES. I. 1: *the City of Desolation* (*la città dolente*; lit.: the sorrowful city). Hell, like Heaven, is represented under the figure sometimes of a city, and sometimes of an empire. Later on (Canto IX) we shall come to the actual city itself, which has its fortifications on the edge of the Sixth Circle, and comprises the whole of Nether Hell. At present we are only in Upper Hell, forming as it were the suburbs

of the city and made up of the Vestibule and the first five circles. (See map, p. 84.)

ll. 4-6: *power ... wisdom supreme and primal love*: the attributes of the Trinity. "If there is God, if there is freewill, then man is able to choose the opposite of God. Power, Wisdom, Love, gave man freewill; therefore Power, Wisdom, Love, created the gate of hell and the possibility of hell." (Charles Williams: *The Figure of Beatrice*, p. 113.)

l. 8: *things eterne*: In Canto xxxiv Dante tells how Hell was made when Satan fell from Heaven: it was created "for the devil and his angels" (*Matt. xxv. 41*) and before it nothing was made except the "eternal things", i.e. the Angels and the Heavens.

l. 9: *lay down all hope*: For the soul that literally enters Hell there is no return, nor any passage to Purgatory and repentance. Dante is naturally disturbed (l. 12) by this warning. But what he is entering upon, while yet in this life, is not Hell but the vision of Hell, and for him there is a way out, provided he keeps his hope and faith. Accordingly, Virgil enjoins him (ll. 14-15) to reject doubt and fear.

l. 18: *the good of intellect*: In the *Convivio* Dante quotes Aristotle as saying: "truth is the good of the intellect". What the lost souls have lost is not the intellect itself, which still functions mechanically, but the *good* of the intellect: i.e. the knowledge of God, who is Truth. (For Dante, as for Aquinas, "intellect" does not mean what we call, colloquially, "braininess"; it means the whole "reasonable soul" of man.)

l. 61: *the great refusal*: Probably Celestine V, who, in 1294, at the age of 80, was made pope, but resigned the papacy five months later. His successor was Pope Boniface VIII, to whom Dante attributed many of the evils which had overtaken the Church. (See also *Introd.* p. 35.)

ll. 91-2: *another road and other ferries*: souls destined for Heaven never cross Acheron; they assemble at the mouth of Tiber and are taken in a boat piloted by an angel to Mount Purgatory at the Antipodes (*Purg.* ii.). Charon recognizes that Dante is a soul in Grace. (See ll. 127-9.)

l. 126: *all their fear is changed into desire*: This is another of the important passages in which Dante emphasizes that Hell is the soul's choice. The damned fear it and long for it, as in this life a man may hate the sin which makes him miserable, and yet obstinately seek and wallow in it.

CANTO V

THE STORY. Dante and Virgil descend from the First Circle to the Second (the first of the Circles of Incontinence). On the threshold sits Minos, the judge of Hell, assigning the souls to their appropriate places of torment. His opposition is overcome by Virgil's word of power, and the Poets enter the Circle, where the souls of the Lustful are tossed for ever upon a howling wind. After Virgil has pointed out a number of famous lovers, Dante speaks to the shade of Francesca da Rimini, who tells him her story.

- From the first circle thus I came descending
To the second, which, in narrower compass turning,
Holds greater woe, with outcry loud and rending.
- There in the threshold, horrible and girning, 4
Grim Minos sits, holding his ghastly session,
And, as he girds him, sentencing and spurning;
- For when the ill soul faces him, confession 7
Pours out of it till nothing's left to tell;
Whereon that connoisseur of all transgression
- Assigns it to its proper place in hell, 10
As many grades as he would have it fall,
So oft he belts him round with his own tail.
- Before him stands a throng continual; 13
Each comes in turn to abye the fell arraign;
They speak – they hear – they're whirled down one and all.
- "Ho! thou that comest to the house of pain," 16
Cried Minos when he saw me, the appliance
Of his dread powers suspending, "think again
- How thou dost go, in whom is thy reliance; 19
Be not deceived by the wide open door!"
Then said my guide: "Wherefore this loud defiance?
- Hinder not thou his fated way; be sure 22
Hindrance is vain; thus it is willed where will
And power are one; enough; ask thou no more."

CANTO V] *Circle II: The Lustful: The Black Wind – Semiramis,*

- 25 And now the sounds of grief begin to fill
My ear; I'm come where cries of anguish smite
My shrinking sense, and lamentation shrill –
- 28 A place made dumb of every glimmer of light,
Which bellows like tempestuous ocean birling
In the batter of a two-way wind's buffet and fight.
- 31 The blast of hell that never rests from whirling
Harries the spirits along in the sweep of its swath,
And vexes them, for ever beating and hurling.
- 34 When they are borne to the rim of the ruinous path
With cry and wail and shriek they are caught by the gust,
Railing and cursing the power of the Lord's wrath.
- 37 Into this torment carnal sinners are thrust,
So I was told – the sinners who make their reason
Bond thrall under the yoke of their lust.
- 40 Like as the starlings wheel in the wintry season
In wide and clustering flocks wing-borne, wind-borne
Even so they go, the souls who did this treason,
- 43 Hither and thither, and up and down, outworn,
Hopeless of any rest – rest, did I say?
Of the least minishing of their pangs forlorn.
- 46 And as the cranes go chanting their harsh lay,
Across the sky in long procession trailing,
So I beheld some shadows borne my way,
- 49 Driven on the blast and uttering wail on wailing;
Wherefore I said: "O Master, art thou able
To name these spirits thrashed by the black wind's flailing?"
- 52 "Among this band," said he, "whose name and fable
Thou seek'st to know, the first who yonder flies
Was empress of many tongues, mistress of Babel.
- 55 She was so broken to lascivious vice
She licensed lust by law, in hopes to cover
Her scandal of unnumbered harlotries.
- 58 This was Semiramis; 'tis written of her
That she was wife to Ninus and heiress, too,
Who reigned in the land the Soldan now rules over.

Dido, etc.: Paolo and Francesca – Good Fri. Night

- Lo! she that slew herself for love, untrue 61
To Sychaeus' ashes. Lo! tost on the blast,
Voluptuous Cleopatra, whom love slew.
- Look, look on Helen, for whose sake rolled past 64
Long evil years. See great Achilles yonder,
Who warred with love, and that war was his last.
- See Paris, Tristram see!" And many – oh, wonder 67
Many – a thousand more, he showed by name
And pointing hand, whose life love rent asunder.
- And when I had heard my Doctor tell the fame 70
Of all those knights and ladies of long ago,
I was pierced through with pity, and my head swam.
- "Poet," said I, "fain would I speak those two 73
That seem to ride as light as any foam,
And hand in hand on the dark wind drifting go."
- And he replied: "Wait till they nearer roam, 76
And thou shalt see; summon them to thy side
By the power of the love that leads them, and they will come."
- So, as they eddied past on the whirling tide, 79
I raised my voice: "O souls that wearily rove,
Come to us, speak to us – if it be not denied."
- And as desire wafts homeward dove with dove 82
To their sweet nest, on raised and steady wing
Down-dropping through the air, impelled by love,
- So these from Dido's flock came fluttering 85
And dropping toward us down the cruel wind,
Such power was in my affectionate summoning.
- "O living creature, gracious and so kind, 88
Coming through this black air to visit us,
Us, who in death the globe incarnadined,
- Were the world's King our friend and might we thus 91
Entreat, we would entreat Him for thy peace,
That pitiest so our pangs dispiteous!
- Hear all thou wilt, and speak as thou shalt please, 94
And we will gladly speak with thee and hear,
While the winds cease to howl, as they now cease.

- 97 There is a town upon the sea-coast, near
Where Po with all his streams comes down to rest
In ocean; I was born and nurtured there.
- 100 Love, that so soon takes hold in the gentle breast,
Took this lad with the lovely body they tore
From me; the way of it leaves me still distrest.
- 103 Love, that to no loved heart remits love's score,
Took me with such great joy of him, that see!
It holds me yet and never shall leave me more.
- 106 Love to a single death brought him and me;
Cain's place lies waiting for our murderer now."
These words came wafted to us plaintively.
- 109 Hearing those wounded souls, I bent my brow
Downward, and thus bemused I let time pass,
Till the poet said at length: "What thinkest thou?"
- 112 When I could answer, I began: "Alas!
Sweet thoughts how many, and desire how great,
Brought down these twain unto the dolorous pass!"
- 115 And then I turned to them: "Thy dreadful fate,
Francesca, makes me weep, it so inspires
Pity," said I, "and grief compassionate.
- 118 Tell me – in that time of sighing-sweet desires,
How, and by what, did love his power disclose
And grant you knowledge of your hidden fires?"
- 121 Then she to me: "The bitterest woe of woes
Is to remember in our wretchedness
Old happy times; and this thy Doctor knows;
- 124 Yet, if so dear desire thy heart possess
To know that root of love which wrought our fall,
I'll be as those who weep and who confess.
- 127 One day we read for pastime how in thrall
Lord Lancelot lay to love, who loved the Queen;
We were alone – we thought no harm at all.
- 130 As we read on, our eyes met now and then,
And to our cheeks the changing colour started,
But just one moment overcame us – when

- We read of the smile, desired of lips long-thwarted,
Such smile, by such a lover kissed away,
He that may never more from me be parted 133
- Trembling all over, kissed my mouth. I say 136
The book was Galleot, Galleot the complying
Ribald who wrote; we read no more that day."
- While the one spirit thus spoke, the other's crying 139
Wailed on me with a sound so lamentable,
I swooned for pity like as I were dying,
- And, as a dead man falling, down I fell. 142

THE IMAGES. *The Circles of Incontinence.* This and the next three circles are devoted to those who sinned less by deliberate choice of evil than by failure to make resolute choice of the good. Here are the sins of self-indulgence, weakness of will, and easy yielding to appetite – the "Sins of the Leopard".

The Lustful. The image here is sexual, though we need not confine the *allegory* to the sin of unchastity. Lust is a type of *shared sin*; at its best, and so long as it remains a sin of incontinence only, there is mutuality in it and exchange: although, in fact, mutual indulgence only serves to push both parties along the road to Hell, it is not, in intention, wholly selfish. For this reason Dante, with perfect orthodoxy, rates it as the least hateful of the deadly sins. (Sexual sins in which love and mutuality have no part find their place far below.)

Minos, a medievalized version of the classical Judge of the Underworld (see *Aen.* vi. 432). He may image an accusing conscience. The souls are damned on their own confession, for, Hell being the place of self-knowledge in sin, there can be no more self-deception here. (Similarly, even in the circles of Fraud, all the shades tell Dante the truth about themselves; this is poetically convenient, but, given this conception of Hell, it must be so.) *The literally* damned, having lost "the good of the intellect", cannot profit by their self-knowledge; *allegorically*, for the living soul, this vision of the Hell in the self is the preliminary to repentance and restoration.

The Black Wind. As the lovers drifted into self-indulgence and were carried away by their passions, so now they drift for ever. The

bright, voluptuous sin is now seen *as it is* – a howling darkness of helpless discomfort. (The “punishment” for sin is simply the sin itself, experienced without illusion – though Dante does not work this out with mathematical rigidity in every circle.)

NOTES. l. 6: *as he girds him, sentencing*: as Dante explains in ll. 11–12, Minos girds himself so many times with his tail to indicate the number of the circle to which each soul is to go (cf. Canto xxvii. 124 and note).

l. 28: *a place made dumb of every glimmer of light* – (cf. Canto i. 60, “wherein the sun is mute”): Nevertheless, Dante is able to see the spirits. This is only one of many passages in which the poet conveys to us that the things he perceives during his journey are not perceived altogether by the mortal senses, but after another mode. (In *Purg.* xxi. 29, Virgil explains to another spirit that Dante “could not come alone, because he does not see after our manner, wherefore I was brought forth from Hell to guide him”). So, in the present case, Dante recognizes that the darkness is total, although he can see in the dark.

l. 61: *she that slew herself for love*: Dido. (For the various lovers mentioned, see Glossary.)

l. 88: *O living creature*: The speaker is Francesca da Rimini. Like many of the personages in the *Comedy*, she does not directly name herself, but gives Dante particulars about her birthplace and history which enable him to recognize her. She was the daughter of Guido Vecchio di Polenta of Ravenna, and aunt to Guido Novello di Polenta, who was Dante’s friend and host during the latter years of his life; so that her history was of topical interest to Dante’s readers. For political reasons, she was married to the deformed Gianciotto, son of Malatesta da Verrucchio, lord of Rimini, but fell in love with his handsome younger brother Paolo, who became her lover. Her husband, having one day surprised them together, stabbed them both to death (1285).

l. 94: *hear all thou wilt*: Tender and beautiful as Dante’s handling of Francesca is, he has sketched her with a deadly accuracy. All the good is there; the charm, the courtesy, the instant response to affection, the grateful eagerness to please; but also all the evil; the easy yielding, the inability to say No, the intense self-pity.

Of this, the most famous episode in the whole *Comedy*, Charles Williams writes: “It is always quoted as an example of Dante’s tenderness. So, no doubt, it is, but it is not here for that reason. ... It has a much more important place; it presents the first tender, pas-

sionate, and half-excusable consent of the soul to sin. ... [Dante] so manages the description, he so heightens the excuse, that the excuse reveals itself as precisely the sin ... the persistent parleying with the occasion of sin, the sweet prolonged laziness of love, is the first surrender of the soul to Hell – small but certain. The formal sin here is the adultery of the two lovers; the poetic sin is their shrinking from the adult love demanded of them, and their refusal of the opportunity of glory.” (*The Figure of Beatrice*, p. 118.)

l. 97: *a town upon the sea-coast*: Ravenna.

l. 102: *the way of it leaves me still distress*: Either (1) the way of the murder, because the lovers were killed in the very act of sin and so had no time for repentance; or (2) the way in which their love came about. The story went that Paolo was sent to conduct the marriage negotiations, and that Francesca was tricked into consenting by being led to suppose that he, and not Gianciotto, was to be her bridegroom. In the same way, in the Arthurian romances, Queen Guinevere falls in love with Lancelot when he is sent to woo her on King Arthur’s behalf; and it is this parallel which makes the tale of Lancelot so poignant for her and Paolo.

l. 107: *Cain’s place*: Caïna, so called after Cain; the first ring of the lowest circle in Hell, where lie those who were treacherous to their own kindred. (Canto xxxii.)

l. 123: *thy Doctor*: Virgil (see l. 70). Dante is probably thinking of Aeneas’ words to Dido: *infandum, regina, jubes renovare dolorem ... (O queen, thou dost bid me renew an unspeakable sorrow ...)*, *Aeneid* ii. 3.

l. 137: *the book was Galleot*: In the romance of *Lancelot du Lac*, Galleot (or Galehalt) acted as intermediary between Lancelot and Guinevere, and so in the Middle Ages his name, like that of Pandarus in the tale of *Troilus and Cressida*, became a synonym for a go-between. The sense of the passage is: “The book was a pander and so was he who wrote it”.

CANTO XXVI

THE STORY. Dante, with bitter irony, reproaches Florence. The Poets climb up and along the rugged spur to the arch of the next bridge, from which they see the Counsellors of Fraud moving along the floor of the Eighth Bowge, each wrapped in a tall flame. Virgil stops the twin-flame which contains the souls of Ulysses and Diomedes, and compels Ulysses to tell the story of his last voyage.

- Florence, rejoice, because thy soaring fame
Beats its broad wings across both land and sea,
And all the deep of Hell rings with thy name!
- Five of thy noble townsmen did I see 4
Among the thieves; which makes me blush anew,
And mighty little honour it does to thee.
- But if toward the morning men dream true, 7
Thou must ere long abide the bitter boon
That Prato craves for thee, and others too;
- Nay, were't already here, 'twere none too soon; 10
Let come what must come, quickly – I shall find
The burden heavier as the years roll on.
- We left that place; and by the stones that bind 13
The brink, which made the stair for our descent,
My guide climbed back, and drew me up behind.
- So on our solitary way we went, 16
Up crags, up boulders, where the foot in vain
Might seek to speed, unless the hand were lent.
- I sorrowed then; I sorrow now again, 19
Pondering the things I saw, and curb my hot
Spirit with an unwontedly strong rein
- For fear it run where virtue guide it not, 22
Lest, if kind star or greater grace have blest
Me with good gifts, I mar my own fair lot.
- Now, thickly clustered, – as the peasant at rest 25
On some hill-side, when he whose rays illumine
The world conceals his burning countenance least,

- 28 What time the flies go and mosquitoes come,
Looks down the vale and sees the fire-flies sprinkling
Fields where he tills or brings the vintage home -
- 31 So thick and bright I saw the eighth moat twinkling
With wandering fires, soon as the arching road
Laid bare the bottom of the deep rock-wrinkling.
- 34 Such as the chariot of Elijah showed
When he the bears avenged beheld it rise,
And straight to Heaven the rearing steeds upstrode,
- 37 For he could not so follow it with his eyes
But that at last it seemed a bodiless fire
Like a little shining cloud high in the skies,
- 40 So through that gulf moved every flaming spire;
For though none shows the theft, each, like a thief,
Conceals a pilfered sinner. To admire,
- 43 I craned so tip-toe from the bridge, that if
I had not clutched a rock I'd have gone over,
Needing no push to send me down the cliff.
- 46 Seeing me thus intently lean and hover,
My guide said: "In those flames the spirits go
Shrouded, with their own torment for their cover."
- 49 "Now thou hast told me, sir," said I, "I know
The truth for sure; but I'd already guessed,
And meant to ask - thinking it must be so -
- 52 Who walks in that tall fire cleft at the crest
As though it crowned the pyre where those great foes,
His brother and Eteocles, were placed?"
- 55 "Tormented there," said he, "Ulysses goes
With Diomede, for as they ran one course,
Sharing their wrath, they share the avenging throes.
- 58 In fire they mourn the trickery of the horse,
That opened up the gates through which the high
Seed of the Romans issued forth perforce;
- 61 There mourn the cheat by which betrayed to die
Deidamia wails Achilles still;
And the Palladium is avenged thereby."

- Then I: "O Master! if these sparks have skill
To speak, I pray, and re-pray that each prayer
May count with thee for prayers innumerable, 64
- Deny me not to tarry a moment here 67
Until the horned flame come; how much I long
And lean to it I think thee well aware."
- And he to me: "That wish is nowise wrong, 70
But worthy of high praise; gladly indeed
I grant it; but do thou refrain thy tongue
- And let me speak to them; for I can read 73
The question in thy mind; and they, being Greek,
Haply might scorn thy speech and pay no heed."
- So, when by time and place the twin-fire peak, 76
As to my guide seemed fitting, had come on,
In this form conjuring it, I heard him speak:
- "You that within one flame go two as one, 79
By whatsoever I merited once of you,
By whatsoever I merited under the sun
- When I sang the high songs, whether little or great my due, 82
Stand; and let one of you say what distant bourne,
When he voyaged to loss and death, he voyaged unto."
- Then of that age-old fire the loftier horn 85
Began to mutter and move, as a wavering flame
Wrestles against the wind and is over-worn;
- And, like a speaking tongue vibrant to frame 88
Language, the tip of it flickering to and fro
Threw out a voice and answered: "When I came
- From Circe at last, who would not let me go, 91
But twelve months near Caieta hindered me
Before Aeneas ever named it so,
- No tenderness for my son, nor piety 94
To my old father, nor the wedded love
That should have comforted Penelope
- Could conquer in me the restless itch to rove 97
And rummage through the world exploring it,
All human worth and wickedness to prove.

100 So on the deep and open sea I set
Forth, with a single ship and that small band
Of comrades that had never left me yet.

103 Far as Morocco, far as Spain I scanned
Both shores; I saw the island of the Sardi,
And all that sea, and every wave-girt land.

106 I and my fellows were grown old and tardy
Or ere we made the straits where Hercules
Set up his marks, that none should prove so hardy

109 To venture the uncharted distances;
Ceuta I'd left to larboard, sailing by,
Seville I now left in the starboard seas.

112 'Brothers,' said I, 'that have come valiantly
Through hundred thousand jeopardies undergone
To reach the West, you will not now deny

115 To this last little vigil left to run
Of feeling life, the new experience
Of the uninhabited world behind the sun.

118 Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
To follow after knowledge and excellence.'

121 My little speech made every one so keen
To forge ahead, that even if I'd tried
I hardly think I could have held them in.

124 So, with our poop shouldering the dawn, we plied,
Making our oars wings to the witless flight,
And steadily gaining on the larboard side.

127 Already the other pole was up by night
With all its stars, and ours had sunk so low,
It rose no more from the ocean-floor to sight;

130 Five times we had seen the light kindle and grow
Beneath the moon, and five times wane away,
Since to the deep we had set course to go,

133 When at long last hove up a mountain, grey
With distance, and so lofty and so steep,
I never had seen the like on any day.

Then we rejoiced; but soon we had to weep, 136
For out of the unknown land there blew foul weather,
And a whirlwind struck the forepart of the ship;

And three times round she went in a roaring smother 139
With all the waters; at the fourth, the poop
Rose, and the prow went down, as pleased Another,
And over our heads the hollow seas closed up." 142

THE IMAGES. *The Counsellors of Fraud.* The sinners in Bowge viii are not men who deceived those whom they counselled, but men who counselled others to practise fraud. The Thieves in the bowge above stole material goods; these are spiritual thieves, who rob other men of their integrity. This explains, I think, the name which Dante gives to their punishment.

The Thievish Fire: The fire which torments also conceals the Counsellors of Fraud, for theirs was a furtive sin (Lat.: *furtivus*, from *fur*, thief). And as they sinned with their tongues, so now speech has to pass through the tongue of the tormenting and thievish flame.

NOTES. l. 9: *Prato:* Cardinal Nicholas of Prato was sent to Florence in 1304 by Pope Benedict XI in hopes of reconciling the hostile factions. Finding all his efforts wasted, he said, "Since you refuse to be blessed, remain accursed," and laid the city under an interdict. Various disasters which happened shortly afterwards – the collapse of a bridge, killing a vast number of people, and a terrible fire in which over 2000 houses were destroyed and many great families ruined – were attributed to the curse of the Church.

ll. 20-24: Dante realizes that he, like the Counsellors, has been blessed by fate ("kind star") or Providence ("greater grace") with great intellectual gifts, and must, therefore, take particular care not to abuse them.

l. 26: *when he whose rays, etc.:* i.e. in summer, when the days are longest.

l. 28: *what time the flies go and mosquitoes come:* i.e. at dusk.

l. 35: *he the bears avenged:* Elisha. (2 Kings ii. 11-12, 23-4.)

l. 54: *Eteocles:* The war of the Seven against Thebes arose from the rival claims of Eteocles and his brother Polynices, the sons of Oedipus, to the throne. They killed each other in battle, and were placed on

one pyre; but, even so, such was their mutual hatred that their very flames would not mingle. (Statius: *Thebaid* xii, 429 *sqq.*)

ll. 55-6: *Ulysses ... Diomede*: the Greek heroes who fought against Troy. The "crafty Ulysses" (Odysseus) advised the stratagem of the Wooden Horse, by which Greek soldiers were smuggled into Troy to open the gates to the besiegers; and also the theft of the sacred statue of Pallas (the Palladium) on which the safety of Troy was held to depend. Thetis, the mother of Achilles, knowing that he would perish if he went to Troy, concealed him at the court of the king of Scyros, disguised as a woman; but he seduced the king's daughter, Deidamia, who bore him a son. Ulysses discovered his hiding-place and persuaded him to go to Troy; whereupon Deidamia died of grief.

l. 74-5: *they, being Greek, ... might scorn thy speech*: The great Greek heroes would despise Dante, as an Italian (i.e. a descendant of the defeated Trojans).

l. 78: *in this form*: Virgil is also an Italian; but he has the power, which Dante has not, of compelling the spirits. We must remember that Virgil, in the Middle Ages, was thought of as a "White Magician", and though the power he uses is not what we should nowadays call "magic" in any evil sense, what follows is in fact a *formal conjuration*. Notice that, since Virgil is here only gratifying Dante's laudable curiosity, he does not use any of those great "words of power" by which he overcame the ministers of Hell in the name of high Heaven (cf. Cantos III. 95; V. 23; VII. 11, etc.), but relies on his own power, which is twofold: (1) the native virtue of a good man who, though not in the Grace of Christ, is yet fulfilling a Divine commission "under the Protection"; (2) the claim of the Poet upon the souls who are indebted to him for their fame in the world.

ll. 80-83: "*By whatsoever ... stand and ... say*": This is the *forma* – the form, or formula – of conjuration: a twice-repeated obscuration, "by whatsoever ..." (naming the claim which constitutes the point of psychic contact between the master and the spirits), followed by a command: "stand ... speak". In the next canto we shall see that the spirits cannot depart until he dismisses them (Canto XXVII. 3) and a few lines later (Canto XXVII. 21) we shall be given the *forma* of the "licence to depart".

l. 83: *one of you*: i.e. Ulysses. Notice that, unlike the other spirits with whom the poets talk, Ulysses never addresses them personally. Compelled by the conjuration, his narrative reels off automatically like a gramophone record and then stops.

The voyage of Ulysses, perhaps the most beautiful thing in the whole *Inferno*, derives from no classical source, and appears to be

Dante's own invention. It may have been suggested to him by the Celtic voyages of Maelduin and St Brendan. It influenced Tasso (*Ger. Lib. Canto xv*), and furnished Tennyson with the theme for his poem *Ulysses*.

l. 91: *Circe*: the sorceress who detained Ulysses on his way from Troy to Ithaca, after turning several of his companions into swine. (See *Odyssey*, Bk. x.)

l. 92: *Caieta* (Gaeta): a town on the south coast of Italy, said to have been so named by Aeneas after his old nurse, who died and was buried there. (*Aen.* vii. 1-4.)

l. 96: *Penelope*: the faithful wife of Ulysses. (See Glossary: *Ulysses*.)

l. 104: *the island of the Sardi*: Sardinia.

l. 108: *his marks*: The Pillars of Hercules (see Glossary) were looked upon as the limit of the habitable globe, and the sun was imagined as setting close behind them.

ll. 127 *sqq.*: *the other pole, etc.*: The voyagers had crossed the equator and made so much leeway south that the Southern Celestial Pole stood high in the heavens with all its attendant constellations; consequently, not only was our Pole Star beneath the northern horizon, but the Arctic constellations (the Great and Little Bears, etc.), which in this hemisphere never set, there never rose.

l. 133: *a mountain*: This is the mountain of the Earthly Paradise, which, after Christ's Harrowing of Hell, becomes Mount Purgatory – the only land, according to Dante, in the Southern Hemisphere. (See Canto XXXIV. 122-3, note.)

l. 141: *as pleased Another*: i.e. as pleased God.

CANTO XXXIV

THE STORY. *After passing over the region of Judecca, where the Traitors to their Lords are wholly immersed in the ice, the Poets see Dis (Satan) devouring the shades of Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. They clamber along his body until, passing through the centre of the Earth, they emerge into a rocky cavern. From here they follow the stream of Lethe upwards until it brings them out on the island of Mount Purgatory in the Antipodes.*

"Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni

Encountering us; canst thou distinguish him,
Look forward," said the master, "as we journey."

As, when a thick mist breathes, or when the rim 4
Of night creeps up across our hemisphere,
A turning windmill looms in the distance dim,

I thought I saw a shadowy mass appear; 7
Then shrank behind my leader from the blast,
Because there was no other cabin here.

I stood (with fear I write it) where at last 10
The shades, quite covered by the frozen sheet,
Gleamed through the ice like straws in crystal glassed;

Some lie at length and others stand in it, 13
This one upon his head, and that upright,
Another like a bow bent face to feet.

And when we had come so far that it seemed right 16
To my dear master, he should let me see
That creature fairest once of the sons of light,

He moved him from before me and halted me, 19
And said: "Behold now Dis! behold the place
Where thou must steel thy soul with constancy."

How cold I grew, how faint with fearfulness, 22
Ask me not, Reader; I shall not waste breath
Telling what words are powerless to express;

This was not life, and yet it was not death; 25
If thou hast wit to think how I might fare
Bereft of both, let fancy aid thy faith.

- 28 The Emperor of the sorrowful realm was there,
Out of the girding ice he stood breast-high,
And to his arm alone the giants were
- 31 Less comparable than to a giant I;
Judge then how huge the stature of the whole
That to so huge a part bears symmetry.
- 34 If he was once as fair as now he's foul,
And dared outface his Maker in rebellion,
Well may he be the fount of all our dole.
- 37 And marvel 'twas, out-marvelling a million,
When I beheld three faces in his head;
The one in front was scarlet like vermilion;
- 40 And two, mid-centred on the shoulders, made
Union with this, and each with either fellow
Knit at the crest, in triune junction wed.
- 43 The right was of a hue 'twixt white and yellow;
The left was coloured like the men who dwell
Where Nile runs down from source to sandy shallow.
- 46 From under each sprang two great wings that well
Befitted such a monstrous bird as that;
I ne'er saw ship with such a spread of sail.
- 49 Plumeless and like the pinions of a bat
Their fashion was; and as they flapped and whipped
Three winds went rushing over the icy flat
- 52 And froze up all Cocytus; and he wept
From his six eyes, and down his triple chin
Runnels of tears and bloody slaver dripped.
- 55 Each mouth devoured a sinner clenched within,
Frayed by the fangs like flax beneath a brake;
Three at a time he tortured them for sin.
- 58 But all the bites the one in front might take
Were nothing to the claws that flayed his hide
And sometimes stripped his back to the last flake.
- 61 "That wretch up there whom keenest pangs divide
Is Judas called Iscariot," said my lord,
"His head within, his jerking legs outside;

- As for the pair whose heads hang hitherward: 64
From the black mouth the limbs of Bruus sprawl –
See how he writhes and utters never a word;
- And strong-thewed Cassius is his fellow-thrall. 67
But come; for night is rising on the world
Once more; we must depart; we have seen all."
- Then, as he bade, about his neck I curled 70
My arms and clasped him. And he spied the time
And place; and when the wings were wide unfurled
- Set him upon the shaggy flanks to climb, 73
And thus from shag to shag descended down
"Twixt matted hair and crusts of frozen rime.
- And when we had come to where the huge thigh-bone 76
Rides in its socket at the haunch's swell,
My guide, with labour and great exertion,
- Turned head to where his feet had been, and fell 79
To hoisting himself up upon the hair,
So that I thought us mounting back to Hell.
- "Hold fast to me, for by so steep a stair," 82
My master said, panting like one forspent,
"Needs must we quit this realm of all despair."
- At length, emerging through a rocky vent, 85
He perched me sitting on the rim of the cup
And crawled out after, heedful how he went.
- I raised my eyes, thinking to see the top 88
Of Lucifer, as I had left him last;
But only saw his great legs sticking up.
- And if I stood dumbfounded and aghast, 91
Let those thick-witted gentry judge and say,
Who do not see what point it was I'd passed.
- "Up on thy legs!" the master said; "the way 94
Is long, the road rough going for the feet,
And at mid-terce already stands the day."
- The place we stood in was by no means fit 97
For a king's palace, but a natural prison,
With a vile floor, and very badly lit.

100 "One moment, sir," said I, when I had risen;
 "Before I pluck myself from the Abyss,
 Lighten my darkness with a word in season.

103 Kindly explain; what's happened to the ice?
 What's turned him upside-down? or in an hour
 Thus whirled the sun from dusk to dawning skies?"

106 "Thou think'st," he said, "thou standest as before
 Yon side the centre, where I grasped the hair
 Of the ill Worm that pierces the world's core.

109 So long as I descended, thou wast there;
 But when I turned, then was the point passed by
 Toward which all weight bears down from everywhere.

112 The other hemisphere doth o'er thee lie –
 Antipodal to that which land roofs in,
 And under whose meridian came to die

115 The Man born sinless and who did no sin;
 Thou hast thy feet upon a little sphere
 Of whose far side Judecca forms the skin.

118 When it is evening there, it's morning here;
 And he whose pelt our ladder was, stands still
 Fixt in the self-same place, and does not stir.

121 This side the world from out high Heaven he fell;
 The land which here stood forth fled back dismayed,
 Pulling the sea upon her like a veil,

124 And sought our hemisphere; with equal dread,
 Belike, that peak of earth which still is found
 This side, rushed up, and so this void was made."

127 There is a place low down there underground,
 As far from Belzebub as his tomb's deep,
 Not known to sight, but only by the sound

130 Of a small stream which trickles down the steep,
 Hollowing its channel, where with gentle fall
 And devious course its wandering waters creep.

133 By that hid way my guide and I withal,
 Back to the lit world from the darkened dens
 Toiled upward, caring for no rest at all,

He first, I following; till my straining sense
 Glimpsed the bright burden of the heavenly cars
 Through a round hole; by this we climbed, and thence
 Came forth, to look once more upon the stars.

136

139

THE IMAGES. *Judecca*. The region of the Traitors to sworn allegiance is called Judecca after Judas, who betrayed Our Lord. Here, cut off from every contact and every means of expression, those who committed the final treason lie wholly submerged.

Judas, Brutus and Cassius. Judas, obviously enough, is the image of the betrayal of God. To us, with our minds dominated by Shakespeare and by "democratic" ideas, the presence here of Brutus and Cassius needs some explanation. To understand it, we must get rid of all political notions in the narrow sense. We should notice, first, that Dante's attitude to Julius Caesar is ambivalent. *Personally*, as a pagan, Julius is in Limbo (Canto iv. 123). *Politically*, his rise to power involved the making of civil war, and Curio, who advised him to cross the Rubicon, is in the Eighth Circle of Hell (Canto xxviii. 97-102 and note). But, although Julius was never actually Emperor, he was the founder of the Roman Empire, and *by his function*, therefore, he images that institution which, in Dante's view (see Introduction, p. 45), was divinely appointed to govern the world. Thus Brutus and Cassius, by their breach of sworn allegiance to Caesar, were Traitors to the Empire, i.e. to World-order. Consequently, just as Judas figures treason against God, so Brutus and Cassius figure treason against Man-in-Society; or we may say that we have here the images of treason against the Divine and the Secular government of the world.

Dis, so Virgil calls him; Dis, or Pluto, being the name of the King of the Classical Underworld. But to Dante he is Satan or Lucifer or Beelzebub – or, as we say, the Devil. "He can see it now – that which monotonously resents and repels, that which despairs. ... Milton imagined Satan, but an active Satan; this is beyond it, this is passive except for its longing. Shakespeare imagined treachery; this is treachery raised to an infinite cannibalism. Treachery gnaws treachery, and so inevitably. It is the imagination of the freezing of every conception, an experience of which neither life nor death can know, and which is yet quite certain, if it is willed." (Charles Williams: *The Figure of Beatrice*, p. 144.)

NOTES. I. 1: *Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni*: "The banners of the King of Hell go forth". This, with the addition of the word *inferni* (of Hell), is the first line of the Latin hymn which we know best as "The royal banners forward go".

l. 18: *fairest once of the sons of light*: referring to Satan's original status as one of the brightest of the Cherubim.

l. 28: *the Emperor*: "Dante uses the word with the full meaning of its perversion" (Charles Williams). In Canto II, he refers to God as "the Emperor of the Imperium on high"; this is the Emperor of the realm below, who gives his name to the "sorrowful City". (Canto VII. 68.)

l. 38: *three faces*: The three faces, red, yellow, and black, are thought to suggest Satan's dominion over the three races of the world: the red, the European (the race of Japhet); the yellow, the Asiatic (the race of Shem); the black, the African (the race of Ham). But they are also, undoubtedly, a blasphemous anti-type of the Blessed Trinity: Hatred, Ignorance, Impotence as against Love, Wisdom, Power.

l. 46: *from under each sprang two great wings*: Satan was a fallen cherub, and retains, in a hideous and perverted form, the six wings which belong to his original rank.

ll. 51-2: *three winds ... and froze up all Cocytus*: see Canto XXXIII. 103-108.

l. 68: *night is rising on the world*: it is about 6 P.M.

l. 74: *from shag to shag descended*: Satan's body is shaggy like that of a satyr, according to a well-known medieval convention. The poets clamber down him, feet-first, as one descends a ladder, working their way through the points where the thick pelt prevents the ice from adhering close to the surface of his body. (We must remember the enormous height of Satan - somewhere about 1200 or 1500 ft. at a rough calculation.)

l. 79: *turned head to ... feet, etc.*: They have been descending feet-first; now they turn themselves topsy-turvy and go up again, head-first.

l. 93: *what point it was I'd passed*: Since Dante proceeds to take the sting out of "thick-witted" by admitting that he himself was completely bewildered, we may perhaps, without offence, explain that the "point" was the centre of gravity, which was situated precisely at Satan's navel. The sketch on p. 264 will make all these geographical complexities clear.

l. 96: *mid-terce*: *Terce*, the first of the four canonical divisions of the day, lasted from sunrise (6 A.M. at the equinox) till 9 A.M.; mid-terce would therefore be about 7.30 A.M.

l. 103: *Kindly explain*: Dante wants to know (1) why Satan is apparently upside-down; (2) how it is that, having started their descent of Satan about 6 P.M., they have, after about an hour and a half of climbing, apparently arrived at the following morning. Virgil explains that (1) having passed the centre, they are now in the Southern Hemisphere, so that "up" and "down" are reversed, and (2) they are now going by southern time, so that day and night are reversed. Purgatory stands on the opposite meridian to Jerusalem; therefore Purgatory time is twelve hours behind Jerusalem time; i.e. it is now 7.30 A.M. on Holy Saturday, all over again. (See note on Chronology, p. 296.)

l. 108: *the ill Worm*: Satan. At the centre of the Earth is a little sphere (see l. 116, and look at the sketch, p. 264), and Satan's body is run through this, like a knitting-needle through an orange, with his head out at one end and his legs at the other.

l. 113: *that which land roofs in*: the Northern Hemisphere, which, according to St Augustine and most medieval geographers, contained all the land in the world.

l. 114: *under whose meridian*: the meridian of Jerusalem, where Christ ("the Man born sinless") was crucified.

ll. 116-17: *a little sphere, etc.*: See sketch, p. 264.

ll. 121 sqq.: *This side the world*: i.e. the southern side. When Satan fell from Heaven, two things happened. (1) The dry land, which until then had occupied the Southern Hemisphere, fled in horror from before him, and fetched up in the Northern Hemisphere; while the ocean poured in from all sides to fill the gap. (2) The inner bowels of the Earth, to avoid contact with him, rushed upwards towards the south, and there formed the island and mountain at the top of which was the Earthly Paradise, ready for the reception of Man, and which, after Hell's Harrowing became Mount Purgatory. This, according to Dante, is the only land in the Southern Hemisphere. The hollow thus left in the middle of the Earth is the core of Hell, together with the space in which Dante and Virgil are now standing - the "tomb" of Satan. From this a winding passage leads up to the surface of the Antipodes. By this passage the river Lethe descends, and up it the poets now make their way.

l. 130: *a small stream*: This is Lethe, the river of oblivion, whose springs are in the Earthly Paradise. They are moving against it - i.e. towards recollection.