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—R.W.B. Lewis, *Los Angeles Times*

DANTE

the inferno

A VERSE TRANSLATION BY

ROBERT HOLLANDER AND JEAN HOLLANDER

Dante Alighieri

INFERNO

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT & JEAN HOLLANDER

INTRODUCTION & NOTES BY ROBERT HOLLANDER

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INTRODUCTION

What is a "great book"? It is probably impossible to define the concept analytically to anyone's satisfaction, but it may be described pragmatically: a work that is loved, over time, by millions of more-or-less ordinary readers *and* by thousands of scholars. Dante, by the time he was writing the fourth canto of *Inferno*, had already decided he was writing such a book. He sets his name down as one of the six all-time great writers: only Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and Lucan have preceded him (he will later add Statius). Unspeakably self-assured as this poet may seem, many today would now shorten that list, perhaps even to two: Homer and Dante. His self-confidence may seem overweening, but he was even more of a prophet than he realized.

In about 1306, having entered his forties, he set about work on his *Comedy*. By 1295 he had written a "little book" (the nomenclature is his own), *The New Life,* thirty-one of his lyric poems surrounded by a governing prose commentary that almost explains the eventual meaning of his love for a young woman of Florence named Beatrice, who had died in 1290 at the age of twenty-five. We know nothing absolutely certain about her, whether she was an actual woman (if so, probably a member of the Portinari family, and then almost certainly married) or whether she is a fictitious lady of the sort that love-poets invented in order to have a subject to write about. The text, on the other hand, makes it clear that we are to treat her as historical, and also suggests that we are to understand that she means more than she seems, for she is ineluctably joined with the Trinity, and in particular with the life of Christ. Dante seems completely aware of the radical newness of a lady loaded with such lofty theological meaning in the tradition of vernacular poetry of love. That is, he knows that what he is proposing is out of bounds. And this is why he is usually so very diffident in his remarks, forcing us to draw some rather disquieting conclusions about the nature of the very special kind of love that eventually informs his praise of Beatrice.

Before he began work on his "theological epic," the *Comedy*, he had also written major parts of two other works, one a presentation of his ideas about eloquence in the vernacular, *De vulgari eloquentia,* the second, *Convivio,* a lengthy study of moral philosophy (in the form of commentary to his own odes), of which he had completed four of the projected fifteen "treatises." He had been actively involved in the often bitterly contested political life of Florence, at that time one of the most important European cities, swollen with new wealth and consequent political power. At a time when that city had only six of them, he served the customary two-month term as one of its priors, the highest political office in the city. By 1302, having inherited the wrong political identity, he lost practically everything when his party, the White Guelph faction, was outfoxed by the Black Guelphs, supported by the allied forces of Pope Boniface VIII and the French king. He was exiled in 1302 and never returned home again. He then lived a mainly itinerant life in northern Italy, with two longish stays in Verona and a final one in Ravenna, where he died of malarial fever in September 1321 at the age of fifty-six.

The political situation of northern Italy during his lifetime was distinguished by factionalism and chaos. The emperors who were supposed to govern all of Europe had, for centuries, mainly avoided their Italian responsibilities. The last of them to rule in Italy was Frederick II (we hear of him in *Inferno* X and XIII), and he, while one of the greatest figures in Europe, was not a leader to Dante's liking. Dead in 1250, Frederick was the last emperor to govern from Italy. Dante hoped for an imperial restoration of the proper kind, and, to everyone's amazement, including his own, had his hopes rewarded when the newly crowned Henry VII, a compromise candidate from Luxembourg, allowed to become emperor primarily because of the machinations of Pope Clement V, descended into the peninsula to rule Europe from Italy in 1310. When his military expedition eventually failed because of his death in 1313, Dante's imperial hopes were dealt a terrible blow, but not finally dashed. To the end of his days (and in the text of *Paradiso* XXVII and XXX) he insisted on believing that a new "Augustus" would fulfill God's design for Italy and Europe.

On the local level, late-thirteenth-century northern Italy (Milano, to the north, and Rome, to the south, are barely on Dante's personal political map; rather we hear, in addition to Florence, of such cities as Genoa, Pisa, Pistoia, Siena, etc.) was in constant turmoil. The two main "parties" were the Guelphs (those essentially allied with the papacy) and the Ghibellines (aligned with the emperor—when there was one to be aligned with—or at least with imperial hopes). But most politics, as they are in our own time, were local. And there, labels did not count so much as family. In Florence the Ghibellines had been defeated and banished in 1266, a year after Dante's birth, leaving the city entirely Guelph. But that did not betoken an era of unity. The Guelphs themselves were already divided (as they were in many northern cities) in two factions, the "Blacks," led by the Donati family (into a less powerful branch of which Dante married), and the "Whites," led by the Cerchi. (It is probably correct to say that the Whites were more devoted to a republican notion of governance, while the Blacks were more authoritarian.) The first impetus toward political division had occurred early in the century, when a young man, member of a Ghibelline family, broke off his engagement and married a Guelph Donati (in Pistoia, not entirely dissimilarly, the roots of division supposedly began in a snowball fight). A member of a White Guelph family, and having married into the most important Black family, Dante was therefore tied to Guelph interests. How then, do we explain his patent allegiance, in the *Comedy*, to the imperial cause? In 1306 or so he seems to have, rereading the Latin classics, reformulated his own political vision (as is first evident in the fourth and fifth chapters of the last treatise of the *Convivio*, before which there is not a clear imperialist sentiment to be found in his writing). And so, nominally a Guelph, Dante was far more in accord with Ghibelline ideas, except that, in practice, he found Ghibellines lacking in the religious vision that he personally saw as the foundation of any imperialist program. Politics are everywhere in the poem, which is far from being the purely religious text that some of its readers take it for.

In his exile, the *Commedia* (first called the *Divina Commedia* only in 1555 by a Venetian publisher) became his obsession. For about fifteen years, with few exceptions (a notable one being his treatise, *Monarchia*, concerning the divine prerogatives of the empire, perhaps composed in 1317), the poem absorbed almost all of his time and energy. Its "motivating idea" is a simple one, outrageously so. In the Easter period of 1300 a thirty-five-year-old Florentine, struggling with failure and apparently spiritual death, is rescued by the shade of the Roman poet Virgil. He, won to the project by the living soul of Beatrice, who descends to hell from her seat in heaven in order to enlist his aid, agrees to lead Dante on a journey through hell and purgatory. Beatrice herself will again descend from heaven to take Dante the rest of the way, through the nine heavenly spheres and into paradise, where angels and souls in bliss gaze, in endless rapture, on God. The entire journey takes nearly precisely one week, Thursday evening to Thursday evening. It begins in fear and trembling on this earth and ends with a joyous vision of the trinitarian God. It is perhaps difficult to imagine how even a Dante could have managed to build so magnificent an edifice out of so improbable a literary idea. The result was a book that began to be talked about, known from parts that seem to have circulated before the whole, even before it was finished (first citations begin to be noted around 1315). By the time he had completed it, shortly before his death, people were eagerly awaiting the publication of *Paradiso*. And within months of his death (or even before) commentaries upon it began to be produced. It was, in short, an instant "great book," probably the first of its kind since the last century of the pagan era, when Romans (no less of them than Augustus himself) awaited eagerly the finished text of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

One of the most striking things about the *Comedy* is the enormous apparatus that has attached itself to it. No secular work in the western tradition has so developed a heritage of line-by-line commentary, one that began in Latin and Italian and that has now entered any number of languages, European, Slavic, and Asian. It is clear that Dante's work convinced the scholars of his time that this was a poem worthy of the most serious attention, both as a purveyor of the most important ideas of Christianity (e.g., sin, grace, redemption, transcendence) and as a response to the greatest of the Latin poets (Virgil foremost, but also Ovid, Statius, Lucan, and others) and philosophers (Aristotle [in his Arabic/Latin form] and Cicero, primarily). Knowledge of Greek had essentially disappeared from the time of the establishment of Latin Christianity as the dominant religion and culture of the West in the fifth and sixth centuries. The study of the language would only gradually begin again some fifty years after Dante's death. And thus while Dante knows about Greek philosophy, all he has experienced of it comes from the works (most of Aristotle) and bits and pieces (only one work of Plato's, the *Timaeus*, and excerpts of some of the pre-Socratics) that had been translated into Latin. Strangely, for a modern reader, his first commentators pay little or no attention to his close and fairly extensive dealings with the poems of his vernacular predecessors and co-practitioners (Guido Guinizzelli, Arnaut Daniel, Brunetto Latini, Guido Cavalcanti, Cino da Pistoia, and others). Perhaps the most impressive aspect of these commentaries (and we are speaking of line-by-line analyses, on the model of commentary to the Bible or to a handful of especially respected classical authors, a form essentially denied to modern writers before 1300) is the vast number of them. From the first twenty years after Dante's death at least ten have survived; by our own time there are hundreds.

Along with conquering the allegiance of scholars, Dante won the hearts of less-erudite Italians (or, at first, Tuscans) who found in his vast poem the first use of Italian as a literary language in an indisputably major work. Italian poetry, beginning at the time of St. Francis in the early twelfth century, had performed wonders, but it had rarely found a subject that seemed serious enough. Here was a poem that tackled everything: theology, religion, philosophy, politics, the sciences of heaven (astronomy/astrology) and of earth (biology, geology), and, perhaps most of all, the study of human behavior. And it did all these things in a language that everyone could understand, or at least thought he could. It is probably not true to suggest that Dante "invented modern Italian." What he did do was to deploy Italian as a literary language on a major scale, incorporating the "serious" subjects that had hitherto been reserved to Latin. If the Italian language had been waiting for a voice, Dante gave it that voice. Before him it did not exist in a global form, a complete language fit for all subjects; after him it did. It is probably not because of him that Italian has changed no more between his time and today than English has since Shakespeare's day. It is, nonetheless, a continuing surprise and reward for contemporary Italians to have so ancient and yet so approachable a father, speaking, at least most of the time, words that they themselves use (and sometimes that he had invented).

Is Dante an "easy" poet? That depends on what passages we happen to be reading. He can be as simple and straightforward as one's country neighbor, or as convoluted as the most arcane professor. (Boccaccio, one of his greatest advocates, also shows both proclivities in the prose of the *Decameron.*) Yet he has always found a welcome from the least schooled of readers, and even from those who could not read at all, but learned the poem by rote. A living Tuscan farmer/poet, Mauro Punzecchi, years ago memorized the poem while he worked his fields and is today able to recite all of it. Who does not envy him his gift?

Each of us reads his own *Commedia*, which makes perfect sense, most of the time. It is only when we try to explain "our" poem to someone else that the trouble starts.

The commentary that accompanies this new translation is, like every one that has preceded it, except the first few, indebted to earlier discussions of this text. And what of that text, as Dante left it? No one has ever seen his autograph version. As a result, the manuscript tradition of the poem is vast and complicated. Nonetheless, and despite all the difficulties presented by particular textual problems, the result of variant readings in various manuscripts, it must be acknowledged that in the *Comedy* we have a remarkably stable text, given the facts that we do not possess an autograph and that the condition of the manuscripts is so unyieldingly problematic. However, we do know that Dante left us precisely 14,233 verses arranged in one hundred cantos, all of which contained precisely the number of verses we find in them today in every modern edition. And that is no small thing.

And so each reader comes to a text that offers some problems of the textual variety; these pale beside problems of interpretation. What we can all agree on is that the work is a wonder to behold. Reading Dante is like listening to Bach. It is unimaginable to think that a human being, so many years ago (or indeed ever), could make such superhuman magic. Yet there it is, beckoning, but also refusing to yield some of its secrets.

When I considered how I might present this poem in a brief introduction, after years of thinking about it and teaching it and writing about it, I thought of what I myself missed when I started reading Dante. The first was a sense of Dante's intellectual biography; the second was a set of answers to a series of questions: how does allegory work (i.e., how does this poem "mean")? What does Virgil represent and why is he the first guide in the poem? How am I supposed to react to the sinners of *Inferno*, especially those that seem so sympathetic to me? The first subject is too vast for treatment here. My own attempt at an intellectual biography of the poet is available in Italian (*Dante Alighieri,* Rome, Editalia, 2000; an English version was published by Yale University Press in 2001). The three questions I have tried to answer, both in the "Lectures" found currently in the Princeton Dante Project, and, in shorter form, in an essay I wrote a year ago ("Dante: A Party of One," *First Things* 92 [April 1999]: 30–35; the essay on Virgil also has some points in common with my article, "Virgil," in the *Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing, New York, Garland, 2000). What follows is another attempt to deal with three important matters facing any first-time reader of the poem, or any reader at all.

(1) *Allegory.*

When I was young I was taught that Dante's poem was the very essence of allegorical writing. What exactly is allegory? Simply put, it is the interpretive strategy of understanding one thing as meaning not itself but something other. A lady, blindfolded, holding a pair of scales in one hand, is not to be understood as a being with a particular history, but as a timeless entity, an abstraction: justice. If we understand just this much, we are prepared to comprehend how we might read—and how many of his first readers did understand—Dante's poem as an "allegory." Virgil is not the Roman poet so much as he is human reason unenlightened by faith; when he acts or speaks in the poem he does so without the historical context supplied by his life or works. And what of the second guide in the poem, Beatrice? She, too, is removed from her historical role in Dante's life, and is treated as an abstraction, in her case the truths discovered through faith, or perhaps revelation, or theology. And what of the protagonist, Dante himself? That he has a very personal history, of which we hear a good deal, matters not. He is a sort of "Everyman," and represents the ordinarily appetitive human soul. Please let me explain that I myself think very little of such formulations, but they are found in almost all the early commentators. In a term derived from Cicero, these interpreters thought of allegory as a "continuous metaphor." The most significant actions performed in the poem, they thought, could best be understood as part of this single, developing metaphor, in which the flawed human soul called "Dante" is gradually educated, first by reason (referred to as "Virgil"), and then by theological certainty (code name "Beatrice").

Since something like this does seem to occur in the course of the poem, we can sense why the formulation has its appeal. The problem is that it shortchanges the entire historical referentiality of the poem. Dante's life disappears as a subject worthy of attention; Virgil's texts need not be read or understood as ways to find out what the poem means when it refers to them; Beatrice's earthly existence as a young woman becomes utterly superfluous, as does her "relationship" (a curiously and precisely wrong word, given its contemporary usage) with Dante. Fourteen centuries ago Isidore of Seville defined allegory as "otherspeech," in which a speaker or writer said one thing but meant something else by it. Without exploring the limitations that he himself imposed upon that formula, we can merely note that it is frequently used in modern days to explain allegory simply and quickly. If I say "Beatrice" I do not mean her, but what she means. We are back to the lady holding the scales. To use a medieval example, St. Thomas explains (*Summa* I.i.9) that when the Bible refers to the arm of God (Isaiah 51:9) it does not mean that God has an arm, but that He has operative power. That is, we can discard the literal for its significance, or, in more modern terms, the signifier for the signified. Does this way of reading Dante utterly denature the text we have before us? Perhaps not utterly, but enough so that we should avoid it as much as we can.

The matter gets more interesting and more complicated because Dante himself wrote about the question of allegory. In his *Convivio* he distinguishes between allegory as it is understood and practiced by poets (along the lines we have been discussing) and as it is used by theologians in order to understand certain passages in the Bible (a very different procedure that we will examine in a moment). And in *Convivio* (II.i) he says the "correct" thing: it is his intention, in the explication of his odes, to follow the allegorical procedures of the poets ("since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets"). There are those who put this remark to the service of the claim that the "allegory of the theologians" thus has nothing to do with Dante's procedures in the *Comedy*, either. However, that is exactly what he claims in the letter he wrote to his patron, Cangrande della Scala of Verona. The authenticity of his *Epistle to Cangrande*, written sometime after Dante had begun writing the *Paradiso*, and thus probably no earlier than 1316, is one of the most debated of Dantean questions. It is difficult for this writer to be fair to the negative argument, which is so obviously based in a desire to cancel what the epistle says. Whether or not Dante wrote it (and current scholarly opinion is, once again, decidedly in favor), this remarkable document puts forward the disturbing (to use a mild word) idea that Dante's poem was written with the same keys to meaning as was the Bible. No one had ever said as much about his own work before, and it must be made clear that it is anathema to any sensible person of Dante's (or any) time. If this were the only occasion on which this most venturesome of writers had said something outrageous, one might want to pay more heed to those who try to remove the text from his canon on the ground that he had no business making such a claim.

The principal tenet of theological allegory is that it holds certain (but not all) historical events in the Bible as a privileged and limited class of texts. Some historical passages in the Bible possessed four senses. The four senses of the Bible are generally put forth, and especially in the wake of Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* I.i.10), as follows: (1) historical/literal, (2) allegorical, (3) moral or tropological, (4) anagogical. It is helpful to understand that these senses unfurl in a historical continuum. For instance, the *historical* Moses, leading the Israelites out of captivity, gains his *allegorical* meaning in Christ, leading humankind out of bondage to the freedom of salvation. His *moral* (or *tropological*—these words are used synonymously) sense is present now—whenever "now" occurs—in the soul of the believer who chooses to make his or her "exodus" from sin; while the *anagogical* sense is found only after the end of time, when those who are saved are understood as having arrived in the New Jerusalem, eternal joy in heaven. To offer a second example, one favored by Dante's early commentators: Jerusalem was the *historical* city of Old Testament time; it points to the *allegorical* Jerusalem in which Jesus was crucified; it is the *moral* or *tropological* "city" (whether within a single believer or as the entity formed by the Church Militant now) at any present moment; it is, *anagogically,* the New Jerusalem, which will exist only at the end of time. As opposed to the literal sense of poet's allegory, the literal sense of theological allegory is historically true, found only in events narrated in the Bible (e.g., the fall of Adam and Eve, Moses leading the Israelites in the Exodus, the birth of Jesus, the Crucifixion). According to the *Epistle to Cangrande* and, more importantly, as found in the treatment of subjects in his poem itself (most of which was written before he wrote the epistle, it is important to remember), Dante has adapted the techniques of theological allegory to the making of his poem. Characters and events in it are portrayed in a historical mode and as part of a historical continuum. Adam, Moses, Icarus, Aeneas, Paul, Augustus, Virgil, and Dante are all portrayed as having said things or accomplished deeds that are seen in a historical and meaningful pattern that gives shape to this poem. Their actual historical status does not matter. Dante surely did not believe that Icarus had enjoyed a life on earth beyond that conferred by poets and mythographers. But he treats him, in *Inferno* XVII, as a possible precursor to himself, should Dante, a latter-day flyer through space, have had a bad end and fallen from the back of Geryon.

If we have been able to rid ourselves of the interpretive problems engendered by the "allegory of the poets," here we have a still larger problem. How can Dante have written the *Comedy* in the same way that God wrote the Bible through his inspired human agents? Obviously he could not have. Then why does he make so outrageous a claim? Because what he is most concerned with is establishing the "right" of poetry to truth. This is a complex argument, and needs to be undertaken with a sense of the standing of poetry in a theological age. Let us say that it was not propitious. St. Thomas Aquinas had been clear about the issue. Poetry was the least of the human sciences, was basically devoid of cognitive value, and its practitioners were liars. In an intellectual climate of that kind, Dante was forced into making a choice. Either he did what all others who defended poetry had done (and as he himself had done in *Convivio*), admit that poets are literally liars who nonetheless tell moral and philosophical truths through (poets') allegory, or he had to find a new answer to the attacks on poetry by friars like Thomas. Typically, he went his own way. If religious detractors of poetry say it lacks truth, he will give them truth. The *Comedy* is presented, from end to end (no reader can possibly miss this fact), as a record of an actual experience. Let us be honest with one another. You do not believe, and I do not believe, that Dante took a seven-day trip to the otherworld. But we can agree that his claims for total veracity are in the poem. Why? Because Dante took Thomas seriously. It is a wonderful game that he plays, daring and at times very funny, and surely he enjoyed playing it. Let me offer a single example, drawn from a pretty "serious" setting, the Earthly Paradise. Describing the six wings adorning each of the four biblical beasts that represent the authors of the Gospels in *Purgatorio* XXIX, Dante assures us that their wings were six in number (Ezechiel's cherubic creatures had only four), that is, as many as are found in John's description of the same cherubs (Revelation 4:8). The text puts this in an arresting way: "John sides with me, departing from him [Ezechiel]." No one but Dante would have said this in this way. "Here I follow John" would have been the proper way for a poet to guarantee the truthfulness of his narrative. Not for Dante. Since the pretext of the poem is that he indeed saw all that he recounts as having seen, his own experience, in completely Thomistic spirit, comes first—he knows this by his senses. And so John is *his* witness, and not he John's.

The whole question of exactly how and how much the "allegory of the theologians" permeates the *Comedy* is not to be rehashed here. It is the subject of a number of books, including two by this writer. It is important to grasp that, by breaking out of the lockstep of other poets, who give us narratives that are utterly and only fabulous, i.e., patently untrue in their literal sense, Dante wanted to take poetry somewhere new. The greatest French medieval poem, the *Romance of the Rose*, is built around the presentation of a series of abstractions speaking to one another in a garden. Marianne Moore, borrowing from another writer, once referred to poems as "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." The *Romance of the Rose* is an imaginary garden filled with imaginary toads; the *Comedy* presents itself as a real garden containing real toads. If the student (or teacher) who is wrestling with this difficult matter for the first time takes only this much away from this discussion, it should be of considerable aid. The reader is not asked by the poem to see Virgil as Reason, Beatrice as Faith (or Theology or Revelation), Francesca as Lust, Farinata as Heresy, etc. We may banish such abstractions from mind, unless Dante himself insists on them. On occasion he does—e.g., the Lady Poverty, beloved of St. Francis [*Paradiso* XI.74], who is not to be confused with any historical earthly woman, but is to be regarded as the ideal of Christ's and the Apostles' renunciation of the things of this world. It is a useful and pleasing freedom that, in consequence, we may enjoy: "The allegory of the *Comedy* is not allegory as the commentators urge me to apply it. I may read this poem as history, and understand it better." That, at least provisionally, is a good way to begin reading this poem.

(2) *Virgil.*

We should be aware that Virgil was not always Dante's guide in poetry. The *Vita nuova* is essentially without major reference to him;

De vulgari and the first three treatises of *Convivio* are similar in this respect. It is only in the fourth and last treatise of the latter that we can begin to see how the *Comedy* could make Virgil so essential a presence, for there Virgil's texts are present in important ways, as Dante begins to think of moral philosophy, Roman polity, and the jettisoning of allegorical procedures in the same breath. As the world of political reality, of human choices made in time and with real consequence, for the first time becomes a stage for Dante's thought, Virgil becomes his most important resource. As is widely understood, Dante's recovery of Virgilian text is the most noteworthy example of this phenomenon that we find in the Middle Ages. We have not yet entered the world of the Renaissance, but we are getting close.

There are few surprises awaiting the reader of the *Comedy* as unsettling as to find a pagan poet serving as guide in a Christian poem. We have perhaps gotten so used to the idea of Dante's Virgil that we forget to be surprised by it. For reasons that we find it difficult to fathom, Dante needed Virgil in order to make this poem; and he wanted him to serve as a central character in it. Lesser minds would have made a less provocative choice: an anonymous friar, a learned Christian theologian, anyone less troubling than Virgil. One tradition of Christian reception of Virgil, which is at least as old as the emperor Constantine, held that his much-discussed fourth *Eclogue* actually foretold the coming of Christ. Had Dante so believed, his choice of guide might have been less burdensome. However, we may be certain from *Monarchia* (I.xi.1) that Dante knew that Virgil's "virgin" was not the blessèd Mary but Astraea, or "justice." Any number of passages within the *Comedy* make it plain that Dante did not consider the Roman poet a Christian *avant-la-lettre*. We must conclude that he willfully chose a pagan as his guide, leaving us to fathom his reasons for doing so.

In recent years a growing number of Dante's interpreters have been arguing for the view that Dante deliberately undercuts the Latin poet, showing that both in some of his decisions as guide and in some of his own actual texts he is, from Dante's later and Christian vantage point, prone to error. If this is the case, we must not forget that Dante at the same time is intent upon glorifying Virgil. And then we might consider the proposition that Dante's love for him, genuine and heartfelt, needed to be held at arm's length and chastised, perhaps revealing to a pagan-hating reader that Dante knew full well the limitations of his Virgil. Yet he could not do without him. Virgil is the guide in Dante's poem because he served in that role in Dante's life. It was Virgil's *Aeneid* and not the works of Aristotle or of Aquinas which served as model for the poem; it was Virgil who, more than any other author, helped to make Dante Dante.

It may take readers years of rereading before they discover an extraordinary fact about Dante's Virgil. For all the excitement, even exhilaration, brought forth by Virgil's mere presence in this poem (a text that would seem to need to exclude him on theological grounds), sooner or later the fact that he is treated, on occasion, rather shabbily begins to impress us. This is so obvious, once it is pointed out, that one can begin to understand how thoroughly trained we have all been to look with pleased eyes upon a Dantean love for Virgil that heralds Renaissance humanism. To take only a few examples from the goodly supply presented in the text of *Inferno* (and *Purgatorio* will add many another), we witness Virgil embarrassed by the recalcitrant fallen angels who deny him entrance to the City of Dis (*Inf.* VIII and IX); later teased by his pupil for that momentary failure (XIV); being careful to get Dante out of observing distance lest Geryon prove as difficult as the rebel angels had been and thus embarrass him again (XVI); completely fooled by the demons of the pitch, who cause him acute discomfort over three cantos (XXI–XXIII). If such scenes make it seem more than unlikely that Virgil could possibly represent Reason (and commentators who think so grow silent at the margins of these scenes, only occasionally being honest enough even to say, "here the allegory is intermittent"), they also make us wonder about Dante's motives in treating his "master and author" so disrespectfully. It is perhaps only because he loved Virgil so deeply that he feels the need to remind himself and his reader that the pagan was, in the end, a failure, capable of causing another Roman poet, Statius, to convert to Christianity, but not of taking that step himself. All of that seems wrong to us. There is perhaps no doctrine in the entire *Comedy* so hateful to modern readers as that which makes pagans—and others outside the Christian dispensation—responsible for knowing Christ. When we consider Dante's situation, however, his motives may seem more understandable to us. Having fought off the temptation to make Virgil a Christian, Dante must now show himself and his reader that he has not gone overboard in his affections.

There is another disturbing element to Dante's Virgilianism.

Not only is Virgil the character forced to undergo some seriously humiliating moments, but his texts are also on the receiving end of Dante's playful mockery. Perhaps the most evident moment of this occurs in the twentieth canto, where Virgil is made to revise an episode in the tenth book of the *Aeneid* so that it accords better with Christian ideas about divination. It is a richly woven scene, and is extremely funny (Dante is a much funnier poet than we like to acknowledge), once we begin to understand the literary game that is being played under our eyes. And this is not the only time that Virgil's texts receive such treatment. We will even find the *Aeneid* remembered in the very last canto of *Paradiso*, with its reminder of what the Sibyl told of Christian truth to an ear that could understand her utterance—if not Virgil's.

It is simply impossible to imagine the *Comedy* without Virgil. And no one before Dante, and perhaps very few after, ever loved Virgil as he did. At the same time there is a hard-edged sense of Virgil's crucial failure as poet of Rome, the city Dante celebrates for its two suns, church and empire, but which Virgil saw only in the light of the one. For Dante, that is his great failure. As unfair as it seems to us, so much so that we frequently fail to note how often Virgil is criticized by the later poet who so loved him, it is the price that Dante forces him to pay when he enters this Christian precinct. And it may have been the price that he exerted from himself, lest he seem too available to the beautiful voices from the pagan past, seem less firm as the poet of both Romes. The Virgilian voice of the poem is the voice that brings us, more often and more touchingly than any other, the sense of tragedy that lies beneath the text of the *Comedy*.

(3) *The Moral Situation of the Reader.*

How are we meant to respond to the sinners in hell? That seems an easy question to resolve. In the *Inferno* we see the justice of God proclaimed in the inscription over the gate of hell (III.4): "Justice moved my maker on high." If God is just, it follows logically that there can be no question concerning the justness of His judgments. All who are condemned to hell are justly condemned. Thus, when we observe that the protagonist feels pity for some of the damned, we are probably meant to realize that he is at fault for doing so. Dante, not without risk, decided to entrust to us, his readers, the responsibility for seizing upon the details in the narratives told by sinners, no matter how appealing their words might be, in order to condemn them on the evidence that issues from their own mouths. It was indeed, as we can see from the many readers who fail to take note of this evidence, a perilous decision for him to have made. Yet we are given at least two clear indicators of the attitude that should be ours. Twice in *Inferno* figures from heaven descend to hell to further God's purpose in sending Dante on his mission. Virgil relates the coming of Beatrice to Limbo. She tells him, in no uncertain terms, that she feels nothing for the tribulations of the damned and cannot be harmed in any way by them or by the destructive agents of the place that contains them (*Inf.* II.88–93). All she longs to do is to return to her seat in Paradise (*Inf.* II.71). And when the angelic intercessor arrives to open the gates of Dis, slammed shut against Virgil, we are told that this benign presence has absolutely no interest in the situation of the damned or even of the living Dante. All he desires is to complete his mission and be done with such things (*Inf.* IX.88; 100–103), reminding us of Beatrice's similar lack of interest in the damned.

The complex mechanism that Dante has developed to establish what we today, after Henry James, call "point of view" has perhaps not been examined as closely as it should be. If we consider it, we realize how "modern" it is. The essential staging of any scene in *Inferno* involving a confrontation with a sinner potentially contains some or all of the following voices: (1) the all-knowing narrator, who has been through the known universe (and beyond!) and knows and understands everything a mortal being can understand; (2) Virgil, the wise guide who understands (most of the time) all that an extremely intelligent pagan can understand (which is considerable, if at some times more limited than at others); (3) the gradually more-and-more-informed protagonist, who moves from alarming cowardice and ignorance to relatively sound moral competence and judgment before the *Inferno* ends; (4) a sinner (sometimes more than one) who may or may not be trying to tell his or her story in a distorted, self-serving way, seeking a better reputation, whether in Dante's eyes or in the view of posterity. That is a brief morphology of the possible combination of speakers in any given scene. We all should be able to agree that such an arrangement is, if nothing else, complex. If the only speaker were Dante the narrator, we would always know where he (and we) stood. When we reflect that he hardly ever intervenes with moral glosses within scenes, we learn something important about this poem: it will not do our work for us. Most of the speakers are, thus, at best usually reliable, at worst completely unreliable. The gradations of their qualifications may change with every scene. And we are left with the problem of evaluating the result. Let us examine only a single scene to see how this grid of potential understanding functions.

In one of the most celebrated passages in all of literature, Francesca da Rimini tells the protagonist her story (*Inf.* V.72–142). As is usual, the omniscient narrator tells us nothing but the facts. From him we learn that the protagonist was overcome by pity (72—is this a good or bad thing?); that the sinners look like doves (82–84—what is the "iconography" of these doves, birds of Venus or signs of the Holy Spirit [the two most usual medieval associations for these birds]?); that Francesca and Paolo come from a line of sinners that includes Dido (85—Dido has a pretty rocky medieval reputation as adulteress; does Francesca suffer from guilt by association?); that the protagonist's summoning call was full of affection and was effective (87—is this to be applauded?). Later, he will tell us that Dante was greatly stirred by Francesca's first speech (109–111—again, what moral view should we take of his behavior?). And he concludes the canto with the information that Paolo was weeping all through Francesca's second speech (139–140—what do we make of these tears?) and that the protagonist, filled with pity, collapsed in a faint (141–142—what moral view should we take of that?). The omniscient narrator could have given us answers to all these questions; he is content to raise them (intrinsically, he rarely asks questions outright) and leave them in our minds. Often, and surely in the Romantic era, many readers have thought that we are meant to identify with the protagonist's view of the scene. And that view, at least, is unambiguous. He is intrigued by the sight of these two handsome shades (73–75), cries out to them with courteous regard for their prerogatives (80–81), bursts into a passionately-felt sense of identification with them (112–114), tells Francesca as much (116–117), and then asks her to spell out exactly how she was overcome by love (118–120). And that is all he *says.* Of course the narrator tells us that, at the conclusion of Francesca's words, he faints from pity, perhaps his single most eloquent response. We at least know where he stands.

What of Virgil, Dante's guide? He only speaks twice, first to assure Dante that these lovers will come if he but summon them in the name of love (77–78—his laconic remark may be read either as a mere statement of fact or as the world-weary remark of the poet who knows all too much about what my friend John Fleming calls

"Carthaginian love," i.e., the passion that undermines reason, exemplified in Dido, as Virgil himself has told the tale in *Aeneid* IV). And then he has only one more two-word utterance (in Italian it is the laconic "che pense"): "What are your thoughts?" (111—is he merely asking, seeing Dante so deep in reverie about the lovers, or is he delicately reminding Dante that he should be thinking, rather than feeling, since we have already been told by the narrator [at verse 39] both that the sin of lust makes "reason subject to desire" and that the protagonist has understood this?). Virgil has fewer than three verses of the seventy-one dedicated to the scene. What would he have said if the poet had allotted him more? It is interesting to speculate.

What about Francesca herself, the most loquacious of the four? She has thirty-eight verses to tell her story, well over half of the scene (88–107; 121–138). What she tells is moving and beautiful, like the woman herself, we imagine. In this reader's view, one common element in both her speeches is that someone or something else is always being blamed for her unhappiness: the God who will not hear her prayers, the god of Love who made Paolo fall in love with her beautiful physical being and made her respond similarly to his, her husband for killing them, the book that, describing an adulterous kiss, encouraged them to engage in an adulterous embrace, and the man who wrote that book. I admit that I am here taking a dour view. Are we meant to read the scene this way? Most people do not. (A. B. Giamatti, with whom I used to converse endlessly about Dante, loved the Romantic reading of this canto. He once cursed me, complaining, "Are you going to try to ruin this scene for me too, Hollander?") I hope it is clear that we all need to watch more carefully the actual exchanges among the various characters that might help establish a point of view from which we can study the events brought forward in the poem. Whatever else we can say, we should all be ready to admit that this is complicated business. Dante is beautiful, yes, but he is complicated.

It is important to acknowledge that Romantic readers have a point. Had Dante thought that all those in hell deserved as little attention as the saved afford them, in other words, if he felt about them as do Beatrice and the descended angel, he could have begun the poem in purgatory, offering a brief notice of the pains of the damned, of which it is better, he might have had the guardian of purgatory say, not to speak. But he was interested in them, and not only as negative exemplars for those Christians who need to reaffirm their faith and will. The saints may have no interest in the damned, but neither we nor Dante are saints. And thus, one might argue, *Inferno,* the most effective part of the poem, in human terms, deals with the problem (sin) and not its solution (faith and good works). Do we have sympathy for the damned, at least those of them that reveal traits that we admire (effective rhetoric, strong feeling, a sense of their personal wrongness, even, at times, courtesy)? Of course we do. Yet we should be aware that there is a trap for us if we go too far. We need to learn to read ironically (a word that is only used once in all Dante's works, in the incomplete thought that ends what we have of *De vulgari eloquentia* [II.xiv]), finding an angle of vision that corresponds to the author's, who expresses thoughts through his characters that need to be examined with care. That is a difficult goal.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy (though rarely, if ever, noted) that the "best" people in hell are not necessarily those whom we tend to admire most. They include those who were involved in Florentine public affairs, always championing the cause of good governance: Ciacco (*Inf.* VI), Farinata degli Uberti (X), Brunetto Latini (XV), Jacopo Rusticucci and his mates (XVI), even Mosca dei Lamberti (XXVIII). All of these are unusual among the denizens of hell in that they either own up to their sins (not making an effort to persuade Dante of their innocence or simply to avoid his questions about their guilt) or want to be remembered for their good deeds on earth. That the "standard list" of sympathetic sinners only mentions two of them (Farinata and Brunetto) is informative: Francesca da Rimini (canto V), Farinata, Pier delle Vigne (XIII), Brunetto, Ulysses (XXVI), and Ugolino della Gherardesca (XXXIII). Francesca, Pier, Ulysses, and Ugolino all try to convince Dante of their worthiness, avoiding the subject of their sins. Their behavior in this regard might serve as a clue to an attentive reader. On this score, Ciacco is a good deal more reliable a witness than is Francesca.

There is more to say about many things. The text of the poem awaits, with annotations that will address many of these. Your translators wish you an invigorated journey through hell (not a bad place once you get used to it) and your commentator hopes that you will find his remarks helpful.

Robert Hollander
Tortola, 23 February 2000

INFERNO I

OUTLINE

1–9	Dante, having lost his way, in a dark wood
10–21	hint of dawn: the sun on a mountaintop
22–27	simile: survivor of shipwreck looking back at sea
28–36	journey resumed; ascending the slope; a leopard
37–43	dawn and reassurance
44–54	a lion renews his fear; a she-wolf drives him back
55–60	simile: merchant (or gambler?) losing everything
61–66	apparition (of Virgil) and Dante's first words
67–75	Virgil identifies himself
76–78	his pointed question to Dante
79–90	Dante's recognition, praise of Virgil; plea for aid
91–100	Virgil's warning: power of the she-wolf
101–111	Virgil's prophecy of the hound that will defeat her
112–120	Virgil will guide Dante through two realms to a third
121–129	Virgil: a second guide will take him to those in bliss, since he is not allowed into that realm
130–135	Dante agrees to be led through the first two realms
136	the two set out

INFERNO I

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

Ahi 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'i' vi trovai,
dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.

Io non so ben ridir com' i' v'intrai,
tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai.

Ma poi ch'i' fui al piè d'un colle giunto,
là dove terminava quella valle
che m'avea di paura il cor compunto,

guardai in alto e vidi le sue spalle
vestite già de' raggi del pianeta
che mena dritto altrui per ogne calle.

Allor fu la paura un poco queta,
che nel lago del cor m'era durata
la notte ch'i' passai con tanta pieta.

E come quei che con lena affannata,
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,

così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.

Midway in the journey of our life
I came to myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.

Ah, how hard it is to tell
the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—
the very thought of it renews my fear!

It is so bitter death is hardly more so.
But to set forth the good I found
I will recount the other things I saw.

How I came there I cannot really tell,
I was so full of sleep
when I forsook the one true way.

But when I reached the foot of a hill,
there where the valley ended
that had pierced my heart with fear,

looking up, I saw its shoulders
arrayed in the first light of the planet
that leads men straight, no matter what their road.

Then the fear that had endured
in the lake of my heart, all the night
I spent in such distress, was calmed.

And as one who, with laboring breath,
has escaped from the deep to the shore
turns and looks back at the perilous waters,

so my mind, still in flight,
turned back to look once more upon the pass
no mortal being ever left alive.

Poi ch'èi posato un poco il corpo lasso,
ripresi via per la piaggia diserta,
sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso.

Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar de l'erta,
una lonza leggiera e presta molto,
che di pel macolato era coverta;

e non mi si partia dinanzi al volto,
anzi 'mpediva tanto il mio cammino,
ch'i' fui per ritornar più volte vòlto.

Temp' era dal principio del mattino,
e 'l sol montava 'n sù con quelle stelle
ch'eran con lui quando l'amor divino

mosse di prima quelle cose belle;
sì ch'a bene sperar m'era cagione
di quella fiera a la gaetta pelle

l'ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;
ma non sì che paura non mi desse
la vista che m'apparve d'un leone.

Questi parea che contra me venisse
con la test' alta e con rabbiosa fame,
sì che parea che l'aere ne tremesse.

Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame
sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza,
e molte genti fé già viver grame,

questa mi porse tanto di gravezza
con la paura ch'uscia di sua vista,
ch'io perdei la speranza de l'altezza.

E qual è quei che volontieri acquista,
e giugne 'l tempo che perder lo face,
che 'n tutti suoi pensier piange e s'attrista;

After I rested my wearied flesh a while,
I took my way again along the desert slope,
my firm foot always lower than the other.

But now, near the beginning of the steep,
a leopard light and swift
and covered with a spotted pelt

refused to back away from me
but so impeded, barred the way,
that many times I turned to go back down.

It was the hour of morning,
when the sun mounts with those stars
that shone with it when God's own love

first set in motion those fair things,
so that, despite that beast with gaudy fur,
I still could hope for good, encouraged

by the hour of the day and the sweet season,
only to be struck by fear
when I beheld a lion in my way.

He seemed about to pounce—
his head held high and furious with hunger—
so that the air appeared to tremble at him.

And then a she-wolf who, all hide and bones,
seemed charged with all the appetites
that have made many live in wretchedness

so weighed my spirits down with terror,
which welled up at the sight of her,
that I lost hope of making the ascent.

And like one who rejoices in his gains
but when the time comes and he loses,
turns all his thought to sadness and lament,

tal mi fece la bestia sanza pace,
che, venendomi 'ncontro, a poco a poco
mi ripigneva là dove 'l sol tace.

Mentre ch'i' rovinava in basso loco,
dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto
chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco.

Quando vidi costui nel gran diserto,
"*Miserere* di me," gridai a lui,
"qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!"

Rispuosemi: "Non omo, omo già fui,
e li parenti miei furon lombardi,
mantoani per patrïa ambedui.

Nacqui *sub Iulio*, ancor che fosse tardi,
e vissi a Roma sotto 'l buono Augusto
nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi.

Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia,
poi che 'l superbo Ilïón fu combusto.

Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
perché non sali il dilettoso monte
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta goia?"

"Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?"
rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.

"O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.

such did the restless beast make me—
coming against me, step by step,
it drove me down to where the sun is silent.

While I was fleeing to a lower place,
before my eyes a figure showed,
faint, in the wide silence.

When I saw him in that vast desert,
'Have mercy on me, whatever you are,'
I cried, 'whether shade or living man!'

He answered: 'Not a man, though once I was.
My parents were from Lombardy—
Mantua was their homeland.

'I was born *sub Julio*, though late in his time,
and lived at Rome, under good Augustus
in an age of false and lying gods.

'I was a poet and I sang
the just son of Anchises come from Troy
after proud Ilium was put to flame.

'But you, why are you turning back to misery?
Why do you not climb the peak that gives delight,
origin and cause of every joy?'

'Are you then Virgil, the fountainhead
that pours so full a stream of speech?'
I answered him, my head bent low in shame.

'O glory and light of all other poets,
let my long study and great love avail
that made me delve so deep into your volume.

'You are my teacher and my author.
You are the one from whom alone I took
the noble style that has brought me honor.

Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi;
aiutami da lei, famoso saggio,
ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi."

"A te convien tenere altro vïaggio,"
rispuose, poi che lagrimar mi vide,
"se vuo' campar d'esto loco selvaggio;

ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,
non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,
ma tanto lo 'mpedisce che l'uccide;

e ha natura sì malvagia e ria,
che mai non empie la bramosa voglia,
e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria.

Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia,
e più saranno ancora, infin che 'l veltro
verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.

Questi non ciberà terra né peltro,
ma sapïenza, amore e virtute,
e sua nazion sarà tra feltro e feltro.

Di quella umile Italia fia salute
per cui morì la vergine Cammilla,
Eurialo e Turno e Niso di ferute.

Questi la caccerà per ogne villa,
fin che l'avrà rimessa ne lo 'nferno,
là onde 'nvidia prima dipartilla.

Ond' io per lo tuo me' penso e discerno
che tu mi segui, e io sarò tua guida,
e trarrotti di qui per loco etterno;

ove udirai le disperate strida,
vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti,
ch'a la seconda morte ciascun grida;

'See the beast that forced me to turn back.
Save me from her, famous sage—
90 she makes my veins and pulses tremble.'

'It is another path that you must follow,'
he answered, when he saw me weeping,
93 'if you would flee this wild and savage place.

'For the beast that moves you to cry out
lets no man pass her way,
96 but so besets him that she slays him.

'Her nature is so vicious and malign
her greedy appetite is never sated—
99 after she feeds she is hungrier than ever.

'Many are the creatures that she mates with,
and there will yet be more, until the hound
102 shall come who'll make her die in pain.

'He shall not feed on lands or lucre
but on wisdom, love, and power.
105 Between felt and felt shall be his birth.

'He shall be the salvation of low-lying Italy,
for which maiden Camilla, Euryalus,
108 Turnus, and Nisus died of their wounds.

'He shall hunt the beast through every town
till he has sent her back to Hell
111 whence primal envy set her loose.

'Therefore, for your sake, I think it wise
you follow me: I will be your guide,
114 leading you, from here, through an eternal place

'where you shall hear despairing cries
and see those ancient souls in pain
117 as they bewail their second death.

e vederai color che son contenti
nel foco, perché speran di venire
120 quando che sia a le beate genti.

A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire,
anima fia a ciò più di me degna:
123 con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire;

ché quello imperador che là sù regna,
perch' i' fu' ribellante a la sua legge,
126 non vuol che 'n sua città per me si vegna.

In tutte parti impera e quivi regge;
quivi è la sua città e l'alto seggio:
129 oh felice colui cu' ivi elegge!"

E io a lui: "Poeta, io ti richeggio
per quello Dio che tu non conoscesti,
132 a ciò ch'io fugga questo male e peggio,

che tu mi meni là dov' or dicesti,
sì ch'io veggia la porta di san Pietro
e color cui tu fai cotanto mesti."
136 Allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro.

'Then you will see the ones who are content
to burn because they hope to come,
120 whenever it may be, among the blessed.

'Should you desire to ascend to these,
you'll find a soul more fit to lead than I:
123 I'll leave you in her care when I depart.

'For the Emperor who has his seat on high
wills not, because I was a rebel to His law,
126 that I should make my way into His city.

'In every part He reigns and there He rules.
There is His city and His lofty seat.
129 Happy the one whom He elects to be there!'

And I answered: 'Poet, I entreat you
by the God you did not know,
132 so that I may escape this harm and worse,

'lead me to the realms you've just described
that I may see Saint Peter's gate
and those you tell me are so sorrowful.'
136 Then he set out and I came on behind him.

1. The first of the 14,233 lines that constitute the *Comedy* immediately establishes a context for the poem that is both universal and particular. It also immediately compels a reader to realize that this is a difficult work, one that may not be read passively, but calls for the reader's active engagement.

Many commentators have pointed out that this opening verse echoes a biblical text, Isaiah's account of the words of Hezekiah, afflicted by the "sickness unto death" (Isaiah 38:10): "in dimidio dierum meorum vadam ad portas inferi" (in the midst of my days, I shall go to the gates of the nether region). Many another potential "source" has found proponents, but this one is so apposite that it has probably received more attention than any other. One other should also be mentioned here, the *Tesoretto* of Brunetto Latini (see note to *Inf.* XV.50). Another tradition holds that the reference is to the age of Dante when he made his voyage (he was thirty-five years old in 1300, half of the biblical "three score and ten"—Psalms 89:10). In addition, some commentators have noted the resonance of the epic tradition in Dante's opening phrase, since epics were seen as beginning, like this poem, *in medias res*, "in the midst of the action," not at its inception.

Related issues are also debated by the earliest commentators, in particular the date of the vision. While there has been disagreement even about the year of the journey to the otherworld, indicated at various points as being 1300 (e.g., *Inf.* X.79–80, XXI.113, *Purg.* II.98, XXXII.2), it is clear that Dante has set his work in the Jubilee Year, proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII in February of 1300. Far more uncertainty attends the question of the actual days indicated. Dante's descent into hell is begun either on Friday, 25 March or on Friday, 8 April, with the conclusion of the journey occurring almost exactly one week later. In favor of the March date, one can argue that Dante could hardly have chosen a more propitious date for a beginning: March 25 was the anniversary of the creation of Adam, of the conception and of the Crucifixion of Christ, and also marked the Florentine "New Year," since that city measured the year from the Annunciation.

2. *mi ritrovai* (I came to myself) has the sense of a sudden shocked discovery. "It is the pained amazement of one who has only now, for the first time, become aware that he is in peril" (Padoan, comm. to *Inf.* I.2).

The grammatical solecism ("Nel mezzo del cammin di *nostra* vita / *mi* ritrov*ai*" [Midway in the journey of *our* life *I* came to *my*self . . .]), mixing plural and singular first-persons, is another sign of the poet's desire to make his reader grasp the relation between the individual and the universal, between Dante and all humankind. His voyage is meant to be understood as ours as well.

The *selva oscura* is one of the governing images of this canto and of the poem. Many commentators point to the previous metaphorical statement found in the Dantean work that is probably nearest in time to it, the fourth treatise of his *Convivio* (*Conv.* IV.xxiv.12), where the author refers to "la selva erronea di questa vita" (the error-filled wood of this life). But here the wood is to be taken "historically" in at least a certain sense, and seems to reflect, to some readers, the condition of Eden after the Fall. In such a reading, Dante's sinful life is as though lived in the ruins of Eden, the place to which he has let himself be led, away from the light of God. In any case, the wood indicates not sin itself, but human life lived in the condition of sin.

3. See Wisdom 5:7: "Lassati sumus in via iniquitate et perditionis, et ambulavimus vias difficiles; viam autem Domini ignoravimus" (We grew weary in the way of iniquity and perdition, and we walked difficult pathways; to the way of the Lord, however, we paid no attention)—perhaps first noted in Padoan's commentary to this verse.

7. Perhaps the first serious interpretive tangle for readers of the poem. The problem is a simple one to describe: what is the antecedent of the implicit subject of the verb *è* ("*It* is so bitter . . .")? There are three feminine nouns that may have that role, since the predicate adjective, *amara* (bitter), is also in the feminine: *cosa dura* (hard thing, v. 4), *selva* (wood, v. 5), *paura* (fear, v. 6). Several current commentators are convinced that *selva* is the antecedent. On the other hand, it seems likely that the antecedent is the phrase *cosa dura* (as in Castelvetro's commentary). The entire passage makes good sense when read this way. To tell of his experience in the dark and savage wood is difficult (vv. 4–6) and so bitter that only dying seems more bitter; *but*, in order to treat of the better things he found in the wood, he *will* speak.

8–9. These innocent-sounding lines have been the cause of considerable puzzlement. What is "the good" that Dante found? What are the "other things"? It may be that these terms are in antithetic relation. Over five hundred years ago Filippo Villani (Bell.1989.1, p. 93) offered this gloss: "de cero formed a similar opinion. According to his article "Dante's Firm Foot and the Journey without a Guide" (1959, reprinted in Frec.1986.1), Dante moves forward with the right foot, representing intellect, supported by the left foot, representing will. Freccero goes on to show that the resultant figuration is one of *homo claudus*, a limping man, wounded in both his feet by Adam's sin.

32–54. The *lonza* (a hybrid born of leopard and lion) is the first of the three beasts to move against Dante as he attempts to mount the hill. Commentators frequently point to a biblical source for Dante's three beasts, the passage in Jeremiah (5:6) that describes three wild animals (lion, wolf, and "pard" [a leopard or panther]) that will fall upon Jerusalemites because of their transgressions and backsliding. For an extensive review of the problem see Gaetano Ragonese, "fiera," *ED* (vol. 2, 1970, with bibliography through 1969).

The early commentators are strikingly in accord; for them the beasts signify **(1) three of the seven mortal sins: lust, pride, and avarice.** Modern interpreters mainly—but not entirely, as we shall see—reject this formulation. One of these interpretations is based on *Inferno* VI. 75, the three "sparks" that have lit evil fires in the hearts of contemporary Florentines, according to Ciacco, who is seconded by Brunetto Latini [*Inf.* XV. 68]): **(2) envy, pride, and avarice.** Others suggest that the key is found at *Inferno* XI. 81–82, where, describing the organization of the punishment of sin, Virgil speaks of **(3) "the three dispositions Heaven opposes, incontinence, malice, and mad brutishness."** Even within this approach there are strong disagreements as to which beast represents which Aristotelian/Ciceronian category of sin: is the leopard fraud or incontinence? is the she-wolf incontinence or fraud? (the lion is seen by all those of this "school" as violence). For instance, some have asked, if the leopard is fraud, the worst of the three dispositions to sin, why is it the beast that troubles Dante the least? A possible answer is that fraud is the disposition least present in Dante.

Perhaps the single passage in the text of *Inferno* that identifies one of the three beasts in such a way as to leave little doubt about its referentiality occurs in XVI. 106–108, where Dante tells us that he was wearing a cord that he once used in his attempt to capture the beast with "the painted pelt." That this cord is used as a challenge to Geryon, the guardian of the pit of Fraud, makes it seem nearly necessary that in this passage the leopard is meant to signify Fraud. If that is true, it would seem also necessary that the lion would stand for Violence and the she-wolf for Incontinence. The last formulation is the trickiest to support. The she-wolf is mainly associated, in the poem, not so much with Incontinence as with avarice (e.g., *Purg.* XX. 10–15). Thus Dante presents himself as most firm against Fraud, less firm against Violence, and weak when confronted by Incontinence. In his case the sin of Incontinence that afflicts him most is lust, not avarice.

There are few passages in the poem that have generated as much discussion and as little common understanding. Now see Gorni's extended discussion (Gorn. 1995.1, pp. 23–55).

The formulation of the early commentators **([1] lust, pride, and avarice)** has had a resurgence in our time. It would certainly be pleasing to have reason to assent to their nearly unanimous understanding. Mazzoni (Mazz. 1967.1. pp. 99–102) has given, basing his argument on texts found in the Bible and in the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, good reason for returning to this view. If it were not for *Inferno* XVI. 106–108, it would be a fairly convincing argument. However, that passage seems unalterably to associate Geryon with the *lonza*.

It should also be noted that a number of still other modern interpreters have proposed various political identities for the three beasts, perhaps the most popular being **(4) the leopard as Dante's Florentine enemies, the lion as the royal house of France, the she-wolf as the forces of the papacy.** It is difficult to align such a view with the details in the text, which seem surely to be pointing to a moral rather than a political view of the situation of the protagonist as the poem begins.

For an extended discussion of the problem in English see Cassell (Cass. 1989.2), pp. 45–76.

33. *di pel macolato . . . coverta* (covered with a spotted pelt). For the resonance of the *Aeneid* (*Aen.* I.323), see the phrase *maculosae tegmine lyncis* (the spotted hide of the lynx), first noted by Pietro Alighieri (first redaction of commentary to *Inf.* I.33).

38. Dante and others in his time believed that the sun was in the constellation of Aries at the creation, which supposedly occurred on 25 March, the date of the Annunciation and of the Crucifixion as well.

55–60. Dante's second simile in the canto turns from the semantic field of epic and perilous adventure to the more mundane but not much less perilous activity of the merchant or the gambler, his financial life hanging in the balance as he awaits news of an arriving ship or the throw of the dice—just at that moment at which his stomach sinks in the sudden awareness that he has in fact, and unthinkably, lost. See the simile involving gambling and gamblers that opens *Purgatorio* VI.

61. For Dante's verb *rovinare* see Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1, p. 114), citing *Conv*. IV.vii.9: "La via . . . de li malvagi è oscura. Elli non sanno dove rovinano" (The path of the wicked is a dark one. They do not know where they are rushing). Mazzoni points out that Dante is translating Proverbs 4:19, substituting *ruinare* for the biblical *correre*.

62. Dante's phrasing that describes Virgil's appearance to the protagonist ("dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto") reminded Tommaseo (commentary to *Inf.* I.62) of the phrasing that describes Venus's appearance to her son, Aeneas, when the latter is intent on killing Helen in order to avenge the harm done to Troy by the Greek surprise attack within the walls of the city: "mihi se . . . ante ocul[o]s . . . obtulit" (she offered herself to my eyes).

63. Both Brugnoli (Brug.1981.1) and Hollander (Holl.1983.1, pp. 23–79) independently agree on most of the key elements in this puzzling verse: *fioco* is to be taken as visual rather than aural; *silenzio* is understood as deriving from the Virgilian sense of the silence of the dead shades (e.g., *Aen.* VI.264: *umbrae silentes*). It is fair also to say that neither deals convincingly with the adjective *lungo*. How can one *see* that a "silence" is of long duration? A recent intervention by Casagrande (Casa.1997.1, pp. 246–48) makes a strong case for interpreting the adjective *lungo* as here meaning "vast, extensive," having a spatial reference. In his reading the verse would mean "who appeared indistinct in the vast silence"; our translation reflects Casagrande's view.

64. Virgil appears to Dante *nel gran diserto*. The adjective is probably meant to recall the first description of the place, *la piaggia diserta* (the desert slope—v. 29).

65–66. Dante's first spoken word as character in his own poem is Latin (*Miserere,* "Have mercy"). This is the language of the Church, the first word of the fiftieth Psalm (50:1). Thus our hero is identified as a son of the Church—albeit a currently failing one—at the outset of the work. It has also been pointed out that, typically enough, this first utterance made by the protagonist involves a double citation, the first biblical, the second classical, Aeneas's speech to his mother, Venus (*Aen.* I.327–330).

That Dante is trying to ascertain whether Virgil is a shade or a living soul helps interpret v. 63, i.e., he looks as though he is alive, and yet somehow not.

67–87. Alessio and Villa (Ales.1993.1) offer an important consideration of Dante's debt to the traditional classical and medieval "lives of the poets" in formulating his own brief *vita Virgilii* in this passage. Among other things, such a view undercuts the argument of those interpreters who try to make Virgil an "allegory" of reason. He is presented as a real person with a real history and is thoroughly individuated. No one could mistake the details of this life for that of another, and no one has.

70. This much-debated verse has left many in perplexity. In what sense are we to take the phrase *sub Iulio*? What is the implicit subject of the verb *fosse*? What is the precise meaning of *tardi* ("late")? Virgil was born in 70 B.C., Julius died in 44 B.C., and Virgil died in 19 B.C. Hardly any two early commentators have the same opinion about this verse. Has Dante made a mistake about the date of Julius's governance? Or does *sub Iulio* only mean "in the days of Julius"? Was Virgil's birth too late for him to be honored by Julius? Or does the clause indicate that, although he was born late in pagan times, it was still too early for him to have heard of Christianity? The most usual contemporary reading is perhaps well stated in Padoan's commentary to this verse: the Latin phrase is only meant to indicate roughly the time of Julius, and nothing more specific than that; when Julius died, Virgil was only twenty-six and had not begun his poetic career, which was thus to be identified with Augustus, rather than with Julius.

73. The word *poeta* is one of the most potent words in Dante's personal vocabulary of honor and esteem. It is used thirty times in all throughout the poem in this form, seven more times in others. In its first use, here, it constitutes Virgil's main claim as Dante's guide.

74. Anchises was the father of Aeneas.

75. The phrase *superbo Ilión* clearly mirrors *Aen.* III.2–3, "superbum / Ilium." It almost certainly has a moralizing overtone here (see also the note to v. 106, below), while in Virgil it probably only indicates the "topless towers of Troy"; in Dante it gives us some sense that Troy may have fallen because of its *superbia*, or pride.

77. *dilettoso monte*: in no ways different from the *colle* of verse 13.

79. At this first appearance of Virgil's name in Dante's text (it will appear thirty times more) it is probably worth noting that Dante's spelling of the name is not only his, but a widespread medieval idiosyncrasy. Translating "Vergilius" with "Virgilio" was intended to lend the Latin poet a certain dignity (by associating him with the noun *vir*, man) and/or a certain mysterious power (by associating him with the word *virga*, or "rod" with magical power).

81. Why is Dante's head "bent low in shame"? The immediate context is that of Virgil's rebuke to Dante for his failure to climb the hill and consequent ruinous flight. It is for this reason—or so one might understand—that he feels ashamed.

84. For the lofty resonance of the word *volume* in the *Comedy* (as compared with *libro*, another and lesser word for "book") see Holl.1969.1, pp. 78–79. The Bible is the only other book so referred to. Two other words that usually refer to God's divine authority are also each used once to refer to Virgil or his writing: *autore* (*Inf.* I.85) and *scrittura* (*Purg.* VI.34).

86–87. There has been much discussion of exactly what the "noble style" is and where it is to be found in Dante's work. The style is the "high style" or "tragic style" found in Virgil and other classical poets and was achieved by Dante in his odes (three of which are collected in *Convivio*), as he himself indicated in *De vulgari eloquentia* (see *Dve* II.vi.7).

Dante's formulation here goes further, making Virgil his sole source. His later interactions with other poets in hell (e.g., Pier delle Vigne [*Inf.* XIII], Brunetto Latini [*Inf.* XV]) or relatives of poets (Cavalcante [*Inf.* X]) show that not one of them is interested in the identity of Dante's guide, a fact that reflects directly on the poems left by these three practitioners, which are markedly without sign of Virgilian influence. Thus, not only is Virgil Dante's sole source for the "noble style," but Dante portrays himself as Virgil's sole follower among the recent and current poets of Italy. Perhaps more than any other claim for a literary identity, this sets him apart from them. For Dante's complicated relationship with his poetic precursors see Barolini (Baro.1984.1).

100–105. In a canto filled with passages that have called forth rivers of commentators' ink, perhaps none has resulted in so much interpretive excitement as this one. While our commentary always follows Petrocchi's text of the poem, even when we are in disagreement, we should say that

INFERNO II

OUTLINE

1–6	Dante, "alone" with Virgil, prepares for the journey
7–9	invocation (Muses, "lofty genius"); his worthy memory
10–36	Dante's uncertainty as to his qualifications
37–42	simile: a man unwilling to do what he has resolved
43–48	Virgil: Dante is a coward
49–74	Virgil tells of his encounter with Beatrice in Limbo
75–84	Virgil will lead Dante; why is Beatrice not fearful?
85–93	Beatrice's response: the saved are proof against hell
94–114	a lady in heaven (Mary), Lucy, and Beatrice all help
115–120	tears of Beatrice induce Virgil to begin at once
121–126	Virgil chides Dante for his cowardice
127–130	simile: flowers raised and opened by sun
131–135	Dante's renewed vigor; debt to Beatrice and to Virgil
136–140	Dante has again embraced his first resolve
141–142	the two again set out

INFERNO II

Lo giorno se n’andava, e l’aere bruno
toglieva li animai che sono in terra
da le fatiche loro; e io sol uno

m’apparecchiava a sostener la guerra
sì del cammino e sì de la pietate,
che ritrarrà la mente che non erra.

O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m’aiutate;
o mente che scrivesti ciò ch’io vidi,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.

Io cominciai: “Poeta che mi guidi,
guarda la mia virtù s’ell’ è possente,
prima ch’a l’alto passo tu mi fidi.

Tu dici che di Silvïo il parente,
corruttibile ancora, ad immortale
secolo andò, e fu sensibilmente.

Però, se l’avversario d’ogne male
cortese i fu, pensando l’alto effetto
ch’uscir dovea di lui, e ’l chi e ’l quale

non pare indegno ad omo d’intelletto;
ch’e’ fu de l’alma Roma e di suo impero
ne l’empireo ciel per padre eletto:

la quale e ’l quale, a voler dir lo vero,
fu stabilita per lo loco santo
u’ siede il successor del maggior Piero.

Per quest’ andata onde li dai tu vanto,
intese cose che furon cagione
di sua vittoria e del papale ammanto.

Day was departing and the darkened air
released the creatures of the earth
from their labor, and I, alone,

prepared to face the struggle—
of the way and of the pity of it—
which memory, unerring, shall retrace.

O Muses, O lofty genius, aid me now!
O memory, that set down what I saw,
here shall your worth be shown.

I began: 'Poet, you who guide me,
consider if my powers will suffice
before you trust me to this arduous passage.

'You tell of the father of Sylvius
that he, still subject to corruption, went
to the eternal world while in the flesh.

'But that the adversary of all evil showed
such favor to him, considering who and what he was,
and the high sequel that would spring from him,

'seems not unfitting to a man who understands.
For in the Empyrean he was chosen
to father holy Rome and her dominion,

'both of these established—if we would speak
the truth—to be the sacred precinct where
successors of great Peter have their throne.

'On this journey, for which you grant him glory,
he heard the words that prompted him
to victory and prepared the Papal mantle.

Andovvi poi lo Vas d'elezïone,
per recarne conforto a quella fede
30 ch'è principio a la via di salvazione.

Ma io, perché venirvi? o chi 'l concede?
Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono;
33 me degno a ciò né io né altri 'l crede.

Per che, se del venire io m'abbandono,
temo che la venuta non sia folle.
36 Se' savio; intendi me' ch'i' non ragiono."

E qual è quei che disvuol ciò che volle
e per novi pensier cangia proposta,
39 sì che dal cominciar tutto si tolle,

tal mi fec' ïo 'n quella oscura costa,
perché, pensando, consumai la 'mpresa
42 che fu nel cominciar cotanto tosta.

"S'i' ho ben la parola tua intesa,"
rispuose del magnanimo quell' ombra,
45 "l'anima tua è da viltade offesa;

la qual molte fïate l'omo ingombra
sì che d'onrata impresa lo rivolve,
48 come falso veder bestia quand' ombra.

Da questa tema a ciò che tu ti solve,
dirotti perch' io venni e quel ch'io 'ntesi
51 nel primo punto che di te mi dolve.

Io era tra color che son sospesi,
e donna mi chiamò beata e bella,
54 tal che di comandare io la richiesi.

Lucevan li occhi suoi più che la stella;
e cominciommi a dir soave e piana,
57 con angelica voce, in sua favella:

'Later, the Chosen Vessel went there
to bring back confirmation of our faith,
the first step in our journey to salvation.

'But why should I go there? who allows it?
I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul.
Neither I nor any think me fit for this.

'And so, if I commit myself to come,
I fear it may be madness. You are wise,
you understand what I cannot express.'

And as one who unwills what he has willed,
changing his intent on second thought
so that he quite gives over what he has begun,

such a man was I on that dark slope.
With too much thinking I had undone
the enterprise so quick in its inception.

'If I have rightly understood your words,'
replied the shade of that great soul,
'your spirit is assailed by cowardice,

'which many a time so weighs upon a man
it turns him back from noble enterprise,
the way a beast shies from a shadow.

'To free you from this fear
I'll tell you why I came and what I heard
when first I felt compassion for you.

'I was among the ones who are suspended
when a lady called me, so blessèd and so fair
that I implored her to command me.

'Her eyes shone brighter than the stars.
Gentle and clear, the words she spoke to me—
an angel's voice was in her speech:

Temer si dee di sole quelle cose
c'hanno potenza di fare altrui male;
90 de l'altre no, ché non son paurose.

I' son fatta da Dio, sua mercé, tale,
che la vostra miseria non mi tange,
93 né fiamma d'esto 'ncendio non m'assale.

Donna è gentil nel ciel che si compiange
di questo 'mpedimento ov' io ti mando,
96 sì che duro giudicio là sù frange.

Questa chiese Lucia in suo dimando
e disse: "Or ha bisogno il tuo fedele
99 di te, e io a te lo raccomando."

Lucia, nimica di ciascun crudele,
si mosse, e venne al loco dov' i' era,
102 che mi sedea con l'antica Rachele.

Disse: "Beatrice, loda di Dio vera,
ché non soccorri quei che t'amò tanto,
105 ch'uscì per te de la volgare schiera?

Non odi tu la pieta del suo pianto,
non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte
108 su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto?"

Al mondo non fur mai persone ratte
a far lor pro o a fuggir lor danno,
111 com' io, dopo cotai parole fatte,

venni qua giù del mio beato scanno,
fidandomi del tuo parlare onesto,
114 ch'onora te e quei ch'udito l'hanno.'

Poscia che m'ebbe ragionato questo,
li occhi lucenti lagrimando volse,
117 per che mi fece del venir più presto.

‘ “We should fear those things alone
that have the power to harm.
Nothing else is frightening.

‘ “I am made such by God’s grace
that your affliction does not touch,
nor can these fires assail me.

‘ “There is a gracious lady in Heaven so moved
by pity at his peril, she breaks stern judgment
there above and lets me send you to him.

‘ “She summoned Lucy and made this request:
«Your faithful one is now in need of you
and I commend him to your care.»

‘ “Lucy, the enemy of every cruelty,
arose and came to where I sat
at venerable Rachel’s side,

‘ “and said: «Beatrice, true praise of God,
why do you not help the one who loved you so
that for your sake he left the vulgar herd?

‘ “«Do you not hear the anguish in his tears?
Do you not see the death besetting him
on the swollen river where the sea cannot prevail?»

‘ “Never were men on earth so swift to seek
their good or to escape their harm as I,
after these words were spoken,

‘ “to descend here from my blessèd seat,
trusting to the noble speech that honors you
and those who have paid it heed.”

‘After she had said these things to me,
she turned away her eyes, now bright with tears,
making me more eager to set out.

E venni a te così com' ella volse:
d'inanzi a quella fiera ti levai
120 che del bel monte il corto andar ti tolse.

Dunque: che è? perché, perché restai,
perché tanta viltà nel core allette,
123 perché ardire e franchezza non hai,

poscia che tai tre donne benedette
curan di te ne la corte del cielo,
126 e 'l mio parlar tanto ben ti promette?"

Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo
chinati e chiusi, poi che 'l sol li 'mbianca,
129 si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo,

tal mi fec' io di mia virtude stanca,
e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse,
132 ch'i' cominciai come persona franca:

"Oh pietosa colei che mi soccorse!
e te cortese ch'ubidisti tosto
135 a le vere parole che ti porse!

Tu m'hai con disiderio il cor disposto
sì al venir con le parole tue,
138 ch'i' son tornato nel primo proposto.

Or va, ch'un sol volere è d'ambedue:
tu duca, tu segnore e tu maestro."
Così li dissi; e poi che mosso fue,
142 intrai per lo cammino alto e silvestro.

'And so I came to you just as she wished.
I saved you from the beast denying you
the short way to the mountain of delight.

'What then? Why, why do you delay?
Why do you let such cowardice rule your heart?
Why are you not more spirited and sure,

'when three such blessèd ladies
care for you in Heaven's court
and my words promise so much good?'

As little flowers, bent and closed
with chill of night, when the sun
lights them, stand all open on their stems,

such, in my failing strength, did I become.
And so much courage poured into my heart
that I began, as one made resolute:

'O how compassionate was she to help me,
how courteous were you, so ready to obey
the truthful words she spoke to you!

'Your words have made my heart
so eager for the journey
that I've returned to my first intent.

'Set out then, for one will prompts us both.
You are my leader, you my lord and master,'
I said to him, and when he moved ahead
I entered on the deep and savage way.

1–6. Against the common opinion (as it exists even today, most recently exhibited by Merc.1998.1) that the first two cantos perform separate functions (e.g., I = prologue to the poem as a whole, II = prologue to the first *cantica*), Wilkins (Wilk.1926.1) argues, on the basis of discussion of the defining characteristics of prologues found in the *Epistle to Cangrande* (*Epist.* XIII.43–48), that Cantos I and II form a unitary prologue to the entire poem as well as to its first *cantica* (or "canticle"). This reader finds his comments just and convincing. In actuality, all three *cantiche* begin with two-canto-long prologues containing an invocation, some narrated action, and presentation of details that prepare the reader for what is to follow further along in the poem.

For the structural parallels that also tend to merge the two cantos into a single entity see Holl.1990.2, p. 97:

Inferno I	*Inferno* II
1–27 Dante's peril	1–42 Dante's uncertainty
simile (22–27)	*simile* (37–40)
28–60 three beasts	43–126 three blessed ladies
simile (55–58)	*simile* (127–130)
61–136 Virgil's assurances	127–142 Dante's will firmed

1–3. The precise Virgilian text that lies behind Dante's generically "Virgilian" opening flourish is debated. (Major candidates include *Aen.* III.147, *Aen.* IV.522–528, *Aen.* VIII.26–27, *Aen.* IX.224–225, *Georg.* I.427–428. See discussion in Mazz.1967.1, pp. 165–66.) These three lines, as has often been noted, have a sad eloquence that establishes a mode of writing to which the poet will return when he considers the Virgilian "tears of things" in the lives of some of his characters.

3. The protagonist, about to descend into hell, is described, perhaps surprisingly, since he is in the company of Virgil, as being alone ("sol uno"). But see *Conv.* IV.xxvi.9, where Dante describes Aeneas, about to begin his descent *ad inferos*, similarly as being "alone": ". . . when Aeneas prepared, *alone* with the Sibyl [*solo* con Sibilla], to enter the underworld." In Dante's view, it would seem that the condition of a mortal soul, about to enter the underworld, is one of loneliness, even though it is accompanied by a shade. See Holl.1993.1, p. 256.

what he was," v. 18—see Mazzoni, pp. 192–96). The sense, however, may be fairly straightforward: it is not surprising that God should have chosen Aeneas to found Rome, with its profound impact on human history, both imperial and ecclesiastical, since Aeneas (the "who" of the verse) was both the founder of a royal line (ancestor of Julius Caesar through Ascanius) and "divine" (the "what," since he was the son of a goddess, Venus).

Dante uses the word "cortese" (courteous, i.e., as in the favoring generosity of a lord or lady) in v. 17 in a way that theologizes its usual courtly context. For the tradition of the concept as it comes into Dante see Crim.1993.1.

20–21. The adjective *alma* (here translated as "holy") has had various interpretations in the commentary tradition, e.g., "exalted" (*eccelsa:* Boccaccio), "lofty" (*alta:* Buti), "nurturing" (*alma:* Landino), "holy" (*sancta:* Benvenuto). Citing Paget Toynbee, Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1), p. 198, makes a strong argument for the last of these. Our translation reflects his view. And this formulation knits up these two tercets into a single meaning: Aeneas was chosen by God to be the founder of imperial *and* ecclesiastical Rome. Such a view disturbs those who believe that Dante, when he began the *Comedy*, was still a Guelph (i.e., a supporter of the papacy) in his political attitudes and not a Ghibelline (a supporter of the empire). A reading of the fourth book of *Convivio* (Mazzoni [Mazz.1967.1], pp. 216–20), demonstrates the close correspondence between what Dante says here and what he had said in *Convivio* IV, iv–v. There he had already made a decisive shift toward recognizing the importance of what we would call "secular Rome." Dante, as the prophecy of the *veltro* (depending on one's interpretation of it) may already have demonstrated, now believes in the divine origin and mission of the empire. See note to *Inf.* I.100–105.

22–24. See Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1), pp. 198–220, for a thorough review of this tercet, made problematic not because its words or the sense of these words is difficult, but because what it says is assumed by many commentators to be premature in its championing of the empire, a position Dante is supposed to have embraced only later. See the preceding note. For a recent attempt to describe the political aspect of the poem see Hollander (Holl.2000.1), the section, in the discussion devoted to the *Commedia*, entitled "La politica."

26. Aeneas understood things from what was revealed to him in the underworld, most notably by his father, Anchises (see Mazz.1967.1, p. 222).

56–57. Virgil describes Beatrice's speech as being *soave e piana* (gentle and clear). She will, in turn, describe his speech as *parola ornata* (polished words—at v. 67). The two adjectives, *piana* and *ornata*, may remind us of a major distinction, found in medieval categorizations of rhetorical styles, between the plain, or low, style, and the ornate, or high. Benvenuto, commenting on this passage, was the first to point this out, glossing "soave e piana" as follows: "divine speech is sweet and humble, not elevated and proud, as is that of Virgil and the poets." Thus Virgil's description of Beatrice's words corresponds antithetically to hers of his; her speech represents the sublimely humble style valorized by the *Comedy*, while his recalls the high style that marked pagan eloquence (the observation is drawn from Holl.1990.2, p. 107, where there are references to previous discussions in Auer.1958.1, pp. 65–66; Mazz.1979.1, pp. 157–58).

58. Beatrice's first words, which Daniello (commentary to this verse) compared to Juno's attempt to win over Aeolus at *Aeneid* I.66–67, offer a striking example of *captatio benevolentiae*, the rhetorical device of gaining favor with one's audience. They will be effective enough in gaining Virgil's goodwill. And, despite Virgil's characterization of her speech, in v. 56, as being "gentle and clear," it is also unmistakably lofty in its rhetorical reach.

61. For a consideration of the fullest implications of this verse see Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1), pp. 256–68. According to him, the literal sense is that Dante is not a friend to Fortune, not that Fortune has forsaken *him*. The upshot of these readings is that Beatrice makes Dante her friend in true spiritual friendship, denying that he is "friendly" to Fortune.

62–64. Words familiar from the first canto come back into play here: *diserta piaggia* (I.29), *cammin* (I.1), *paura* (I.53), *smarrito* (I.3). This is not the last time we will look back to the protagonist's desperate condition evident at the beginning of the poem.

67. See Holl.1990.2, p. 118, for discussion of the undercutting of Virgil's "ornate speech" (*parola ornata*) when it is seen as linked to Jason's *parole ornate* (*Inf.* XVIII.91), the deceptive rhetoric by which he seduces women.

74. Beatrice's promise to speak well of Virgil to God has drawn some skeptical response, e.g., Castelvetro on this verse: "Questo che monta a

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