# The Portable Dante

Translated, Edited and with an Introduction and Notes by MARK MUSA

PENGUIN BOOKS

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# **CONTENTS**

**Editor's Introduction** 

Translator's Note

THE DIVINE COMEDY

Inferno

**Purgatory** 

**Paradise** 

**VITA NUOVA** 

Selected Bibliography

#### INTRODUCTION

#### LIFE

Dante Alighieri was Born in Florence in May 1265 in the district of San Martino, the son of Alighiero di Bellincione d'Alighiero. His mother died when he was young; his father, whom he seems to avoid mentioning as much as possible, remarried and produced two more children. The Alighieri family may be considered noble by reason of the titles and dignities bestowed upon its members, although by Dante's time it seems to have been reduced to modest economic and social circumstances. According to Dante himself, the family descended from the noble seed of the Roman founders of the city (*Inferno* XV. 73-78). This claim remains largely unsubstantiated, as nothing is known of Dante's ancestors before his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, who was knighted by Emperor Conrad III and died, as Dante tells us, during the Second Crusade, about 1147 (*Paradiso* XV. 139-148).

Like most of the city's lesser nobility and artisans, Dante's family was affiliated with the Guelf party, as opposed to the Ghibellines, whose adherents tended to belong to the feudal aristocracy. These two parties came into Italy from Germany, and their names represent italianized forms of those attached to the two quarreling houses of Germany, Welf and Waiblingen. In Italy the parties were at first identified with broad allegiances: to papal authority for the Guelfs, and to imperial authority in the case of the Ghibellines. Eventually, however, this church-empire distinction disappeared, and the two parties became less clearly defined in outlook and purpose. The local connotations of the parties became much more important as their issues and activities became tied to geographical situation, rivalries of neighborhoods in the same city, family feuds, and private interests. Thus the Guelfs and Ghibellines of Florence were factions peculiar to that region alone.

As far as one can tell from his writings, Dante's recollections of family life were pleasant ones. It is fairly certain that he received a careful education, although little of it is known precisely. He may have

attended the Franciscan lower schools and, later, their schools of philosophy. The family's modest social standing did not prevent him from pursuing his studies, nor was he hindered in his effort to lead the life of a gentleman. His writings indicate that he was familiar with the ways of the country as well as with city life. Dante probably studied rhetoric with the scholar and statesman Brunetto Latini (ca. 1220-1294), from whom he says that he learned "how man makes himself eternal" (*Inferno* XV. 85), during a period when he was driven by a desire to master the techniques of style. It seems that Brunetto fed his keenness for study and learning, and this may account for a trip in about 1287 to Bologna, where Dante elected to pursue his study of rhetoric in the highly renowned school there.

Dante tells us that as a young man he taught himself the art of writing verse (*Vita nuova* III. 9). In time he became acquainted with the bestknown troubadours of Florence, corresponding with them and circulating his own love lyrics. For the youthful Dante, writing poetry gradually became an important occupation, nourished by his sincere love for art and learning, and his interest in the nature of genuine love. Equally significant at this time was his friendship with the wealthy, aristocratic poet Guido Cavalcanti (ca. 1255-1300). Guido exerted a strong influence on his early poetic endeavors. This period was also marked by the death of Dante's father (ca. 1283), and by his marriage to Gemma, a gentlewoman of the Donati family. The marriage had been arranged by Dante's father in 1277, well before his death. Gemma and Dante had two sons, Pietro and Jacopo, and at least one daughter. (There exist the names of two daughters, Antonia and Beatrice, but they could refer to the same person, the second, Beatrice, being a monastic name.) Dante's marriage and children seem to have had little influence on him as a poet; nowhere in his works does he make direct reference to his wife.

Besides his associations with Guido Cavalcanti and Brunetto Latini, Dante knew well the notary Lapo Gianni and became acquainted later on with the youthful Cino da Pistoia. Both of these men were poets. Dante was also on friendly terms with the musician Casella (*Purgatorio* II. 76-114), about whom there exists little information. The artists Oderisi da Gubbio and Giotto may also have been among his acquaintances. A comrade chosen with far less discrimination, perhaps, was Forese Donati (*Purgatorio* XXIII), a kinsman of Dante's wife and a regular rogue, with whom Dante had an exchange of reproaches and coarse insults in sonnet form. The exchange may have begun only as a joke in a moment of good humor.

Along with Guido, Dante refined and developed his poetic skill in Latin and began to distinguish himself in his art from the other writers of the time. In their poetry Dante and Guido presented their ideas on the nature of love and its ability to contribute to the inner perfection of man. Guido, however, was more interested in natural philosophy than was Dante, who, because of his more artistic orientation, favored the study

and emulation of the Latin poets. He particularly admired Virgil, from whom he learned so much about matters of style. Though Dante was deeply influenced in his writing by the example of his friend Guido, he eventually responded to his own artistic temperament, to his study of Virgil, and to the example provided by a more recent poetic master, Guido Guinizzelli (ca. 1230-1276). The result was a shift to composition in the vernacular, a poetic innovation that is praised by Bonagiunta Orbicianni in the *Purgatorio* (XXIV. 49-62).

Dante's life and writings were also influenced by his acquaintance with a noble Florentine woman of outstanding grace and beauty. He had named her among the sixty fairest women of Florence, but it was not until later that the poet truly "discovered" her. This revelation proved to be an extremely powerful force in his artistic development. According to the testimony of Boccaccio and others, the woman, called Bice, was the daughter of Folco Portinari of Florence. She later became the wife of the banker Simone de' Bardi. Dante called her Beatrice, "the bringer of blessings," the one who brought bliss to all who looked upon her.

Dante claims to have met Beatrice for the first time when he was nine years old. Theirs was not an easy relationship, for Beatrice took offense at the attention he paid other women. The resulting rebuff caused Dante great sorrow. His emotional attachment to Beatrice brought him to idealize her more and more as the guide of his thoughts and feelings, as the one who would lead him toward the inner perfection that is the ideal of every noble mind. In his poems Dante praises his lady as a model of virtue and courtesy, a miraculous gift given to earth by God to ennoble and enrich all those who appreciated her qualities. Such an exalted view of this woman was bound to carry with it the fear that she would not remain long in this life; in fact, premature death did befall her. Beatrice's father died first, and then she died on June 8, 1290. Dante was overcome with grief at his loss. There followed a period of contemplating Beatrice's significance after her death. After the first anniversary of her death, another woman, who is never mentioned by name, succeeded in winning Dante's affection for a brief time. However, Beatrice soon came vividly to mind again, and while feeling guilt and remorse for having neglected the memory of her, Dante reaffirmed his fidelity to her. This experience prompted him to gather together all the poems he had written in her honor, in an attempt to celebrate her virtue. This collection, to which Dante added a commentary on the meaning and occasion of each poem, became the little volume that he called the Vita nuova (New Life), about which I shall have more to say later on in this essay.

During all of this time Dante's passion for study had continued unabated. His vision had been broadened by the reading of Boethius and Cicero. The dissemination of Aristotle's works on physical and metaphysical subjects brought recognition of the need to harmonize the ideas of the great guide of human reason with the truths and teachings of the faith. Dante, by now a grown man, was attracted to many of the new

schools and universities that were operating under the tutelage of the new religious orders. Among the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians were many eminent teachers and scholars. In this brisk intellectual environment of around 1290 Dante applied his energies to philosophy with such fervor that "in a short time, perhaps thirty months," he began "to be so keenly aware of her sweetness that the love of her drove away and destroyed every other thought" (Convivio II. 2.7). Dante read so much, it seems, that his eyes were weakened considerably because of it. Among Christian scholars and theologians, he certainly read Saint Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Saint Augustine, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Saint Bonaventura, Saint Bernard, and Peter Lombard. In the area of history he took up Livy and Paulus Orosius, among others. Evidence of this extensive course of study found its way into his poetry as he became interested in the glorification of philosophy as mistress of the mind. Dante also treated questions of moral philosophy, such as nobility and courtship, in a number of beautifully composed *canzoni*, or odes. Nevertheless, in spite of this ardent pursuit of philosophical matters he retained his view of love as the most important force behind noble actions and lofty endeavors. To his appreciation of the Latin poets he added an admiration for the Provençal troubadours, and this encouraged him to attempt new poetic techniques that would serve him well in his later writings.

Along with his spiritual and intellectual activities Dante engaged in civic enterprises as well. In 1289 he had fought on the Guelf side at the battle of Campaldino. In 1295 he began an active public life, and within a few years he became an important figure in Florentine politics. He had joined the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries in order to participate in government (except for certain offices, government was closed to those without guild affiliation), and there is evidence that he served as a member of the People's Council of the Commune of Florence (1295), on the Council for Election of the Priors of the City (1295), and on the Council of the Hundred (1296), a body that dealt with finance and other important civic matters.

This was a time of political ferment and instability. Between 1215 and 1278 the Guelfs and Ghibellines of Florence had engaged in a bitter struggle for power, with numerous reversals of fortune for both sides, countless plots and conspiracies, and frequent expulsion orders issued against whoever was on the losing side. The Guelfs finally prevailed. Around 1300, however, there occurred a split in the Guelf party into two very hostile factions: the Blacks and the Whites. The Blacks, staunch Guelfs, remained in control of the commune. The Whites eventually associated themselves with the Ghibellines. Dante, meanwhile, fought to preserve the independence of Florence, and repeatedly opposed the schemes of Pope Boniface VIII, who wanted to place Florence and all of Tuscany under the control of the Church. Boniface attempted to take advantage of the unrest in the city and undermine his opponents by promising protection to those who displayed some sympathy with his

cause. He met with firm opposition from the six priors (magistrates) of Florence, of whom Dante was one, in the summer of 1300. To show his displeasure Boniface moved to excommunicate the members of the priorate. Dante was spared this fate only because his term of office was soon due to expire. Obviously, none of this served to improve Dante's opinion of the pontiff. He made no secret of his opposition to the pope's ambitious policy; he regarded Boniface as an enemy of peace.

In 1301 Boniface summoned Charles of Valois and his army to Italy in an attempt to neutralize anti-Church forces in Florence. It was at this time, as Charles approached the city, that Dante was sent as one of three envoys on behalf of the commune to the pope, in order to request a change in papal policy toward the city and to protest the intrigues of the Blacks. After the initial talks the other envoys were dismissed, but Dante was retained. During his absence Charles of Valois entered Florence, and the Blacks staged a revolution and gained complete control of the commune. Dante found himself sentenced to exile on trumped-up charges of graft, embezzlement, opposition to the pope and his forces, disturbance of the peace of Florence, and a number of other transgressions. Dante always felt that his difficulties had been brought on by the trickery of Boniface, and this only aggravated his already pronounced hatred for the pontiff and his methods. When Dante failed to appear to answer the charges against him, and when he did not pay the fine levied against him for his "crimes," a second sentence was imposed: should he ever return to the commune, he would be seized and burned alive. There is no evidence that Dante saw his beloved Florence again.

In 1302, shortly after his banishment, Dante conspired with his fellow exiles, most of them Whites, to regain admission to Florence. However, disapproving of their machinations and possibly in danger of his life because of their violence, he abandoned them and set off on his own to lead the life of an exiled courtier. It appears that he first took refuge with the Scala family at Verona. He is believed to have visited the university at Bologna, where he had been known since 1287. This visit probably occurred after the death in 1304 of his generous patron, Bartolommeo della Scala. It is generally thought that Dante traveled extensively in Italy, particularly in the north. He may have been in Padua in 1306. During that same year he appeared in Lunigiana with the Malaspina family, and it was probably then that he went to the mountains of Casentino, on the upper Arno. It is also thought that he went to Paris sometime between 1307 and 1309.

In 1310 Henry VII of Luxembourg, Holy Roman emperor from 1312 to 1313, entered Italy in an effort to reunite Church and state, restore order, and force various rebellious cities to submit to his authority. His coming caused a great deal of excitement and conflict. Florence generally opposed him, but Dante, who attributed the woes of Florence and all of Italy to the absence of imperial guidance, welcomed Henry as a savior. Dante's state of great exaltation is documented in three letters that

he wrote in 1310 and 1311. However, Henry's invasion proved fruitless; he met opposition from all sides, including Pope Clement V, who had sent for him in the first place. Just as the situation for Henry and his supporters began to improve, the emperor died near Siena in 1313. With him went Dante's every hope of restoring himself to an honorable position in his city. Thus in 1314 he took shelter with the Ghibelline captain Can Grande della Scala in Verona.

Dante did not totally abandon his quest to return to his native city. He wrote letters to individual members of the government, attempting to appease those who ruled. He even sent a *canzone* to the city of Florence, praising her love for justice and asking that she work with her citizens on his behalf. Dante strove to be acceptable to the Florentines, but for many reasons the public associated him with the Ghibellines; no matter how Dante tried to free himself of suspicion, he did not succeed. He also tried to appeal to them on the grounds of his poetic ability, and sought to show that if he had cultivated poetry in the vernacular it was not for lack of skill or study. He was compelled to display his love for learning and his great respect for philosophy and matters having to do with civic education. He therefore composed two treatises (both left incomplete), the *De vulgari eloquentia* (*On Eloquence in the Vernacular*) and the Convivio (Banquet), sometime between 1304 and 1307. In them can be seen his longing to reestablish himself in the good graces of his city and to find consolation for his wretchedness in the study of matters useful to man's well-being and his art. Thus in the ten years or so between the Vita nuova and the Commedia (Divine Comedy), Dante's studies were essentially of a philosophical and artistic nature. The *Convivio* is often acknowledged as the key to his philosophical researches, while the *De vulgari eloquentia* is viewed as the key to his artistic inquiries.

Though he desperately hoped to restore his reputation as a Florentine and resume his life in the city that had turned against him, Dante refused to compromise his principles and turned down more than one opportunity to return to Florence, because such opportunities involved answering the false charges made against him. Such unwillingness to dishonor himself brought him yet another sentence of death, this one extending to his sons as well.

The last years of the poet's life were spent at Ravenna, where he was offered asylum by Guido Nevella da Polenta, the nephew of the famous Francesca da Rimini, the only woman sinner who actually speaks in the *Inferno*. These years seem to have been serene ones. In Ravenna he was greatly esteemed, and he enjoyed a very pleasant social life and an eager following of pupils, for he was already well known for his lyrics, and especially the *Convivio*, *Inferno*, and *Purgatorio*. Shortly before his death he was sent by Guido on a mission to Venice. Although Florence still rejected him, other cities very much valued his presence. Dante's friendship with Can Grande della Scala remained intact, and Dante placed great store in him; it is to him that he dedicated the *Paradiso*.

Ravenna was Dante's home until his death on September 13 or 14, 1321.

#### WORKS

The *Vita nuova*, one of Dante's earliest works, is a combination of prose and poetry (thirty-one poems accompanied by a prose text). It is one of the first important examples of Italian literary prose and probably the first work of fiction that has come down to us in which the prose serves the purpose not only of offering a continuous narrative but also of explaining the occasion for the composition of each of the poems included. The originality of the *Vita nuova* consists of the functional relationship between the poetry and the prose.

In recent years the critics of the *Divine Comedy* have come to see more clearly the necessity of distinguishing between Dante the poet, the historical figure who wrote the poem in his own voice, and Dante the pilgrim, who is the poet's creation and who moves in a world of the poet's invention. In the case of the *Vita nuova* it is more difficult to distinguish between Dante the poet and Dante the lover, because in this book the lover, the protagonist, is himself a poet. More important, however, is the fact that the events of the *Vita nuova*, unlike those of the Divine Comedy, are surely not to be taken as pure fiction, and the protagonist himself is no fictional character: he is the historical character Dante at an earlier age. But we must attempt, just as we must in the case of any first-person novel, to distinguish between the point of view of the one who has already lived through the experiences recorded and has had time to reflect upon them in retrospect, and the point of view of the one undergoing the experiences at the time. What we have in the *Vita nuova* is a more mature Dante, reevoking his youthful experiences in a way that points up the folly of his younger self.

Also significant is the chronological relationship between the composition of the poems and that of the prose narrative, which reflects the way in which the author has adapted to a new purpose some of his earlier writings. In general scholars agree that when Dante, sometime between 1292 (that is, two years after the death of Beatrice) and 1300, composed the *Vita nuova*, most, if not all, of the poems that were to appear in the text had already been written. The architecture of the work, as has been said, consists of selected poems arranged in a certain order, with bridges of prose that serve primarily a narrative function: to describe those events in the life of the protagonist that supposedly inspired the poems included in the text. By giving the poems a narrative background, Dante was able to make their meaning clearer or even to change their original meaning or purpose.

For example, though the beauty of the first *canzone* in the book,

Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore ("Ladies who have intelligence of love") (chapter XIX), is independent of its position in the work, the poem owes entirely to the preceding narrative its dramatic significance as the proclamation of a totally new attitude adopted by the young poet-lover at this time in the story. This is also true, though from a different point of view, of what is probably the most famous sonnet in the *Vita nuova*, *Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare* ("Such sweet decorum and such gentle grace") (chapter XXVI).

Just how much of the narrative prose is fiction we shall never know. We can never be sure that a given poem actually arose from the circumstances related in the prose preceding it. A few critics believe that all of the events of the narrative reflect biographical truth; most, fortunately, are more skeptical. But it goes without saying that to enjoy reading the *Vita nuova* we must suspend our skepticism and accept as "true" the events of the narrative. For only by doing so can we perceive the significance that Dante attributed to his poems by placing them where he did. And most critics of the *Vita nuova* seem to be agreed that in interpreting this work as a piece of literature, in seeking to find its message, the reader must try to forget the biographical fact that any given poem may have been written before Dante could know the use he would make of it later on.

In the opening chapter or preface (for it is so short) of his little book the author states that his purpose is to copy from his "book of memory" only those past experiences that belong to the period beginning his "new life"—a life made new by the poet's first meeting with Beatrice and the God of Love, who together with the poet-protagonist are the three main characters in the story. And by the end of chapter II all of the motifs that are important for the story that is about to unfold step by step have been introduced.

The first word of the opening sentence is "Nine": "Nine times already since my birth the heaven of light had circled back to almost the same point, when there appeared before my eyes the now glorious lady of my mind, who was called Beatrice even by those who did not know what her name was." The number nine will be repeated twice more in the next sentence (and it will appear another twenty times before the book comes to an end). In this opening sentence the reader not only finds a reference to the number nine of symbolic significance, but he also sees the emphasis on mathematical precision that will appear at frequent intervals throughout the *Vita nuova*.

In the opening sentence also the child Beatrice is presented as already enjoying the veneration of the people of her city, including strangers who did not know her name. With the words "the now glorious lady of my mind" (the first of two time shifts, in which the figure of the living Beatrice at a given moment is described in such a way as to remind us of Beatrice dead) the theme of death is delicately foreshadowed at the beginning of the story. As for the figure of Beatrice, when she appears

for the first time in this chapter she wears a garment of blood-red color—the same color as her shroud will be in the next chapter.

In the next three sentences the three main spirits are introduced: the "vital" (in the heart), the "animal" (in the brain), and the "natural" (in the liver). They rule the body of the nine-year-old protagonist, and they speak in Latin, as will the God of Love in the chapter that follows (and once again later on). The words of the first spirit describing Beatrice anticipate the first coming of Love in the next chapter and suggest something of the same mood of terror. The words of the second spirit suggest rapturous bliss to come (that bliss rhapsodically described in chapter XI), while in the words of the third spirit there is the first of the many references to tears to be found in the *Vita nuova*. It is the spirit of the liver that weeps. It is only after this reference to the organ of digestion that Love is mentioned. He is mentioned first of all as a ruler, but we learn immediately that much of his power is derived from the protagonist's imagination—this faculty of which there will be so many reminders in the form of visions throughout the book.

We are also told that Love's power was restricted by reason, and later in the book the relation between Love and reason becomes an important problem. Two more themes are posited in this beginning chapter, to be woven into the narrative: the godlike nature of Beatrice and the strong "praise of the lady" motif. Both sound throughout the chapter as the protagonist's admiration for Beatrice keeps growing during the nine years after her first appearance.

Thus the opening chapter prepares for the rest of the book not only in the obvious way of presenting a background situation, an established continuity out of which single events will emerge in time, but also by setting in motion certain forces that will propel the *Vita nuova* forward—forces with which Dante's reader will gradually become more and more familiar.

In chapter XLII, the final chapter of the *Vita nuova*, the poet expresses his dissatisfaction with his work: "After I wrote this sonnet there appeared to me a miraculous vision in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this blesséd one until I should be capable of writing about her in a nobler way." As the result of a final vision, which is not revealed to the reader, he decides to stop writing about Beatrice until he can do so more worthily. The preceding vision he had in the course of the story had made him decide to keep on writing; this one made him decide to stop. If the main action of the book is to be seen, as some critics believe, as the development of Dante's love from his preoccupation with his own feelings to his enjoyment of Beatrice's excellence and, finally, to his exclusive concern with her heavenly attributes and with spiritual matters, then this action, and the *Vita nuova* itself, ends in an important sense in failure.

To understand the message of the book, to understand how it succeeds through failure, we must go back in time and imagine the poet Dante, somewhere between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-five, having already glimpsed the possibility of what was to be his terrible and grandiose masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*. We must imagine him rereading the love poems of his earlier years and feeling shame for a number of them. He would have come to view Beatrice as she was destined to appear in the *Divine Comedy*, and indeed as she does appear briefly in the *Vita nuova*, specifically in that essay (chapter XXIXM) on the miraculous quality of the number nine (the square of the number three, the symbol of the Blessed Trinity)—that is, as an agent of divine salvation.

Having arrived at this point, he would have chosen from among his earlier love poems many that exhibit his younger self at his worst, in order to offer a warning example to other young lovers and especially to other love poets. This would imply on Dante's part, as he is approaching the midmost part of life (the "mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" of the Divine Comedy), a criticism of most of the love poetry in Italian literature, for which his century was famous, and also that for which Provençal poetry was famous in the preceding century. One might even say that the *Vita nuova* is a cruel book; cruel, that is, in the treatment of the human type represented by the protagonist. In the picture of the lover there is offered a condemnation of the vice of emotional self-indulgence and an exposure of its destructive effects on a man's integrity. The "tender feelings" that move the lover to hope or despair, to rejoice or to grieve (and perhaps even to enjoy his grief), spring from his vulnerability and instability and self-love; however idealistically inspired, these feelings cannot, except spasmodically, lead him ahead and above as long as he continues to be at their mercy. In short, he must always fall back into the helplessness of his selfcenteredness. The man who would realize a man's destiny must ruthlessly cut out of his heart the canker at its center, the canker that the heart instinctively tends to cultivate. This is, I am convinced, the main message of the *Vita nuova*. And the consistent, uncompromising indictment it levels has no parallel in the literature of Dante's time. But of course the *Vita nuova* offers more than a picture of the misguided lover: there is also the glory of Beatrice and the slowly increasing ability of the lover to understand it, although he must nevertheless confess at the end that he has not truly succeeded.

Both in the treatment of the lover and in that of Beatrice, Dante has gone far beyond what he found at hand in the love poetry of the troubadours and their followers. He has taken up two of their preoccupations (one might almost say obsessions) and developed each of them in a most original way: the lover's glorification of his own feelings, and his glorification of the beloved. Of the first he has made a caricature. Unlike his friend Guido Cavalcanti, also highly critical of the havoc wrought by the emotions within a man's soul, who makes of the distraught lover a macabre portrait of doom, Dante has presented his

protagonist mainly as an object of derision.

As to the glorification of the lady, all critics of the *Vita nuova* admit that Dante has carried this idealization to a degree never before reached by any poet, and one that no poet after him will ever quite attempt to reach. However blurred may be the lover's vision of the gracious, pure, feminine Beatrice, Dante the poet, in chapter XXIX, probes to the essence of her being and presents the coldness of her sublimity. Thus the tender foolishness of the lover is intensified by contrast with the icy perfection of the beloved.

With a few exceptions, Dante's lyrical poems (and not only those contained in the *Vita nuova*) are inferior as works of art to those of Cavalcanti and Guinizelli, or, for that matter, to those of Bernart de Ventadorn and Arnaut Daniel. The greatness of the *Vita nuova* lies not in the poems but in the purpose that Dante made them serve. Certainly the book is the most original form of recantation in medieval literature—a recantation that takes the form of a reenactment, seen from a new perspective, of the sin recanted.

The *Convivio*, or *Banquet*, which Dante wrote in Italian sometime between 1304 and 1308, is an unfinished piece of work (it would be difficult to call it a work of art). His purpose in writing it is explained in the opening sentence, which is a quotation from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire to know." Dante invites his reader to a feast consisting of fourteen courses (only three were completed), of which the "meat" of each is a *canzone* concerning love and virtue, while the "bread" is the exposition of it. Dante invites to his *Banquet* all those worthy people who, because of public duties, family responsibilities, and the like, have not been introduced to the science of philosophy. It is the laymen whom Dante invites to his feast, for it is through philosophy, he believes, that they can attain the temporal goal of happiness.

While the *Vita nuova* is Dante's monument to his first love, the lady Beatrice, the *Convivio* is a monument to his "second love," the lady Philosophy. That the lady who offers to console Dante a year after the death of Beatrice in the *Vita nuova* is that same lady Philosophy of the *Convivio* is revealed in book II, chapter II.

To begin with, then, let me say that the star of Venus had already revolved twice in that circle of hers that makes her appear at evening or in the morning, according to the two different periods, since the passing away of that blessed Beatrice who dwells in heaven with the angels and on earth with my soul, when that gentle lady, of whom I made mention at the end of the *Vita nuova*, first appeared to my eyes, accompanied by love, and occupied a place in my mind.

What attracted the poet-protagonist to this lady was her offer of consolation. In the *Vita nuova* his love for the lady at the window lasts

for a short time, and he refers to this love as "the adversary of reason" and "most base," but in the *Convivio* he calls this love "most noble." It should be remembered, however, that Philosophy in the *Vita nuova* tries to make the young protagonist forget the fact that he has lost Beatrice — something of this earth (such as Philosophy) cannot replace the love of Beatrice. After the vision in chapter XXXIX of the *Vita nuova*, after grasping the true significance of his lady, he returns to Beatrice and vows to never again stray. In doing this he is to be thought of not as rejecting Philosophy, but rather as rejecting the ideal of replacing Beatrice with Philosophy. Never in the *Convivio* does he consider such a replacement.

Here Dante exalts learning and the use of reason to the highest, for only through knowledge can man hope to attain virtue and God. The *Convivio* seems to be the connecting link between the *Vita nuova* and the *Divine Comedy*, since a love that at first has earthly associations turns out to have religious significance. Furthermore, just as Dante praises reason in this work, we know that in the *Divine Comedy*, reason in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom is man's sole guide on earth, except for the intervention of divine grace.

One might say that the *Convivio* is the philosophical counterpart of the *Vita nuova*. Even from a quick reading of the *canzone* that opens book II, "*Voi che' ntendendo* " ("You who by understanding"), the reader easily sees that, given the appropriate prose background, it might well have fitted into the *Vita nuova*. But when Dante begins the exposition of this ode it is "the sail of reason" that bears him on.

In the preamble to the *Convivio* Dante suggests reform in his declaring the vernacular suitable for ethical subjects as well as amorous ones. He was a leader in considering the vernacular a potential medium for all forms of expression, and his impassioned defense and praise of it manifest his awareness of its value in scientific interpretation as he comments at length on its uses.

He tells his reader that writings should be expounded in four senses. The first is the literal level. The second is the allegorical; for example, when Ovid tells his reader that Orpheus moved both animals and stones with his music he is signifying the power of eloquence over what is not rational. In this case the literal level of the story or poem need not be true. If it is not true, it is known as the allegory of poets; if the literal level is taken to be the truth, it is known as the allegory of theologians, because the literal level of the Scriptures was considered to be true. The third is the moral level, and this has a didactic purpose: when Christ took only three of his disciples with him on the occasion of the Transfiguration, it was another way of saying that for those things that are most secret we should have little company. The fourth sense is the anagogical, as when Scripture signifies certain spiritual or mystical truths. When we read, for example, that the people of Israel came out of Egypt and that Judea was made free, we must take this to be literally true, but the statement also signifies the spiritual truth that when a soul

turns away from sin it becomes holy and free.

The literal level of a writing must always be exposed first, for it is impossible to delve into the "form" of anything without first preparing the "subject" upon which the form is to be stamped—you must prepare the wood before you build the table. Dante, in book II, chapter I of the *Convivio*, proposes to expound the literal level of his *canzone* first and then the allegorical, bringing into play the other levels or senses when it seems appropriate. There are very few passages in Dante's work where all four senses are at work; in fact, of the three *canzoni* expounded in the *Convivio* he manages to treat only the first two poems on two levels, while the third he discusses only on the literal level. And when Dante talks about the literal sense he means, of course, not the words but what the words mean. We must bear in mind that the literal sense contains all the other meanings.

In the third book Dante expounds the *canzone "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona"* ("Love that converses with me in my mind"), which Casella in the *Divine Comedy* will sing to the newly arrived souls on the shores of Purgatory. In discussing the literal level of this ode he gives most of his attention to the meaning of *amor* (love).

Dante begins the fourth book, which treats the third and final *canzone*, "*Le dolci rime d'amor ch'i'solìa* " ("Those sweet rhymes of love that I was wont"), by stressing the fact that. his love of philosophy has led him to love all those who pursue the truth and despise those who follow error. He also tells us in chapter 1 of this book that in order to have the utmost clarity he will discuss the poem only on the literal level. The lady involved, however, is still Philosophy.

Critics have proposed a number of theories on why Dante completed only four of the projected fourteen books of the *Convivio*. Thomas Bergin goes as far as to suggest that the *Convivio* might be thought of as the *selva oscura* (dark wood) of the *Divine Comedy*, from which the poet's lady, Beatrice, in a more graceful and harmonious work of art, felt obliged to rescue her poet-lover. I tend to agree with Rocco Montano, who suspects that it was some kind of personal crisis or "conversion" that made Dante stop working on this project. Montano assigns such a conversion and the writing of the *Divine Comedy* to the insight that resulted from Dante the poet's great disappointment at the failure of Henry VII's expedition into Italy. In any case, whatever Dante's reason for cutting short his work on the *Convivio*, whether it was personal or political, if this meant he could get on with the *Divine Comedy* and complete his masterpiece, we should be grateful that he did.

In all his works Dante shows his concern for words and the structure of language. In chapter XXV of the *Vita nuova* he takes time to explain and illustrate the use of personification, as he does in the early chapters of the *Convivio*, where he defends the use of Italian rather than Latin. But this concern is most evident in his Latin treatise *De vulgari eloquentia*. Before it there was no such scholarly treatment of a

language. Dante completed only the first and second books, but he refers to a fourth; it is not known if that one was to be the last.

In book I Dante deals with the origin and history of the Italian language. The first five chapters cover the basic definitions of human speech while a good deal of the rest is given over to a discussion of dialects and the principles of poetic composition in the vulgar tongue, which he calls the "illustrious" vulgar tongue—the language of Guido Guinizzelli and, most perfectly, of Guido Cavalcanti, Cino da Pistoia, and Dante himself.

The second book of the De *vulgari eloquentia* is devoted to a more thorough discussion of Italian, which, Dante asserts, is just as appropriate for works of prose as for poetry. Early in this book (chapter II) he discusses what kind of subject is worthy of this vernacular and concludes that it is suited for only the most elevated subjects. And they are three: war (or prowess of arms), love, and virtue (or direction of the will). He states that the greatest writers using a vulgar tongue wrote only on these three subjects. Among Provencal poets, Dante cites Bertran de Born, who wrote about war. Arnaut Daniel on love, and Guiraut de Bornelh on virtue: he also mentions that in Italian Cino da Pistoia wrote about love and "his friend" (Dante), about virtue, citing an example of verse from each poet and including one of his own. Then he admits that he can find no Italian poet who has written on the topic of war. In chapter III of this book we learn that while poets have used a variety of forms (canzoni, ballate, sonnets, and other irregular types), the most excellent form remains the *canzone*, and it is this form that is most suited to lofty subjects. In the remaining chapters of book II the author goes on to discuss style and the rules and form of the *canzone*; the work ends abruptly with the incomplete chapter XIV, in which he intended to treat the number of lines and syllables in the stanza.

Most scholars agree that the *De vulgari eloquentia* is not a finished work, but is rather an unfinished first draft. There are three basic reasons for this belief: the paucity of manuscripts (there are only three), the way the work breaks off in chapter XIV, and the fact that references to points the author promises to discuss in coming chapters are never followed up. Perhaps Dante stopped writing the work, as Aristide Marigo suggests, because he was not certain of the direction he was taking. There is an obvious difference between the wide, humanistic scope of book I and the dry, manual-like approach of book II. Or could Dante simply have become bored with it?

The date of composition of the *De vulgari eloquentia* has not been definitively resolved. Boccaccio claims that it was written in Dante's old age. Marigo, who has done the standard edition of the work (Florence, 1938), dates it between the spring of 1303 and the end of 1304. And because in the *Convivio* Dante makes an allusion to this work in progress we must assume, at least, that he had the project in mind during this time.

It is also difficult to assign a date of composition to Dante's *De* 

monarchia (On Monarchy), primarily because it contains no references to the author's contemporaries or to events taking place at the time. Some say that it was written before Dante's exile because the work contains no mention of it; others tend to think that it was written even later than the *Convivio*, because a number of ideas appearing in an embryonic stage in that work are fully developed in the *De monarchia*. Nevertheless, it was probably written between 1312 and 1313 (sometime before or after the coronation of Henry VII) to commemorate Henry's advent into Italy.

The treatise is divided into three books. In the first book Dante attempts to prove that temporal monarchy is necessary for the welfare of the world. Temporal monarchy, or the empire, means a single command exercised over all persons; that is, in those things that are subject to time as opposed to eternal matters. In the opening sentence of the *De monarchia* the author pays tribute to both God and Aristotle while he establishes the reason for undertaking the present work: "All men whom the higher nature has imbued with a love of truth should feel impelled to work for the benefit of future generations, whom they will thereby enrich, just as they themselves have been enriched by the labors of their ancestors." According to Dante (and we find the idea throughout his writings), the man who does not contribute to the common good fails sadly in his duty.

Clearly Dante is convinced that he is doing something new in his treatise. There is nothing new, however, in his ideas of justice, freedom, and law—they are very much in line with the medieval philosophy of his day. The idea so elaborately set forth in book I, that a higher jurisdiction is necessary whenever there is a possibility of discord or strife, was an argument that had already been used by Pope Boniface VIII and his followers. The originality of the *De monarchia*, the new element that Dante brings to the old idea of empire, rests precisely in its main premise, upon which and around which the treatise is constructed: Dante's justification from a philosophical point of view of a single ruler for all the human race. It is in his concern with founding a "universal community of the human race" ("universalis civilitas humani generis") that he is new and even daring—daring because in Dante's day this idea of a universal community existed only as a religious one, in the form of the church. His new idea, then, took its shape from universal Christendom; it is, in a sense, an imitation of it elaborated from a philosophical point of view. Working from the Averroistic concept of the "possible intellect," Dante affirms that the particular goal of mankind as a whole is to realize to the fullest all the potentialities of this intellect (to have all the intellectual knowledge it is capable of having); this can happen only under the direction of a single ruler, under one world government. And the most important essential, if we are to secure our happiness and if the human race is to fulfill its proper role, is universal peace.

Dante considers the monarch to be the purest incarnation of justice, for there is nothing for him to desire, nothing more to be greedy about. He is a man who has everything, having authority over all territories. Dante also tells us that the human race is at its best when it is most free—meaning self-dependent. Under the monarch the citizens do not exist for his sake; on the contrary, it is the monarch who exists for his citizens.

In the closing paragraph of the first book we hear the desperate voice of Dante the poet warning all humanity. Rarely do we hear this voice in the poet's Italian or Latin prose works, where his intention is to remain as objective as possible. It is a preview of what is to come, for Dante makes frequent and effective use of this device of authorial intervention in the *Divine Comedy*. After presenting his case for the necessity of a monarch in a logical and scholastic fashion, as Saint Thomas Aquinas or Aristotle might have done, Dante the poet bursts forth:

O humanity, in how many storms must you be tossed, how many shipwrecks must you endure, so long as you turn yourself into a many-headed beast lusting after a multiplicity of things! You are ailing in both your intellectual powers and heart. You pay no heed to the unshakable principles of your higher intellect, nor tune your heart to the sweetness of divine counsel when it is breathed into you through the trumpet of the Holy Spirit: "Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."

In book II Dante is primarily concerned with showing that the Romans were justified in assuming imperial power. He attempts to prove his thesis first by a number of arguments based on rational principles, then by the principles of the Christian faith.

In book III the poet proposes the question he has from the start wanted to ask and can ask only now that he has prepared the way in books I and II: whether the authority of the Holy Roman emperor is directly dependent on God or whether his authority comes indirectly from another, a vicar or minister of God, meaning the pope. Dante ignores the vast historical distance between the Roman Empire and the Holy Roman Empire, preferring to see the two governments joined by historical and political continuity. First Dante must refute those scriptural arguments (based on Genesis 1:16: "And God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night") used by his opponents to show the dependence of the emperor on the pope. Having done this, he turns to those historical arguments that must be refuted. The main one he must deal with is the very one that up to this point in his treatise he has been able to cope with only in a rather subjective, emotional, and even poetic way: the painful reality of the Donation of Constantine, a document that purported to prove that the emperor Constantine had invested Pope Sylvester with temporal authority. Dante proceeds by means of his two preferred sources: Scripture and

philosophy (from Matthew and, on this occasion, Aristotle).

Man, who participates in two natures—one corrupt (the body), the other incorruptible (the soul)—has a twofold goal, and since he is the only being who participates in both corruptibility and incorruptibility, he has a goal for his body and a goal for his soul. God, who never errs, has, then, given man two goals: happiness in this life and happiness in the eternal life. The pope leads mankind to eternal life in accordance with revelation, while the emperor leads mankind to temporal happiness in accordance with philosophical teaching. The temporal monarch, who must devote his energies to providing freedom and peace for men as they pass through the "testing time" of this world, receives his authority directly from God.

Intellectual perfection, the happiness of this world, can therefore be attained without the Church. With proper guidance from the universal monarch, man can regain the happiness of the earthly paradise—this is a dangerous conclusion that can easily follow from Dante's arguments in his treatise, and one that Dante himself does not draw. Not surprisingly, the book was placed on the *Index of Forbidden Books*. Unfortunately for Dante, what he wished and wrote for in the *De monarchia* did not come about. It is for this reason that the poet's main political focus shifted from the empire to the Church when he wrote the *Divine Comedy*. With the death of Henry VII, Dante's hopes for the empire and the universal monarch began to fade; he was forced to put aside his ideal and face facts: a monarch and an empire would not overcome the power of the pope and the Church.

While Dante divides temporal and spiritual authority in the De monarchia by means of ingenious logic and scholastic arguments (and in the *Divine Comedy* by its larger allegorical structure), his masterpiece reveals the sad truth that temporal and spiritual authority are often in the same hands. There are many passages that lament this fact. In the *Purgatorio* (canto XVI), to cite one of the more famous passages, Marco Lombardo tells the pilgrim why the world has gone bad (" *la cagion che 'l mondo ha fatto reo*": 106-112):

On Rome, that brought the world to know the good, once shone two suns that lighted up two ways: the road of this world and the road of God.

The one sun has put out the other's light, the sword is now one with the crook—and fused together thus, must bring about misrule,

since joined, now neither fears the other one.

No one is quite sure if Dante is the author of a pedantic little essay

written in Latin with the title *Questio de aqua et terra* (*Discourse on the Nature of Water and Earth*). According to a statement attached to the original manuscript, the essay is in essence a lecture delivered at Verona in 1320. It consists of twenty-four brief chapters that debate in detail the question of whether or not the water of the sea anywhere rises higher than land emerging from it. The document was first published in 1508 by G.B. Moncetti, who claimed that he had copied it from an autograph manuscript of Dante's; the manuscript, however, was never found.

Among Dante's other minor works we find his two pastoral odes in Latin, addressed to Giovanni del Virgilio, who was a professor of Latin at the University of Bologna, where Dante at one time had probably studied. The exchange of Latin hexameters between the two men took place when Dante was staying in Ravenna some two years before his death. In his verses Giovanni del Virgilio reprimands Dante for writing his great poem in Italian rather than Latin. The eclogues are interesting insofar as they reveal Dante's mood toward the end of his life: he seems to be playful, happy, and at peace with himself. Also evident in these verses is the poet's pathetic wish to return to his fair city to receive the laurel crown, as well as his feelings and hopes for the *Divine Comedy*.

A brief mention should be made of *Il fiore* (*The Flower*), the authenticity of which has been questioned by many scholars. It is a sequence of 232 sonnets based on the French *Roman de la Rose*. Those few who are sure that this allegorical story of a successful seduction was written by Dante give two reasons: first, the author is referred to as Durante, which is a form of Dante; second, it is much too well composed to have been written by anyone else but Dante. *Il fiore*, which is worth reading in its own right, is to be found in one manuscript of the late thirteenth century (first published in 1881 in Paris by Ferdinand Castets).

There are approximately fifty-four (and a possible twenty-six more) short poems (not included in the *Vita nuova* or *Convivio*) that Dante did not group together or organize in any way, but that modern editors have collected and called the *Canzoniere* or *Rime* (*Songbook* or *Rhymes*). They consist of scattered lyrics written over a long period of the poet's life, many of which he probably tried to, but could not, fit into the structure of the *Vita nuova* or *Convivio*. Many, of course, were inspired by Beatrice, but there are some written for other women; some done as exercises, as part of his correspondence with other poets; and some composed simply to please ladies and gentlemen who were fond of poetry.

Dante undoubtedly wrote many letters. Unfortunately, only ten letters considered authentic have come down to us; all ten are written in Latin, and none is of a personal or intimate nature. There are also three other letters that Dante may have written on behalf of the countess of Battifolle, but they do not reflect his own thoughts.

To the student of the *Divine Comedy* the most interesting of Dante's letters is the one addressed to Can Grande della Scala in which the author

sets forth his purpose and method in writing his poem. The letter is extant in six manuscripts, three of which (all sixteenth-century) contain the letter in its entirety. He talks about the different meanings contained in the *Divine Comedy:* the first is called literal, the second allegorical or mystical. We learn that on the literal level the poem is about the state of souls after death; on the allegorical level, "The subject is man, liable to the reward or punishment of Justice, according to the use he has made of his free will."

In his letter he also discusses why he has called his poem a "comedy." The word, he says, is derived from *comus* and *oda* and means a "rustic song." Unlike tragedy, which begins in tranquillity but comes to a sad end, comedy may begin under adverse circumstances, but it always comes to a happy end. The style or language of comedy is humble while that of tragedy is lofty. Therefore, because his poem begins in Hell and has a happy ending in Paradise, and because it is written in a most humble language, which is the Italian vernacular, it is called the *Commedia*. The letter goes on with a meticulous, almost word-by-word examination of the beginning verses of the opening canto of the *Paradiso* up to the invocation to Apollo. The letter is thought by many to be an important piece of literary criticism seen in the framework of Dante's time and tradition, and as such it certainly is worth reading in its own right.

#### THE DIVINE COMEDY

Dante's masterpiece is, of course, the *Divine Comedy* (the word *divina* was added to *commedia* by posterity). It is to some degree a result of his determination to fulfill the promise he made at the close of the *Vita nuova*: "If it be the wish of Him in whom all things flourish that my life continue for a few years, I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any lady."

No one knows when Dante began composing his great poem; some say perhaps as early as 1307. In any case the *Inferno* was completed in 1314, and it is probable that the final touches to the *Paradiso* were, as Boccaccio states, not made until 1321, the year of Dante's death. The purpose of the poem, which has moved readers through the centuries, is, as Dante reveals in his epistle to Can Grande, "to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity."

The poem is divided into three major sections: *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Heaven). Each section contains thirty-three cantos, with the exception of Hell, which has thirty-four—the opening canto serving as an introduction to the work as a whole. For the *Commedia* Dante invented a rhyme scheme known as *terza rima* (tertiary

rhyme: *aba bcb cdc*), thus continuing to display his fascination with the number three, which was so much on his mind when he was composing the *Vita nuova* many years earlier. And each canto is divided into three-line stanzas called *terzine*, or tercets, in which the first and third lines rhyme, while the middle or second lines rhyme with the first and third of the next *terzina*. The basic metrical unit of the verse is the hendecasyllabic line, quite common in Italian poetry: it is an eleven-syllable line in which the accent falls on the tenth syllable.

The drama or main action of the poem centers on one man's journey to God. It tells how God through the agency of Beatrice drew the poet to salvation; and the moral that Dante wishes his reader to keep in mind is that what God has done for one man he will do for every man, if every man is willing to make this journey. The reader of the poem would do well to distinguish from the very beginning of the *Commedia* between the two uses of the first-person singular: one designates Dante the pilgrim, the other Dante the poet. The first is a character in a story invented by the second. The events in the narrative are represented as having taken place in the past; the writing of the poem and the memory of these events, however, are represented as taking place in the present. For example, we find references to both past and present, and to both pilgrim and poet, in line 10 of the introductory canto of the *Inferno*: "How *I entered* there *I cannot* truly say" (italics added).

There are times in the poem when the fictional pilgrim (Dante the pilgrim) embodies many of the characteristics of his inventor (Dante the poet); for the *Commedia*, though it is above all the journey of Everyman to God, is in many ways a personal, autobiographical journey. It is often difficult, most times impossible, to say whether what is happening in the poem belongs to the real-life biography of the poet or the fictional biography of the pilgrim. For instance, at the beginning of canto XIX of the *Inferno* the pilgrim alludes to having broken a baptismal font in the church of his "lovely San Giovanni" (line 17). Now, Dante the poet may well have broken the font to save someone who was drowning within, but it is highly unlikely (and most inartistic) that he would mention the incident for the sole purpose of clearing his name in connection with an act that some of his contemporaries would have thought sinful. The breaking of the font is an event that took place in the life of the pilgrim, and the pilgrim is not trying to "clear his name," as critics have suggested. Rather the poet is giving an example to the reader of the true nature of the sin of simony (the sin punished in canto XIX), which "breaks" the holy purposes of the church by perverting them.

The poet is the poet, but he is not the pilgrim, and the story traced in the *Commedia* is the story of Dante the pilgrim, who is at once himself and Everyman. We must keep in mind the allegory of the opening verse of the poem: "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai...*" ("Midway along the journey of our life / I found myself ..."). Dante begins to construct his allegory of the double journey: that is, his

personal experience in the world beyond ("I found myself"), open to Everyman in his own journey through this life ("of our life"). The poet finds himself wandering in a dark wood (the worldly life). He tries to escape by climbing a mountain that is lit from behind by the rays of the sun (God). His journey upward is impeded by the sudden appearance of three beasts: a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf (the three major divisions of sin, signifying the three major divisions of Hell: fraud, violence, and concupiscence). The poet is about to be driven back when, just as suddenly, Virgil (reason or human understanding) appears. He has been sent by Beatrice (divine revelation) to aid Dante, to guide him on this journey that cannot fail. The only way to escape from the dark wood is to descend into Hell (man must first descend into humility before he can raise himself to salvation or God). The way up the mountain, then, is to go down: before man can hope to climb the mountain of salvation, he must first know what sin is. The purpose of Dante's journey through Hell is precisely this: to learn all there is to know about sin as a necessary preparation for the ascent to God. In fact, from the opening canto of the *Inferno* to the closing one of the *Paradiso*, Dante the poet presents his pilgrim as continuously learning, his spiritual development being the main theme of the entire poem. His progress is slow, and there are even occasional backslidings.

In *Inferno* IV the pilgrim and his guide, Virgil, who are now in Limbo, see a hemisphere of light glowing in the distance, and as they move toward it they are met by four great pagan poets. Virgil explains to his ward:

"Observe the one who comes with sword in hand, leading the three as if he were their master.

It is the shade of Homer, sovereign poet, and coming second, Horace, the satirist; Ovid is the third, and last comes Lucan.

(86-90)

Together with Virgil these four non-Christians form the group of those classical poets whom Dante most admired and from whom he drew much of the material for his poem. It must be said, however, that while Homer was known in the Middle Ages as the first of the great epic poets, the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, few people—and Dante was not among them—could read Greek; thus Homer's great epics were known almost entirely second-hand through the revised versions of Dares and Dictys, who told the tale of the Trojan war in a way that exalted the Trojans and often disparaged the Greeks. Dante admired Homer more for his reputation than for any intimate knowledge that he had of his works. The second of the four is Horace, whom Dante calls the "satirist" but whom

he must have thought of mainly as a moralist since Dante was familiar only with the *Ars poetica*. Ovid, who comes next, was the most widely read Roman poet in the Middle Ages, and he was Dante's main source of mythology in the *Commedia*. Dante, however, seems to have been acquainted with only the *Metamorphoses*. Coming last is Lucan, author of the *Pharsalia*, which deals with the Roman civil war between the legions of Pompey and those of Caesar. The book was one of Dante's important historical sources.

When the pilgrim and his guide have seen all there is to see of sin (canto XXXIV) they find they must exit from Hell by climbing down Lucifer's monstrous, hairy body. Only by grappling with sin itself, by knowing the foundation of all sin, which is pride, personified in the hideous figure of Lucifer frozen in the ice at the very center of the universe, can they hope to make their way out "to see again the stars."

The island-mountain of Purgatory, invented by Dante, is divided into three parts. At the very top is the Earthly Paradise; the upper part of the mountain is sealed off from the lower by a gate that a resplendent angel guards, equipped with St. Peter's keys. This upper half, with its seven cornices corresponding to the seven deadly sins, is reserved for those who have been permitted to enter the gate from below in order to begin the self-willed torments of their purgation; after its accomplishment they pass to the Earthly Paradise, from which they ascend to Heaven. In the lower half, the "Antepurgatory," dwell those souls who are not yet ready to begin their purgation. As for the reason why certain souls are forced to put off the experience they all desire, the pilgrim is told by a number of individuals he meets that, while alive, they had put off repentance until the end (thus their delay is in the nature of a *contrapasso*, or retribution); it is generally accepted that all of the inhabitants of the Antepurgatory are to be considered as "late repentants." (The Antepurgatory is dealt with in the first nine cantos.) This mountain (whose creation was the miraculous result of Lucifer's fall) keeps not only those assigned to Purgatory but also those destined for immediate passage to Heaven.

The middle portion of the mountain of Purgatory is surrounded by seven concentric ledges, each separated from the other by a steep cliff. On each ledge, or terrace, one of the seven capital sins is purged: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice (and Prodigality), Gluttony, Lust. The setup of the First Terrace (cantos IX-XII), where souls are being punished for the sin of Pride, establishes the pattern of purgation that is followed throughout Purgatory proper.

Each group of souls on its particular terrace is assigned a prayer. When a soul has finished purging his sin on one level, he climbs to the next via a stairway, where there is an angel-sentry who performs a final cleansing gesture. A beatitude appropriate to the sin that has been cleansed is assigned to each ledge. In addition, on each terrace of Purgatory, representations of the sin being purged there are found, as well as examples of the virtue which is opposed to that sin. The

representation of the sin is intended to incite disdain for the sin, while that of the virtue is designed to inspire souls to the emulation of virtuous behavior. These representations take on various forms—on the First Terrace they appear as carvings in the stone of the mountain—and both "disdain for the sin" and "inspiration for virtuous behavior" are drawn from examples of Christian and pagan love. But the first example of every virtue is always taken from the life of the Virgin Mary.

In the first canto of the *Purgatorio* Dante and Virgil are at the foot of a mountain again, and the reader is naturally reminded of the first canto of the *Inferno*: it is the same mountain, the one they could not climb then, because Dante was not spiritually prepared. But now, having investigated all sin, having shaken off pride during his perilous descent into humility, Dante will be able to climb the mountain.

Purgatory is a place of repentance, regeneration, conversion. Though the punishments inflicted on the penitents here are often more severe than in Hell, the atmosphere is totally different: it is one of sweet encounters, culminating in Dante's reunion with Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise and Virgil's elegant disappearance. Brotherly love and humility reign here, necessary qualities for the successful journey of man's mind to God. Everyone here is destined to see God eventually; the predominant image is one of homesickness (especially in the Antepurgatory), a yearning to return to man's real home in Heaven. Toward the close of the *Purgatorio* the time comes for Beatrice (divine revelation) to take charge of the pilgrim; human reason (Virgil) can take man only so far; it cannot show him God or explain his many mysteries.

The *Paradiso* is an attempt to describe the religious life, one in which man centers his attention wholly on God, divine truth, and ultimate happiness. Only in perfect knowledge of the true God can man have perfect happiness.

Unlike Hell and Purgatory, Heaven in Dante's poem does not exist in a physical sense. The celestial spheres through which the pilgrim and his guide, Beatrice, ascend and in which the souls of the blessed appear to the wayfarer are not part of the real Paradise. That place is beyond the spheres and beyond space and time; it is the Empyrean, and Beatrice takes pains to explain this early in the *Paradiso*, while they are in the first sphere of the moon:

Not the most godlike of the Seraphim, not Moses, Samuel, whichever John you choose —I tell you—not Mary herself

has been assigned to any other heaven than that of these shades you have just seen here, and each one's bliss is equally eternal;

all lend their beauty to the Highest Sphere,

sharing one same sweet life to the degree that they can feel the eternal breath of God.

(IV. 28-36)

The dominant image in this realm is light. God is light, and the pilgrim's goal from the very start was to reach the light (we are reminded of the casual mention of the rays of the sun behind the mountain in the opening canto).

The word "stars," the last word of the poem, glows with a number of meanings which *The Divine Comedy* itself has given it in the course of the journey. The sun is another star, as the last verse surely implies through the use of the word "other," and we know that the sun is the symbol for God—this is clear from the first canto of the *Inferno*, and the stars stand for all the heavens. It is through the sphere of the Fixed Stars, immediately below the Primum Mobile, that God's grace is filtered down through the lower spheres, finally reaching the material universe—that is what canto II concerning the spots on the moon is all about. The stars, then, are the link between God and His creation. They are His eyes set in the outermost limits of the physical universe:

O Triune Light which sparkles in one star upon their sight, Fulfiller of full joy! look down upon us in our tempest here!

(XXXI, 28-30)

They are the constant reminder to mankind of his connection to his Maker. Through them we see God from our earth. Through them God touches us. Through them Dante connects the three distinct parts of his miraculous poem, the *Inferno*, the *Purgatory*, and the *Paradise*, into a single unity which is *The Divine Comedy*.

The formal beauty of the *Commedia* should not be dissociated from its spiritual message. The universal appeal of the poem comes precisely from a combination of the two: poetry and philosophy. For Dante, though not for the majority of poets of the Renaissance, ultimate truth was known—in principle it was contained in the *Summa* of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and the doctrine of the *Commedia* comes largely from the writings of Aquinas and the other church fathers.

Dante was in accord with Hugh of Saint Victor, who, in his *Didascalia* (VI. 5), says: "Contemplating what God has done, we learn what is for us to do. All nature speaks God. All nature teaches man." Dante, then, with his special kind of allegory, tries to imitate God: the symbolic world he creates in his poem is in principle a mirror of the actual world created by God himself.

#### TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: ON BEING A GOOD LOVER

To what extent should the translator of Dante's *Comedy* strive to be faithful to the original? Ezra Pound distinguishes between what he calls "interpretative translation," which is what most translators are after, and a more creative, original type of paraphrase—the translator using the original mainly as an inspiration for writing his own poem. But even those who attempt an interpretive rendering differ greatly in the degree and manner of their faithfulness to the original. The question has been raised and debated: should it be the poet's voice that is heard, or the voice of the one who is making the poet accessible in another language? This is obviously a delicate, sophisticated, and complicated problem.

Surely much depends on what it is that is being translated. A principle that might apply to a sonnet or perhaps any short poem, especially a lyrical one, would not be appropriate to a lengthy narrative with theological and encyclopedic underpinnings such as *The Divine Comedy*. I should say that anyone who attempts to translate this massive poem must try, with humility and flexibility, to be as faithful as possible. He should do what Jackson Mathews recommends to the guild of translators in general—"be faithful without seeming to be"—and he adds in regard to this type of faithfulness: "a translator should make a good lover."

Perhaps it must always be the voice of Dante's translator that we hear (if we have to hear an intervening voice at all), but he should have listened most carefully to Dante's voice before he lets us hear his own. He should not only read and reread what he is translating, in order to know what it is about (know a whole canto thoroughly before translating a line), but he should also read Dante aloud, listening to the rhythm and movement within the lines and the movement from line to line. Consider, for example, line 63 of the famous canto V of the *Inferno* (Paolo and Francesca's canto), where Virgil points out to the Pilgrim the figure of Cleopatra among the lustful souls of Dido's band, and characterizes her with one word that caps the line:

*Poi è Cleopatràs lussurïosa* (And there is Cleopatra, who loved men's lusting)

This epithet, epitomizing the whole career of the imperial wanton, serves to remind us of the technical nature of the sin being punished in the second circle, the circle of the lustful: *i lussuriosi*. And in the movement of the word *lus-su-ri-o-sa* (Dante forces us to linger over the word this way; otherwise the verse would be a syllable short) there is an important

anticipation of a movement in the second part of the canto: the dovelike movement that starts with the actual descent of Francesca and Paolo, a gentle movement that becomes the movement of the entire second half of this canto and offers such a contrast to the wild buffetings of the winds we hear in the first half, where we see the damned dashed along by the tempestuous storm. The sensitive translator must stop to question (then to understand) the rhythm of *lussuriosa* at this point in the canto: to sense how this diaphanous word in this melodious line stands out against the howling noises in the background. This seductive rhythm applied to Cleopatra's sin anticipates not only the gentle movements but the seductive atmosphere of the second half of the canto, when Francesca is on stage and melting the Pilgrim's heart. No translator I have read seems to have made any attempt to reproduce the effect intended by the line in the original: the simplicity of the first half of the line (*Poi è Cleopatràs* ...) and the mellifluous quality of the epithet (*lussuriosa*) in final position, with its tapering-off effect.

Again, the translator should study Dante's use of poetic devices such as enjambment and alliteration. This does not mean that the translator should always use such devices when Dante does and only when he does, but that he should study the effects Dante has achieved with these devices—and his economical use of them. Dante is a greater poet than any of his translators have been or are likely to be. A translator using the English iambic pentameter may even learn from Dante's flowing lines to use better the meter he has chosen. It is true that Dante's hendecasyllabic verse is quantitative and not accentual; still, the words of the Italian language have their own natural accent. In reading aloud Dante's lines with their gentle stress, one can hear the implicit iambs and trochees and dactyls and anapaests. And one may learn to achieve the same effect of "implicitness" to counterbalance the natural tendency of English meters to have too insistent a stress.

Finally, there is the matter of diction. Here the translator must be *absolutely* faithful, choosing words and phrases that have the same tone as those of the poet. They must obviously suggest solemnity when he is solemn, lightness when he is light; they must be colloquial or formal as he is colloquial or formal. But, most of all, the diction should be simple when Dante's is. And this is where the translators have sinned the most. There are two ways to sin against simplicity of diction: one concerns only the matter of word material and syntax—for instance the use of stilted or overflowery language and of archaic phraseology. Most translators would not agree with me; some feel free to use any word listed in the *O.E. D.* after A.D. 1000: *to girn, to birl, to skirr, scaling the scaur, to abye the fell arraign* —to say nothing of syntactical archaisms.

A more subtle sin against the simplicity of Dante's diction is the creation of original striking rhetorical or imagistic effects where Dante has intended none. Dante himself saves spectacular effects for very special occasions. Most of his narrative, if we make an exception of the elaborate similes, is composed in simple, straightforward style. Occasionally one finds an immediately striking effect in a line or phrase, and when this does happen, it is magnificent. Consider line 4 of canto V (so different from line 63,

quoted earlier, with its muted, inconspicuous effect):

Stavvi Minòs orribilmente e ringhia (There stands Minòs grotesquely, and he snarls)

Surely Dante meant to startle his reader with this sudden presentation (after the sober explanation of the opening three lines) of the monster-judge. The line ends with the resounding impact of the verb *ringhia* —it ends with a snarl that sounds like the lash of a whip (or tail). And we are made to feel the horror of Minòs by the key word in the middle of the line, the slow-moving *orribilmente*, which points both backward and ahead: *Stavvi orribilmente*, *ringhia orribilmente*. Grammatically, of course, the adverb modifies the opening word, the static verb, *stavvi*. This construction, in which an adverb of manner modifies a verb of

This construction, in which an adverb of manner modifies a verb of presence, is most unusual: Minòs was present horribly!

Usually, however, one comes to realize only at the end of several tercets that a certain effect has been achieved by the passage as a whole, one to which each single line has been quietly contributing. Dante's effects, then, are mainly of a cumulative nature. And often there are no "effects," only simple, factual, narrative details. In fact, sometimes Dante's style (and not unfortunately!) is purely prosaic. An adventurous, imaginative translator is easily tempted to speed up the movement of Dante's tranquil lines, to inject fire and color into a passage of neutral tone. Even if he carries it off successfully, I would tend to question his goal. And when the translator fails, when he falls, great is the fall thereof.

If the translator had to choose in general between a style that strives for striking effects, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing, and one less colorful but more consistent, the choice could be merely a matter of personal taste. But when it is a question of translating a poet who himself is so economical in his use of conspicuous effects, then, I believe, it is no longer a wide-open choice. I have set as my goal simplicity and quiet, even, sober flow—except when I feel that the moment has come to let myself go, to pull out the stops: to be flamboyant or complicated instead of simple, to be noisy instead of quiet, to be rough instead of smooth—or to be deliberately mellifluous. Except for those rare occasions, I have consistently tried to find a style that does not call attention to itself. And I might add that, in translating, this requires a great deal of effort. To the extent that I have succeeded, those readers who admire the fireworks of some recent translations of the *Inferno* will find my own less exciting—as little exciting as Dante himself often is.

My desire to be faithful to Dante, however, has not led me to adopt his metrical scheme. I do not use *terza rima*, as, for example, Dorothy Sayers does, or even the "dummy" *terza rima* of John Ciardi. My medium is rhymeless iambic pentameter, that is, blank verse. I have chosen this, first, because blank verse has been the preferred form for long narrative poetry from the time of Milton on. It cannot be proved that rhyme necessarily makes verse better: Milton declared rhyme to be a barbaric device, and many modern poets resolutely avoid it. Karl Shapiro, an enthusiast for

rhyme, is considering only shorter poems when he speaks of the five main qualities that rhyme gives to verse: the musical, the emphatic, the architectural, the sense of direction one feels in a well-turned stanza, and, finally, the effect of the rests that come between the stanzas. Three of these qualities could apply only to stanzaic poetry, where rhyme is much more necessary in establishing structure than in a poem with the dimensions of *The Divine Comedy*, whose only large subdivision is the canto. Only two of the qualities of rhyme he mentions might apply to Dante's poem: the musical and the emphatic.

But my main reason for avoiding rhyme has been the results achieved by all those who have used rhyme in translating *The Divine Comedy:* they have shown that the price paid was disastrously high. I believe that all those who have offered rhymed translations of Dante could have produced far better poems if they had not used rhyme. There are two reasons for the crippling effects of rhyme in translating a lengthy poem. First of all it is apparently impossible always to find perfect rhymes in English for a long stretch of lines—and if good rhyme gives a musical effect, bad rhyme is cacophonous; it is a reminder (and with some translators we are being constantly reminded) that the search for rhyme has failed. I have found at least six kinds of bad rhyme in translations of Dante: vowels that do not match, consonants that do not match, stresses that do not match, plus combinations of these. Especially when there is a pause at the end of a line or the line ends with a stressed syllable, so that the cacophonous element is put into relief, the result can be most painful. One can be more faithful to Dante (without seeming to be) by avoiding rhyme than by introducing imperfect rhyme into the rendition of his lines, whose rhymes are always acoustically perfect.

Shapiro, speaking of the power of rhyme to draw us into the movement of a poem, says that our expectation is thereby being continually raised and then satisfied; ideally, rhyme helps pull us through, and pull us in deep, as we anticipate the scheme. But, when the translator uses a mixture of perfect and imperfect rhyme—when, that is, we never know whether our expectation will be satisfied—the effect is quite different. In every tercet the reader with a sensitive ear will always be wondering "Will he make it this time?" and may often look ahead to see the result, thus breaking the movement of the poem.

But the rhymed translations of the *Comedy* reveal, all of them, a second disadvantage, and a far greater one than the difficulty of matching sounds. Because of the difficulty imposed by the continuous mechanical necessity of finding rhyme, good or bad, the translator is often forced to use a diction that is aesthetically unacceptable, or even contrary to the spirit of the language (and once a translator has agreed to distort the English language for the sake of rhyme, the result could well be an increasing insensitivity to the requirements of natural diction). To be forced to think, with every line, in terms of the sound of the final stressed syllable has resulted, far too often, in lines that sound like a translation. And the first of the Capital Sins in translating is for a translation to sound like one!

For the poet creating original verse in his own language, the search for

rhyme also, of course, imposes limitations, but these limitations themselves may be a help in the creative process, and the rhyme, when found, as Shapiro says, may bring an image or idea that will suggest a new line of development. At its best, rhyme leads the poet into discoveries. And since he is in the process of creation, he can afford at any moment to change the course of his poetic fluidity. But for the translator, who is faced from the beginning with an existing structure whose shape has been forever fixed, rhyme constitutes a crippling burden.

But if I feel such horror at the paralyzing potentiality of rhyme when used to translate *The Divine Comedy*, why have I chosen to bind myself to the mechanical device of meter? Five beats in every line—no more and no less. Why not choose free verse? Free verse, I feel, is more appropriate for purely creative composition than for translation; and it is more suitable for verse deeply charged with emotion than for narrative. The irregular rhythms, the modulations, of free verse must be determined by the writer's own moods, which will direct the ebbing and flowing of his verse. For this he needs space; as a translator such a writer would need to get as far away as possible from the original!

Moreover, the requirements of iambic pentameter can be very flexible if one is ready to avail oneself of the alternations possible. One need not limit oneself continually to the sequence:" (\* \*):. The last foot, for example, may be given, when desired, an extra unstressed syllable (feminine ending; in Italian this is the norm):

When those/offen/ded souls/had told/their story . . .

For an iamb one may substitute its opposite, a trochee (\* ):

Hátefül/tö Gód/aňd tó/Hís eń/ĕ/miés . . .

Or a further extension of itself, the anapaest ( ):

## Iň the world/this mán/was filled/with ar/rogance.

(The reader sensitive to rhythm should be on the alert for such opening anapaests.)

Or the opposite of this, the dactyl ( ):

Ĭ saíd/tŏ hím,/bówĭng/mÿ heád/*módeštl*ÿ...

And I have often used a substitution that some translators seem to avoid, the amphibrach 'the final foot is always an amphibrach when there is a feminine ending):

# Ĭ saíd,/"Frăncéscă,/the tor/ment thát/you súffer . .

(Compare this with Dorothy Sayers's and John Ciardi's translations of the same line, in which the natural rhythm of the name Francesca is not echoed in an amphibrach foot: "[Thy dreadful fate,] Frăncés/că, mákes/mĕ wéep,/ĭt só/iňspiŕes [pity]"; "I sáid:/'Frăncés/că whát/yŏu súf/fĕr heŕe . . . '")

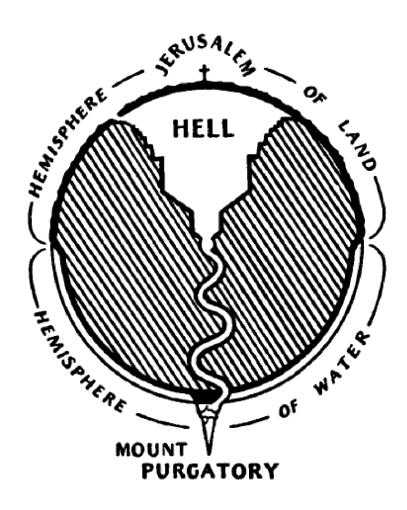
Finally, one may let just one syllable count as a foot when the stress is very heavy:

# Love, / that kin / dles quick / in the gen / tle heart .

And there may be gradation in degrees of stress. Iambic pentameter is a beautiful, flexible instrument, but only when the translator is freed from preoccupation with rhyme.

Because I am free of this tyranny I have had time to listen carefully to Dante's voice, and though the result is far from being a miracle of perfect translation, still, I believe I can promise that my reader seldom, if ever, will wince or have his teeth set on edge by an overambitious attempt to force the language into the unnatural tensions almost never felt in poetry other than translations.

## THE DIVINE COMEDY: INFERNO



#### CANTO I

Halfway through his life, Dante the Pilgrim wakes to find himself lost in a dark wood. Terrified at being alone in so dismal a valley, he wanders until he comes to a hill bathed in sunlight, and his fear begins to leave him. But when he starts to climb the hill his path is blocked by three fierce beasts: first a Leopard, then a Lion, and finally a She-Wolf. They fill him with fear and drive him back down to the sunless wood. At that moment the figure of a man appears before him; it is the shade of Virgil, and the Pilgrim begs for help. Virgil tells him that he cannot overcome the beasts which obstruct his path; they must remain until a "Greyhound" comes who will drive them back to Hell. Rather by another path will the Pilgrim reach the sunlight, and Virgil promises to guide him on that path through Hell and Purgatory, after which another spirit, more fit than Virgil, will lead him to Paradise. The Pilgrim begs Virgil to lead on, and the Guide starts ahead. The Pilgrim follows.

Midway along the journey of our life I woke to find myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered off from the straight path.

3

How hard it is to tell what it was like, this wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn (the thought of it brings back all my old fears),

6

a bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer. But if I would show the good that came of it I must talk about things other than the good.

9

How I entered there I cannot truly say, I had become so sleepy at the moment when I first strayed, leaving the path of truth;

12

1. The imaginary date of the poem's beginning is the night before Good

Friday in 1300, the year of the papal jubilee proclaimed by Boniface VIII. Born in 1265, Dante would be thirty-five years old, which is half the seventy years allotted to man in the Bible.

but when I found myself at the foot of a hill, at the edge of the wood's beginning, down in the valley, where I first felt my heart plunged deep in fear,	
neart pranged deep in rear,	15
I raised my head and saw the hilltop shawled in morning rays of light sent from the planet that leads men straight ahead on every road.	
	18
And then only did terror start subsiding in my heart's lake, which rose to heights of fear that night I spent in deepest	
desperation.	21
Just as a swimmer, still with panting breath, now safe upon the shore, out of the deep, might turn for one last look at the dangerous waters,	
dangerous waters,	24
so I, although my mind was turned to flee, turned round to gaze once more upon the pass that never let a living soul escape.	0.5
	27
I rested my tired body there awhile and then began to climb the barren slope (I dragged my stronger foot and limped	
along).	30
Beyond the point the slope begins to rise sprang up a leopard, trim and very swift!	
It was covered by a pelt of many spots.	33

And, everywhere I looked, the beast was

there blocking my way, so time and time again I was about to turn and go back	
down.	36
The hour was early in the morning then, the sun was climbing up with those same stars that had accompanied it on the world's first day,	
world 3 first day,	39
31-51. The three beasts that block the Pilgrim's path could symbolic three major divisions of Hell. The spotted Leopard (32) represent (cf. Canto XVI, 106-108) and reigns over the Eighth and Ninth (where the Fraudulent are punished (Cantos XVIII-XXXIV). The (45) symbolizes all forms of Violence that are punished in the Scircle (XII-XVII). The She-Wolf (49) represents the different ty Concupisence or Incontinence that are punished in Circles Two (V-VIII).	nts Fraud Circles Lion eventh opes of
the day Divine Love set their beauty turning; so the hour and sweet season of creation encouraged me to think I could get past	47
that gaudy beast, wild in its spotted pelt, but then good hope gave way and fear returned when the figure of a lion loomed	42
up before me,	45
and he was coming straight toward me, it seemed, with head raised high, and furious with hunger— the air around him seemed to fear his presence.	48
And now a she-wolf came, that in her leanness seemed racked with every kind of greediness (how many people she has brought to grief!).	.0
	51

This last beast brought my spirit down so

low with fear that seized me at the sight of her, I lost all hope of going up the hill.	54
As a man who, rejoicing in his gains, suddenly seeing his gain turn into loss, will grieve as he compares his then and now,	
now,	57
so she made me do, that relentless beast; coming toward me, slowly, step by step, she forced me back to where the sun is mute.	60
While I was rushing down to that low place, my eyes made out a figure coming toward me of one grown faint, perhaps from too much silence.	63
And when I saw him standing in this wasteland, "Have pity on my soul," I	

- 62. The approaching figure represents (though not exclusively, for he has other meanings) Reason or Natural Philosophy. The Pilgrim cannot proceed to the light of Divine Love (the mountaintop) until he has overcome the three beasts of his sin; and because it is impossible for man to cope with the beasts unaided, Virgil has been summoned to guide the Pilgrim.
- 63. The voice of Reason has been silent in the Pilgrim's ear for a long time.

"No longer living man, though once I was," he said, "and my parents were from Lombardy, both of them were Mantuans by birth.

cried to him, "whichever you are, shade

or living man!"

69

I was born, though somewhat late, <i>sub Julio</i> , and lived in Rome when good  Augustus reigned, when still the false and lying gods were worshipped.	
-y8 8	72
I was a poet and sang of that just man, son of Anchises, who sailed off from Troy after the burning of proud Ilium.	75
But why retreat to so much misery? Why not climb up this blissful mountain here, the beginning and the source of all man's joy?"	
	78
"Are you then Virgil, are you then that fount from which pours forth so rich a stream of words?" I said to him, bowing my head modestly.	
my head modesdy.	81
"O light and honor of the other poets, may my long years of study, and that deep love that made me search your verses, help me now!	
help me now:	84
You are my teacher, the first of all my authors, and you alone the one from whom I took the noble style that was to bring me honor.	
bring the notion.	87
You see the beast that forced me to retreat; save me from her, I beg you, famous sage, she makes me tremble, the blood throbs in my veins."	
	90
"But you must journey down another road, " he answered, when he saw me lost in tears, "if ever you hope to leave this wilderness;	

this beast, the one you cry about in fear, allows no soul to succeed along her path, she blocks his way and puts an end to him.

96

91. Dante must choose another road because, in order to arrive at the Divine Light, it is necessary first to recognize the true nature of sin, renounce it, and pay penance for it.

She is by nature so perverse and vicious, her craving belly is never satisfied, still hungering for food the more she eats.

99

She mates with many creatures, and will go on mating with more until the greyhound comes and tracks her down to make her die in anguish.

102

He will not feed on either land or money: his wisdom, love, and virtue shall sustain him; he will be born between Feltro and Feltro.

105

He comes to save that fallen Italy for which the maid Camilla gave her life and Turnus, Nisus, Euryalus died of wounds.

108

And he will hunt for her through every city until he drives her back to Hell once more, whence Envy first unleashed her on mankind.

111

And so, I think it best you follow me for your own good, and I shall be your guide and lead you out through an

where you will hear desperate cries, and see tormented shades, some old as Hell itself, and know what second death is, from their screams.

117

And later you will see those who rejoice while they are burning, for they have hope of coming, whenever it may be, to join the blessèd—

120

101-111. The Greyhound has been identified with Henry VII, Charles Martel, and even Dante himself. It seems more plausible that the Greyhound represents Can Grande della Scala, the ruler of Verona from 1308 to 1329, whose "wisdom, love, and virtue" (104) were certainly well-known to Dante. Whoever the Greyhound may be, the prophecy would seem to indicate in a larger sense the establishment of a spiritual kingdom on earth in which "wisdom, love, and virtue" will replace the bestial sins of the world. Perhaps Dante had no specific person in mind.

107. Camilla was the valiant daughter of King Metabus, who was slain while fighting against the Trojans (*Aeneid* XI).

108. Turnus was the king of the Rutulians. Nisus and Euryalus were young Trojan warriors slain during a nocturnal raid on the camp of the Rutulians.

117. The "second" death is that of the soul, which occurs when the soul is damned.

to whom, if you too wish to make the climb, a spirit, worthier than I, must take you; I shall go back, leaving you in her care,

123

because that Emperor dwelling on high will not let me lead any to His city, since I in life rebelled against His law. Everywhere He reigns, and there He rules; there is His city, there is His high throne. Oh, happy the one He makes His citizen!"

129

And I to him: "Poet, I beg of you, in the name of God, that God you never knew, save me from this evil place and worse,

132

lead me there to the place you spoke about that I may see the gate Saint Peter guards and those whose anguish you have told me of."

135

Then he moved on, and I moved close behind him.

## **CANTO II**

BUT THE PILGRIM begins to waver; he expresses to Virgil his misgivings about his ability to undertake the journey proposed by Virgil. His predecessors have been Aeneas and Saint Paul, and he feels unworthy to take his place in their company. But Virgil rebukes his cowardice, and relates the chain of events that led him to come to Dante. The Virgin Mary took pity on the Pilgrim in his despair and instructed Saint Lucia to aid him. The Saint turned to Beatrice because of Dante's great love for her, and Beatrice in turn went down to Hell, into Limbo, and asked Virgil to guide her friend until that time when she herself would become his guide. The Pilgrim takes heart at Virgil's explanation and agrees to follow him.

122. Just as Virgil, the pagan Roman poet, cannot enter the Christian Paradise because he lived before the birth of Christ and lacks knowledge

of Christian salvation, so Reason can only guide the Pilgrim to a certain point: In order to enter Paradise, the Pilgrim's guide must be Christian Grace or Revelation (Theology) in the figure of Beatrice.

124. Note the pagan terminology of Virgil's reference to God: It expresses, as best it can, his unenlightened conception of the Supreme Authority.

The day was fading and the darkening air

was releasing all the creatures on our earth from their daily tasks, and I, one man alone,	
was making ready to endure the battle of the	3
journey, and of the pity it involved, which my memory, unerring, shall now retrace.	
reudce.	6
O Muses! O high genius! Help me now! O memory that wrote down what I saw, here your true excellence shall be revealed!	
revealed	9
Then I began: "O poet come to guide me, tell me if you think my worth sufficient before you trust me to this arduous road.	12
You wrote about young Sylvius's father,	12
who went beyond, with flesh corruptible, with all his senses, to the immortal realm;	

but if the Adversary of all evil was kind to him, considering who he was, and the consequence that was to come from him,

this cannot seem, to thoughtful men, unfitting, for in the highest heaven he was chosen father of glorious Rome and of her empire, 15

	21
and both the city and her lands, in truth, were established as the place of holiness where the successors of great Peter sit.	
	24
And from this journey you celebrate in verse, Aeneas learned those things that were to bring victory for him, and for Rome, the Papal seat;	7.7
	27
then later the Chosen Vessel, Paul, ascended to ring back confirmation of that faith which is the first step on salvation's road.	
Salvation S rodu.	30
But why am I to go? Who allows me to? <i>I</i> am not Aeneas, I am not Paul, neither I nor any man would think me worthy;	
	33
and so, if I should undertake the journey, I fear it might turn out an act of folly— you are wise, you see more than my	
words express. "	36
As one who unwills what he willed, will change his purpose with some new second thought, completely quitting what	
he first had started,	39
so I did, standing there on that dark slope, thinking, ending the beginning of that venture I was so quick to take up at the	
start.	42
"If I have truly understood your words, " that shade of magnanimity replied, "your	

soul is burdened with that cowardice	45
which often weighs so heavily on man, it turns him from a noble enterprise like a frightened beast that shies at its own shadow.	
	48
To free you from this fear, let me explain the reason I came here, the words I heard that first time I felt pity for your soul:	
	51
I was among those dead who are suspended, when a lady summoned me. She was so blessed and beautiful, I implored her to command me.	
	54
With eyes of light more bright than any star, in low, soft tones she started to address me in her own language, with an angel's	
voice:	57
28-30. In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians (12:2-4), the apostle lalludes to his mystical elevation to the third heaven and to the arcane messages pronounced there.	
'O noble soul, courteous Mantuan, whose fame the world continues to preserve and will preserve as long as world there	
is,	60
my friend, who is no friend of Fortune's, strays on a desert slope; so many obstacles have crossed his path, his fright has turned him back	63
I fear he may have gone so far astray, from what report has come to me in Heaven,	

that I may have started to his aid too late.	66
Now go, and with your elegance of speech, with whatever may be needed for his freedom, give him your help, and thereby bring me solace.	69
I am Beatrice, who urges you to go; I come from the place I am longing to return to; love moved me, as it moves me now to speak.	72
When I return to stand before my Lord, often I shall sing your praises to Him. 'And then she spoke no more. And I	12
'O Lady of Grace, through whom alone	75
mankind may go beyond all worldly things contained within the sphere that makes the smallest round,	78
your plea fills me with happy eagerness— to have obeyed already would still seem late! You needed only to express your wish.	01
But tell me how you dared to make this	81
journey all the way down to this point of spacelessness, away from your spacious home that calls you back.	0.4
	84
'Because your question searches for deep meaning, I shall explain in simple words, ' she said, 'just why I have no fear of coming here.	
	87

A man must stand in fear of just those things that truly have the power to do us harm, of nothing else, for nothing else is fearsome.	
	90
God gave me such a nature through His Grace, the torments you must bear cannot affect me, nor are the fires of Hell a threat to me.	
	93
A gracious lady sits in Heaven grieving for what happened to the one I send you to, and her compassion breaks Heaven's stern decree.	
stern decree.	96
She called Lucia and making her request, she said, "Your faithful one is now in need of you, and to you I now commend his soul."	
ms sour.	99
Lucia, the enemy of cruelty, hastened to make her way to where I was, sitting by the side of ancient Rachel,	
	102
and said to me: "Beatrice, God's true praise, will you not help the one whose love was such it made him leave the	
vulgar crowd for you?	105
Do you not hear the pity of his weeping, do you not see what death it is that threatens him along that river the sea shall never conquer?"	100
	108
There never was a wordly person living more anxious to promote his selfish gains than I was at the sound of words	

like these—	111
to leave my holy seat and come down here and place my trust in you, in your noble speech that honors you and all those who have heard it!'	114
	114
When she had finished reasoning, she turned her shining eyes away, and there were tears. How eager then I was to come to you!	
come to you.	117
And I have come to you just as she wished, and I have freed you from the beast that stood blocking the quick way	
up the mount of bliss.	120
94. The lady is the Virgin Mary.	
102. In the Dantean Paradise Rachel is seated by Beatrice.	
So what is wrong? Why, why do you	
delay? Why are you such a coward in your heart, why aren't you bold and free	
delay? Why are you such a coward in	123
delay? Why are you such a coward in your heart, why aren't you bold and free	123
delay? Why are you such a coward in your heart, why aren't you bold and free of all your fear,  when three such gracious ladies, who are blessed, watch out for you up there in Heaven's court, and my words, too,	123 126
delay? Why are you such a coward in your heart, why aren't you bold and free of all your fear,  when three such gracious ladies, who are blessed, watch out for you up there in Heaven's court, and my words, too, bring promise of such good?"  As little flowers from the frosty night are closed and limp, and when the sun shines down on them, they rise to open	
delay? Why are you such a coward in your heart, why aren't you bold and free of all your fear,  when three such gracious ladies, who are blessed, watch out for you up there in Heaven's court, and my words, too, bring promise of such good?"  As little flowers from the frosty night are closed and limp, and when the sun	

Here sighs and cries and shrieks of lamentation echoed throughout the starless air of Hell; at first these sounds resounding made me weep:	
	24
5-6. Divine Omnipotence, Highest Wisdom, and Primal Love are, respectively, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Thus, the gate o Hell was created by the Trinity moved by Justice.	f
18. Souls who have lost sight of God.	
tongues confused, a language strained in anguish with cadences of anger, shrill outcries and raucous groans that joined	
with sounds of hands,	27
raising a whirling storm that turns itself forever through that air of endless black, like grains of sand swirling when a whirlwind blows.	
williwing blows.	30
And I, in the midst of all this circling horror, began, "Teacher, what are these sounds I hear? What souls are these so	
overwhelmed by grief?"	33
And he to me: "This wretched state of being is the fate of those sad souls who lived a life but lived it with no blame and with no praise.	
no praise.	36
They are mixed with that repulsive choir of angels neither faithful nor unfaithful to their God, who undecided stood but for themselves.	
	39
Heaven, to keep its beauty, cast them out, but even Hell itself would not receive	

them, for fear the damned might glory over them. "
42
And I. "Master, what torments do they suffer that force them to lament so bitterly?" He answered: "I will tell you in few words:
45
these wretches have no hope of truly dying, and this blind life they lead is so abject it makes them envy every other fate.
48
The world will not record their having been there; Heaven's mercy and its justice turn from them. Let's not discuss them; look and pass them by."
51
And so I looked and saw a kind of banner rushing ahead, whirling with aimless speed as though it would not ever take a
stand; 54
52-69. In the <i>Inferno</i> divine retribution assumes the form of the <i>contrapasso</i> , i. e., the just punishment of sin, effected by a process either resembling or contrasting to the sin itself. In this canto the <i>contrapasso</i> opposes the sin of neutrality, or inactivity: The souls who in their early lives had no banner, no leader to follow, now run forever after one.
behind it an interminable train of souls pressed on, so many that I wondered how death could have undone so great a
number. 57

When I had recognized a few of them, I saw the shade of the one who must have been the coward who had made the great

refusal.

At once I understood, and I was sure this was that sect of evil souls who were hateful to God and to His enemies.	63
These wretches, who had never truly lived, went naked, and were stung and stung again by the hornets and the wasps that circled them	66
and made their faces run with blood in streaks; their blood, mixed with their tears, dripped to their feet, and disgusting	00
maggots collected in the pus.	69
And when I looked beyond this crowd I saw a throng upon the shore of a wide river, which made me ask, "Master, I would like to know:	
like to know.	72
who are these people, and what law is this that makes those souls so eager for the crossing— as I can see, even in this dim light? "	
ngm.	75
And he: "All this will be made plain to you as soon as we shall come to stop awhile upon the sorrowful shore of Acheron."	
	78
And I, with eyes cast down in shame, for fear that I perhaps had spoken out of turn, said nothing more until we reached the river.	
117C1.	81
And suddenly, coming toward us in a boat, a man of years whose ancient hair was white shouted at us, "Woe to you, perverted souls!	

Give up all hope of ever seeing Heaven: I
come to lead you to the other shore, into
eternal darkness, ice, and fire.

87

60. The coward could be Pontius Pilate, who refused to pass sentence on Christ.

And you, the living soul, you over there, get away from all these people who are dead. "But when he saw I did not move aside,

90

he said, "Another way, by other ports, not here, shall you pass to reach the other shore; a lighter skiff than this must carry you."

93

And my guide, "Charon, this is no time for anger! It is so willed, there where the power is for what is willed; that's all you need to know."

96

These words brought silence to the woolly cheeks of the ancient steersman of the livid marsh, whose eyes were set in glowing wheels of fire.

99

But all those souls there, naked, in despair, changed color and their teeth began to chatter at the sound of his announcement of their doom.

102

They were cursing God, cursing their own parents, the human race, the time, the place, the seed of their beginning, and their day of birth.

	105
Then all together, weeping bitterly, they packed themselves along the wicked shore that waits for every man who fears not God.	
	108
The devil, Charon, with eyes of glowing coals, summons them all together with a signal, and with an oar he strikes the laggard sinner.	111
As in autumn when the leaves begin to fall, one after the other (until the branch is witness to the spoils spread on the ground),	
8	114
so did the evil seed of Adam's Fall drop from that shore to the boat, one at a time, at the signal, like the falcon to its lure.	
	117
Away they go across the darkened waters, and before they reach the other side to land, a new throng starts collecting on this side.	
	120
"My son," the gentle master said to me, "all those who perish in the wrath of God assemble here from all parts of the earth;	
	123
they want to cross the river, they are eager; it is Divine Justice that spurs them on, turning the fear they have into desire.	100
	126
A good soul never comes to make this crossing, so, if Charon grumbles at the	

down to the first circle of the abyss.	24
Down there, to judge only by what I heard, there were no wails but just the sounds of sighs rising and trembling through the timeless air,	
	27
the sounds of sighs of untormented grief burdening these groups, diverse and teeming, made up of men and women and of infants.	30
Then the good master said, "You do not ask what sort of souls are these you see around you. Now you should know before we go on farther,	
	33
they have not sinned. But their great worth alone was not enough, for they did not know Baptism, which is the gateway to the faith you follow,	
the rates you rosson,	36
and if they came before the birth of Christ, they did not worship God the way one should; I myself am a member of this group.	
group.	39
For this defect, and for no other guilt, we here are lost. In this alone we suffer: cut off from hope, we live on in desire. "	42
The words I heard weighed heavy on my heart; to think that souls as virtuous as these were suspended in that limbo, and forever!	
	45
"Tell me, my teacher, tell me, O my master,	

" I began (wishing to have confirmed by him the teachings of unerring Christian doctrine),	
docume),	48
"did any ever leave here, through his merit or with another's help, and go to bliss?" And he, who understood my hidden question,	
	51
answered: "I was a novice in this place when I saw a mighty lord descend to us who wore the sign of victory as his crown.	
	54
He took from us the shade of our first parent, of Abel, his good son, of Noah, too, and of obedient Moses, who made the laws;	
the laws,	57
Abram, the Patriarch, David the King, Israel with his father and his children, with Rachel, whom he worked so hard to win;	60
and many more he chose for blessedness; and you should know, before these souls were taken, no human soul had ever reached salvation."	
	63
We did not stop our journey while he spoke, but continued on our way along the woods— I say the woods, for souls were thick as trees.	
anch as arces.	66
We had not gone too far from where I woke when I made out a fire up ahead, a hemisphere of light that lit the dark.	
	69

place, but close enough for me vaguely to see that honorable souls possessed that spot.	72
	12
"O glory of the sciences and arts, who are these souls enjoying special honor, dwelling apart from all the others here?"	75
And he to me: "The honored name they bear that still resounds above in your own world wins Heaven's favor for them in this place."	
and place.	78
And as he spoke I heard a voice announce: "Now let us honor our illustrious poet, his shade that left is now returned to us."	81
And when the voice was silent and all was quiet I saw four mighty shades approaching us, their faces showing neither joy nor sorrow.	84
69. The "hemisphere of light" emanates from a "splendid castle" (106) the dwelling place of the virtuous men of wisdom in Limbo. The light the illumination of human intellect, which those who dwell in the cast had in such high measure on earth.	t is
Then my good master started to explain: "Observe the one who comes with sword in hand, leading the three as if he were their master.	87
It is the shade of Homer, sovereign poet, and coming second, Horace, the satirist; Ovid is the third, and last comes Lucan.	

name you heard resounding in that single voice, they honor me and do well doing so. "	
	93
So I saw gathered there the noble school of the master singer of sublimest verse, who soars above all others like the eagle.	
eagle.	96
And after they had talked awhile together, they turned and with a gesture welcomed me, and at that sign I saw my master smile.	
muster sinne.	99
Greater honor still they deigned to grant me: they welcomed me as one of their own group, so that I numbered sixth among such minds.	
unong such minus.	102
We walked together toward the shining light, discussing things that here are best kept silent, as there they were most	

105

We reached the boundaries of a splendid castle that seven times was circled by high walls defended by a sweetly flowing stream.

fitting for discussion.

Since they all chare one name with me the

108

86-88. Because his name was inseparably linked with the Trojan War, Homer is portrayed by Dante as a sword-bearing poet, one who sang of arms and martial heroes.

106-111. The allegorical construction of the castle is open to question. It may represent natural philosophy unilluminated by divine wisdom, in which case the seven walls serving to protect the castle would be the

seven moral and speculative virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, intellect, science, and knowledge); and the seven gates that provide access to the castle would be the seven liberal arts that formed the medieval school curriculum (music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy—the *quadrivium*; and grammar, logic, and rhetoric—the *trivium*). The symbolic value of the stream also remains uncertain; it could signify eloquence, a "stream" that the eloquent Virgil and Dante should have no trouble crossing—and indeed, they "walked right over it as on hard ground" (109).

We walked right over it as on hard ground; through seven gates I passed with those wise spirits, and then we reached a meadow fresh in bloom.

111

There people were whose eyes were calm and grave, whose bearing told of great authority; seldom they spoke and always quietly.

114

Then moving to one side we reached a place spread out and luminous, higher than before, allowing us to view all who were there.

117

And right before us on the lustrous green the mighty shades were pointed out to me (my heart felt glory when I looked at them).

120

There was Electra standing with a group, among whom I saw Hector and Aeneas, and Caesar, falcon-eyed and fully armed.

123

112-144. The inhabitants of the great castle are important pagan philosophers and poets, as well as famous writers. Three of the shades named (Saladin, Avicenna, Averroës) lived only one hundred or two hundred years before Dante. Modern readers might wonder at the

The company of six becomes just two; my wise guide leads me by another way out of the quiet into tempestuous air.

150

I come into a place where no light is.

- 140. Dioscorides was a Greek natural scientist and physician of the first century A.D. Orpheus was a mythical Greek poet and musician whose lyrical talent was such that it moved rocks and trees and tamed wild beasts.
- 141. Tully was Marcus Tullius Cicero, celebrated Roman orator, writer, and philosopher (106—43 B.C.). Linus was a mythical Greek poet and musician who is credited with inventing the dirge. Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C. -A.D. 65) followed the philosophy of the Stoics in his moral treatises. Dante calls him "the moralist" to distinguish him from Seneca the tragedian, who was thought (erroneously) during the Middle Ages to be another person.
- 142. Euclid was a Greek mathematician (ca. 300 B.C.) who wrote a treatise on geometry that was the first codification and exposition of mathematical principles. Ptolemy was a Greek mathematician, astronomer, and geographer. The universe, according to the Ptolemaic system (which was accepted by the Middle Ages), so named although he did not invent it, had the earth as its fixed center encircled by nine spheres.
- 143. Hippocrates was a Greek physician (ca. 460-377 B.C.) who founded the medical profession and introduced the scientific art of healing. Galen was a celebrated physician (ca. A.D. 130-ca. 200) who practiced his art in Greece, Egypt, and Rome. Avicenna (or Ibn-Sina) was an Arabian philosopher and physician (A.D. 980-1037) who was a prolific writer.
- 144. Ibn-Rushd, called Averroës (ca. A.D. 1126-ca. 1198), was a celebrated Arabian scholar born in Spain. He was widely known in the Middle Ages for his commentary on Aristotle, which served as the basis for the work of St. Thomas Aquinas.

## **CANTO V**

From Limbo Virgil leads his ward down to the threshold of the Second Circle of Hell, where for the first time he will see the damned in Hell being punished for their sins. There, barring their way, is the hideous figure of Minòs, the bestial judge of Dante's underworld; but after strong words from Virgil, the poets are allowed to pass into the dark space of this circle, where can be heard the wailing voices of the Lustful, whose punishment consists in being forever whirled about in a dark, stormy wind. After seeing a thousand or more famous lovers — including Semiramis, Dido, Helen, Achilles, and Paris — the Pilgrim asks to speak to two figures he sees together. They are Francesca da Rimini and her lover, Paolo, and the scene in which they appear is probably the most famous episode of the Inferno. At the end of the scene, the Pilgrim, who has been overcome by pity for the lovers, faints to the ground.

This way I went, descending from the first into the second round, that holds less space but much more pain—stinging the soul to wailing.

3

There stands Minòs grotesquely, and he snarls, examining the guilty at the entrance; he judges and dispatches, tail in coils.

6

By this I mean that when the evil soul appears before him, it confesses all, and he, who is the expert judge of sins,

9

knows to what place in Hell the soul belongs; the times he wraps his tail around himself tell just how far the sinner must go down.

12

4. Minòs was the son of Zeus and Europa. As king of Crete he was revered for his wisdom and judicial gifts. For these qualities he became chief magistrate of the underworld in classical literature. (See Virgil, *Aeneid* VI, 432-433.) Although Dante did not alter Minòs' official function, he transformed him into a demonic figure, both in his physical

her vicious tastes had so corrupted her she licensed every form of lust with laws to cleanse the stain of scandal she had spread;	57
opreud,	٦/
she is Semiramis, who, legend says, was Ninus' wife as well as his successor; she governed all the land the Sultan rules.	
	60
The next is she who killed herself for love and broke faith with the ashes of Sichaeus; and there is Cleopatra, who	
loved men's lusting.	63
	00
See Helen there, the root of evil woe lasting long years, and see the great Achilles,	
who lost his life to love, in final combat;	66
	66
64. Helen of Troy.	
65-66. Enticed by the beauty of Polyxena, a daughter of the Trojan kin Achilles desired her to be his wife, but Hecuba, Polyxena's mother, arranged a counterplot with Paris so that when Achilles entered the temple for his presumed marriage, he was treacherously slain by Paris	
see Paris, Tristan"—then, more than a thousand he pointed out to me, and	
named them all, those shades whom love cut off from life on earth.	
	69
After I heard my teacher call the names of	
all these knights and ladies of ancient times, pity confused my senses, and I was	
dazed.	
	72
I began: "Poet, I would like, with all my heart, to speak to those two there who move together and seem to be so light	

"O living creature, gracious and so kind, who makes your way here through this dingy air to visit us who stained the world with blood,	
world with blood,	90
if we could claim as friend the King of Kings, we would beseech him that he grant you peace, you who show pity for our atrocious plight.	93
	<i>3</i> 3
Whatever pleases you to hear or speak we will hear and we will speak about with you as long as the wind, here where we are, is silent.	
are, is shelle.	96
The place where I was born lies on the shore where the river Po with its attendant streams descends to seek its final resting place.	
mai resting place.	99
Love, quick to kindle in the gentle heart, seized this one for the beauty of my body, torn from me. (How it happened	
still offends me!)	102
Love, that excuses no one loved from loving, seized me so strongly with delight in him that, as you see, he never	
leaves my side.	105
Love led us straight to sudden death together. Caïna awaits the one who quenched our lives. "These were the words that came from them to us.	108
When those offended souls had told their story. I bowed my head and kept it	