

Divine Comedy

T. S. Eliot wrote, “Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them. There is no third.” Without a doubt, Dante (c.1265-1321) is one of the supreme poets of history, and his *Divine Comedy* one of the supreme achievements of literature. He wrote in the vernacular (Italian rather than Latin), thus helping to shift the world from “Roman” broadly speaking into the “romance” of modern Europe.

Born in Florence, Dante was a vigorous participant in the political life of that Republic. His family was Guelph, which put them on the side of the papacy over against the Holy Roman Emperor in the Florentine power game. When the Guelphs won the struggle for control of Florence (at the 1289 Battle of Campaldino, in which Dante fought), they broke into two further factions: the Whites and the Blacks. Dante became a White Guelph, siding with those who wanted less interference from the Pope in the temporal affairs of the city. The Black Guelphs won in 1301 and exiled Dante, who would never return to Florence. In exile, he wrote *The Divine Comedy*, which sets the drama of human life within a vitally imaginative context of ultimate consequences. This context makes action freer by making it more thoughtful. Troubadour poetry was a formative influence on Dante, as was Thomistic theology. What Dante presents is a cosmic-Christian romance. The poem was composed between c.1308 and 1320, in three great parts. It supposedly recounts Dante’s journey through the three realms of the dead, from the night before Good Friday to Easter Wednesday in 1300, guided by Virgil through the Inferno (hell) and most of Purgatory and by his beloved Beatrice through Paradise.

INFERNO

CANTO I

DANTE, AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-FIVE, comes to his senses to find he has wandered from the true path and is lost in a wild and trackless forest. It is shortly after sunrise and, at the end of the valley, he can see a hill lit by the sun's rays. Taking heart, he begins to climb upward toward the light, but his progress is blocked, first by a prancing leopard, then by a roaring lion, then by a ravening female wolf, or "she-wolf." This third beast so terrifies him that, despairing of scaling the heights, he is forced back down into the darkness below.

As he retreats, he glimpses a faint figure to whom—whatever he may be, a living man or a ghost—he cries out desperately for help. The figure reveals that he is the shade of a Roman poet who sang of Aeneas, a survivor of the fall of Troy. Dante recognizes his beloved Virgil, his chief authority and poetic model. Virgil tells him that he must reach the light by another, less direct route. The she-wolf bars all access to the sun-drenched mountain, but the day will come when she will be driven back to Hell by a messianic Hound that will rid the world of her depravity. Virgil offers to be Dante's guide on the journey that will lead through Hell and Purgatory. Another, worthier guide will accompany him into Paradise. Dante is eager to undertake this pilgrimage.

Midway through the journey of our life
I found myself within a dark wood,
for the straight way had now been lost.

Ah, how hard it is to describe that wood,
a wilderness so gnarled and rough
the very thought of it brings back my fear.

Death itself is hardly more bitter;
but to tell of the good that I found there
I will speak of the other things I saw.

I cannot say just how I entered that wood,
so full of sleep was I at the point
when I abandoned the road that runs true.

But when I reached the foot of a hill
that rose up at the end of the valley
where fear had pierced me through to the heart,

I lifted my eyes and saw its shoulders
already bathed in the light of that planet
that leads us straight along every path.

This calmed a little the lake of my heart
that had surged with terror all through the night
that I had just spent so piteously.

And as a man who, gasping for breath,
has escaped the sea and wades to shore,
then turns back and stares at the perilous waves,

So too my mind, still racing in flight,
turned back to wonder at the narrow gorge
that had never left any traveler alive.

I rested a little and then resumed
my journey across that deserted slope,
so that my firmer foot was always below.

But look there—near the start of the climb
a leopard prowls, all swift and
light and covered with a rippling, spotted hide.

It was everywhere that I turned my eyes,
blocking my way at every turn, so that
again and again I was forced to go back.

The time was early morning, and the sun
was ascending the sky with those very stars
that rose along with it when Divine Love

First set those beautiful things in motion.
So the hour of day and the sweet season
were reasons for me to hope for the best

From that fierce beast with the gaudy pelt;
but not so much that I did not feel fear
at the sight of a lion that then appeared.

This one looked to be coming toward me,
his head held high and roaring with hunger
so that the very air seemed to be trembling—

And then a she-wolf, so emaciated
she seemed stricken with every kind of craving
and had already caused many to live in grief.

The very sight of this creature burdened
me with such a weight of desperate fear
that I lost all hope of attaining the height;

And as a man who eagerly racks up gains
weeps and is wretched in all of his thoughts
when the time finally comes for him to lose,

So did that restless beast make me feel.
Advancing always, she kept pushing me back,
little by little, to where the sun is mute.

While I was scrambling down to those depths
a figure presented itself to my eyes,
one who appeared to be faint through long silence.

When I saw him in that vast and trackless waste,
I cried out to him: "Miserere mei,
whatever you are, living man or shade!"

And he answered me: "Not a living man,
though once I was. My parents were Lombards,
both of them natives of Mantua.

I was born sub Julio, though late,
and lived in Rome under noble Augustus
in the time of the false and lying gods.

I was a poet, and sang of that just
son of Anchises, who came out of Troy
after proud Ilion fell in fire and ash.

But you, why do you return to woe so great?
Why not ascend this blissful mountain,
the source and cause of every kind of joy?"

"Can you be Virgil, then, that great wellspring,
that wide, spreading stream of eloquence?"
I blushed with shame as I said this to him.

"O glory and light of all other poets,
may my long study of your works repay me,
and the love that made me pore over your verse.

You are my master, you are my author.
It is from you alone that I have acquired
the beautiful style that has won me honor.

Look at the beast that makes me turn back.
Save me from her, glorious sage,
for she fills me with fear and makes my blood pound!"

“You will have to go by another road,”
he answered me when he saw my tears flow,
“if you want to escape this wilderness.

This savage beast that makes you wail
does not allow any to pass that way.
She will harry you until she takes your life.

Her nature is so depraved and vicious
that her craving can never be satisfied.
Fed, she is hungrier than before.

Many are the beasts with whom she mates,
and there will be more, until the Veltro comes,
the Hound that will put her to a painful death.

He will not feed on property or wealth,
but on wisdom, on love, and on virtue.
His birthplace will be between Feltro and Feltro,

And he will be lowly Italy’s salvation,
the land for which the virgin Camilla died
along with Euryalus, Turnus, and Nisus.

He will hunt her down through every village
until he sends her back to Hell below
from where Envy first sent her into this world.

Therefore I think that it is best for you
to follow me. I will be your guide
and lead you from here to an eternal place,

Where you will listen to cries of despair
and see the ancient tormented spirits
who lament forever their second death.

And you will see the souls who are content
to stay in the fire, because they hope to arrive,
whenever it may be, among the blessed.

And then, if you wish to ascend to their side,
there will be a soul more worthy than I,
and with her I will leave you when I depart.

For the Emperor who reigns on high
wills that I, who did not obey his law,
never gain admittance into His city.

His rule is everywhere, but there is His reign,
there is His city and exalted throne.
Happy are those chosen to share His domain!”

And I to him: “Poet, I implore you
by that very God whom you did not know:
help me escape this and worse ills too.

Lead me to the place you speak of, so I may go
and look upon Saint Peter’s gate, and see
those whom you say are full of sorrow.”

Then he set out, and I kept him before me.

CANTO XXXIV

THE PILGRIMS REACH THE FOURTH AND FINAL ZONE of Cocytus, Judecca, where Virgil warns Dante that they are at last about to see Dis, king of Hell and embodiment of evil. In fact, squinting ahead, Dante perceives something that looks like a giant sail-driven windmill, towering above the ice, in which the last sinners can be seen to be totally immersed. Half dead with fear, Dante views the three-faced monster, whose arms alone dwarf the mythical Giants Nimrod, Ephialtes, and Antaeus, the last of whom handed them down into the Ninth Circle in Canto XXXI. In each of his three mouths, this rebel against God mangles one of Christian and Roman history’s greatest traitors, Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. Now that they have seen everything Hell has to show, Virgil tells Dante to hang onto him tightly and begins to clamber down the gruesome Dis’ hairy sides. When he reaches the leviathan’s haunches, he inverts his position and begins to ascend, leading Dante to believe that they are going back up. Eventually, however, they scramble down onto solid ground and Virgil explains that they have passed through the center of the Earth. Following a cave hollowed out by an underground stream, they now make their way to the surface and emerge from the darkness of Hell to see the stars.

“Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni
toward us,” my master said. “Look straight ahead
and see if you can make him out.”

Like a windmill turning on the horizon
when a thick fog drifts and settles in
or when our hemisphere turns toward night,

Such a structure I now seemed to see;
then I took shelter behind my leader’s back,

for there was no other way to block the wind.

I was now (and I shudder to put this into verse)
where the shades hung completely engulfed,
showing through the ice like straw through glass.

Some are lying sideways, some stand upright,
one with his head, another with feet on top,
and another bent over double like a bow.

And when we had made our way forward far enough
that it pleased my master to reveal to me
the creature who had been so beautiful once,

He stepped to one side and had me stop,
saying, "Behold Dis. And there is the place
where you must steel your soul to the utmost."

Do not ask, Reader, how frozen and faint
I became then, for I cannot write it down;
every word known to man would not be enough.

I did not die, and yet I was no longer alive.
Imagine, if you can, what I became,
deprived of death and bereft of life.

The emperor of the world of pain
stood out of the ice up to his chest,
and I am bigger standing beside a Giant

Than a Giant would be beside one of his arms.
You can see how huge the whole must be
for a part such as this to fit into place.

If he was as beautiful once as now he is
hideous, and arched his brow against his Maker,
well may he be the source of all woe.

How great a sense of wonder overcame me
when I saw three faces arranged on his head.
One was in the front, as red as cinnabar,

And the other two were aligned with this one
just over the middle of each shoulder,
and all of them fused at the crown of his head.

The one on the right was a pale yellow,
while the left one was as dark a color
as those who live beyond the Nile's cataracts.

Under each face grew a pair of wings
of a size that matched this portentous bird.
I never saw sails so large catch the wind at sea.

They had no feathers, but were bald like the wings
of the darkling bat, and he beat them slowly,
so that three winds blew away from him,

And this was why all Cocytus was frozen.
He wept from six eyes, and over three chins
the tears dripped down with bloody slaver.

In each mouth he chewed upon a sinner
with teeth like a harrow that scutches flax,
and so he kept three in constant agony.

For the sinner in front to be chewed alive
was nothing compared to the claws that flayed him,
so at times his back was utterly stripped of skin.

“The soul up there who is punished the most,”
my master said, “is Judas Iscariot,
who has his head within and flails his legs outside.

Of the other two, with their heads below,
the one who hangs from the black snout is Brutus.
See how he writhes and never says a word.

The other is Cassius, so powerful in stature.
But night is coming on again, and it is time
for us to depart, for we have seen all there is.”

Then, as he wanted, I clasped him around the neck,
and he, gauging the timing and distance,
made his move when the wings opened wide,

And caught hold of the great shaggy flanks.
From one clump of matted hair to another
and down through frozen crusts he descended,

And when we had come to where the thigh
turns within the socket of the hip, my leader,
straining with the weight and near exhaustion,

Brought his head around to where his legs had been,
and struggled with the hair like someone climbing,
so that I thought we were going back to Hell.

“Hold tight, for it is by such stairs as these,”
my master said to me, gasping for breath,
“that we must depart from evil so great.”

At last he climbed through a vent in the rock,
perched me on its edge, and then with a careful stride
brought himself over to where I sat on the rim.

I raised my eyes, expecting I would see
Lucifer as I had left him below, but instead
I saw him with legs stretched out above,

And if I became confused, well then,
let the dull minds out there that fail to see
the point I had passed be the judge of that.

“Up on your feet,” the master said to me.
“The way is long and the road not easy,
and the sun is climbing past the third hour.”

It was no great palatial hall where we were,
but more of a kind of natural dungeon
with a rough floor and a lack of light.

“Before I tear myself away from the abyss,
O my master,” I said when I had risen,
“talk to me and clear up my confusion.

Where is the ice? And how did Lucifer there
get stuck upside down? And how did the sun
transit so quickly from evening to dawn?”

And he said, “You imagine that you are still
on the other side of the center, where I
caught hold of the hair of the Evil Worm

Who pierces the world. You remained on that side
as long as I was descending. But when I pivoted
you passed the point to which all weights are drawn.

And now you are beneath the hemisphere
opposite the one that arches over
the great land mass, under whose zenith

The Man was slain who was born and lived without sin;
and your feet are resting upon a little round
that forms the other face of Judecca.

Here it is morning when it is evening there,
and Lucifer, whose pelt formed a ladder for us,
is in the same position as he was before.

He fell down from Heaven on this side of Earth,
and the land withdrew behind a veil of ocean
and fled to the north, toward our hemisphere;

And the Earth that once filled the empty space
where we are standing, perhaps to escape him,
rushed upward to form what now looms above us.”

There is a region below, stretching underground
as far from Beelzebub as his tomb is deep,
not known by sight, but only by the sound

Of a rivulet winding down through a tunnel
that it has eroded from the solid rock
as it flows in its gently sloping channel.

Up this hidden way my guide and I now went
to return again to the world of light,
and without thought of rest we made the ascent,

He leading the way and I following,
until the beautiful things that Heaven bears
appeared above through a round opening,

And we came out again and saw the stars.

PURGATORIO

CANTO XVI

DANTE AND VIRGIL ENTER THE cloud of darkness that appeared at the end of the previous canto. Dante holds Virgil's shoulder in order not to lose him. They hear the voices of the wrathful praying and singing the "Agnus Dei." One of the invisible souls addresses them, asking to know who Dante is. Dante explains that he is still alive and asks the soul's identity. The soul is that of Marco Lombardo, whom Dante then asks to explain why the world has fallen into such corruption. Marco Lombardo begins an extended discourse that considers human free will, the need for laws, and the corruption brought about by the lack of imperial power.

Darkness of hell, or of a night bereft
of every star, beneath a barren sky
utterly obscured with shadowy clouds,

Had never so thickly veiled my sight
as that smoke that enveloped us there—
or had been so harsh and palpable

That it wouldn't let us keep our eyes open;
and therefore my wise and trusted escort
came to my side and offered me his shoulder.

Just as a blind man walks behind his guide
so he won't get lost or knock against
something that might harm or even kill him,

So did I go through that foul, bitter air
listening to my leader, who was saying,
"Make sure you do not get cut off from me."

I heard voices, and each of them seemed
to be praying for peace and for mercy
from the Lamb of God who takes away our sins.

Indeed, they all began with "Agnus Dei"
and sang the words with one voice on pitch
so that they seemed to be in perfect accord.

I asked, "Master, are these spirits I hear?"
And he answered, "You sense the truth,
and here they untie the knot of wrathfulness."

"And who are you who cut through our smoke
and speak of us as though, even here,

you measured time by a calendar's days?"

This had been said by one of the voices,
and then my master told me, "Answer him,
and ask if the road goes up from here."

And so I said, "O creature cleansing yourself
to return in beauty to the One who made you,
you will hear a wonder if you follow me."

"I will follow as far as permitted,"
he replied, "and if the smoke blocks our sight,
hearing will keep us together instead."

And so I began, "Wearing the swaddling clothes
that death unwinds I make my way upward,
and I have come here through the anguish of Hell.

And since God has enclosed me in such grace
that he wills that I see His court, in a way
wholly beyond all modern custom,

Do not hide from me what you were before death,
but tell it to me, and tell me if I am headed
toward the passage up. Your words will guide us."

"I was a Lombard called Marco by name,
a man of the world who loved that valor
at which today all aim with unstrung bows.

You are on the right path to make the ascent."
So he answered, and then added, "I pray you,
please pray for me when you are above."

I said to him, "You have my promise
to do as you ask. But I will burst with the doubt
I have inside unless I free myself of it,

A single doubt at first, but it has been doubled
by what you just said, which confirms for me
sentiments I have also elsewhere heard.

The world is very much a desert
barren of every virtue, as you tell me,
and overgrown with the malice it bears.

But I pray you, point out to me the reason,
so I may see it and show it to others,
for some blame the heavens, and some the earth."

At first he sighed deeply, a sigh that grief
wrung into “O me.” Then he began, “Brother,
the world is blind, and, yes, you come from it.

You who are still alive assign each cause
only to the heavens, as if they drew
everything with them by necessity.

If that were so, your free will would be destroyed,
and it would not be just to have joy
for goodness, or feel grief for evil.

Yes, the heavens initiate your actions—
I don’t say all of them, but even if I did,
you’ve still received light to see good and evil,

And you still have free will, which, though it may tire
when it first battles the heavens, will later
overcome all if it is properly nourished.

You, free, are subject to a greater power
and a better nature, which creates within you
the mind that is not in the heavens’ charge.

And so, if the world around you goes astray
the cause is in you, in you let it be sought.
I will now be your true informant in this.

From the hands of the Creator, who loves it
before it exists, the soul comes forth
like a child at play, now weeping now laughing.

The simple little soul, which knows nothing
except that, coming from a joyous Maker,
it turns eagerly to whatever delights it.

When it tastes the savor of some trivial good
it turns with eagerness to what delights it
if it is not guided or its love reined in.

And so laws had to be imposed as a curb,
and a ruler was needed who could discern
at least the tower of the one true city.

And laws there are, but who takes them in hand?
No one, because the shepherd in charge
may ruminate, but does not have cleft hooves.

The people, therefore, who see their leader lunge
only at the goods for which they themselves lust,
graze only on that and seek no further.

So you can plainly see that poor guidance
has made the world wicked, and it is not
your own nature that has become corrupt.

Rome, which made the world good, once had two suns,
each illuminating a different road,
the road of the world and the road of God.

One has extinguished the other, and the sword
is now joined to the crook, and these two,
forced to go together, can only go badly,

For, being joined, they do not fear each other.
If you don't believe me, look at an ear of grain,
for every plant is known by its seed.

In the land watered by the Adige and Po
valor and courtesy were once to be found,
before Frederick met with opposition.

Now it could safely be crossed by a person
who wanted out of shame to avoid
speaking with or meeting any good man.

Well, there are three good men still in whom
the ancient age rebukes the new, waiting
for God to take them to a better world:

Currado del Palazzo and the good Gherardo
and Guido da Castel, who is better named,
as he is by the French, the honest Lombard.

From now on say that the Church of Rome,
by confounding in herself two governments,
falls in the mire, fouling her burden and herself."

"O Marco mine," I said, "you reason well;
and now I see why the sons of Levi
were excluded from the inheritance.

But who is this Gherardo, whom you say
remains as one of the vanished people
in reproach of the present barbarous age?"

“Either your words deceive me,” responded Marco,
“or you are testing me, for you, speaking Tuscan,
seem not to have heard of the good Gherardo.

I know him by no other added name,
unless I would take it from his daughter, Gaia.
May God be with you, for I can come

No farther with you. You can already see
gleaming through the smoke a brightening pallor.
The angel is there, and must not spy me.”

So he turned back and would hear me no more.

CANTO XVII

DANTE AND VIRGIL EMERGE FROM the smoke of the terrace of Anger. Dante is immediately overcome by a wave of visions that fill his imagination. These are the examples of Anger. A bright light striking his face awakens Dante from his visions. The angel of the terrace calls the travelers to ascend, his face hidden in his own brightness. As the travelers mount the stair, a further P is removed from the pilgrim's forehead and a Beatitude is sung. As night approaches, Dante feels his physical strength giving way. Dante asks Virgil what sin is purged on the terrace on which they now stand. Virgil responds with an extended discourse on the nature of love between creature and Creator and the characteristics of the seven capital vices in one of the *Commedia's* most important passages of philosophical poetry.

Recall, Reader, if ever in the mountains
a fog has shrouded you and you could not see
except as moles do, through the pores of your skin,

How when the thick, moist mist begins at last
to evaporate, the disk of the sun
feebly penetrates the curtain of haze,

And you will be able to imagine at once
how I saw the reappearance of the sun,
which by now was very close to setting.

So, matching mine to my master's trusted steps,
I came forth from such a fog to the rays
that were already dead on the shores below.

O Imagination, that sweeps us away
so completely from the outside world

that we would not hear a thousand trumpets,

Who moves you when our senses are idle?
A light moves you, either formed in Heaven,
of itself, or by desire that discerns it from below.

I imagined I saw the impious deed
of that woman who was transformed
into the bird that most delights in song;

And my mind was so restrained by this image,
so self-contained, that it received nothing
that came to it from the outside world.

Then rained down into my high fantasy
the image of one crucified, scornful
and fierce in his mien, and so when dying.

About him stood the grand Ahasuerus
and his wife, Esther, and the just Mordecai,
who was in word and deed beyond reproach.

When this image burst, spontaneously,
as a bubble does when the water
of which it is made suddenly gives way,

There rose up in my vision a young maiden
weeping and wailing aloud, "O Queen,
why through anger have you annulled yourself?"

You have killed yourself so that you would not lose
Lavinia, now you have lost me, and I mourn
your ruin, Mother, before another's has happened."

As sleep is shattered when light abruptly
strikes our closed eyes, and although shattered
still shimmers a little before it all dies away,

So too my imagination dropped away
as soon as a light struck my face, far brighter
than any light we are used to seeing.

I was turning around to see where I was
when a voice said, "Here is the way up,"
removing from me every other intent

And giving my desire to see
who the speaker was the sort of eagerness
that never rests until it sees face to face.

But just as the sun overwhelms our sight
and veils its form by its very excess,
so too was my strength now failing me.

“This is a divine spirit directing us
toward the ascent without our asking.
He conceals his form within his own light.

He treats us as we would treat ourselves;
for whoever sees the need but waits to be asked
already tends toward unkind denial.

Now let’s match our steps to this invitation
and try to ascend before it grows dark,
or we will have to wait until daylight returns.”

So said my leader, and then he and I
turned our footsteps to mount a stairway;
no sooner was I on the first step

Than I felt a moving wing fan the air
and brush my face, and I heard
“Beati pacifici, who are without wrath.”

Twilight’s last rays were already so high
on the mountainside above, that the stars
were coming out in many parts of the sky.

“O my strength, why are you melting away?”
I said to myself, for I felt that my legs
had no strength left and had given up the fight.

We were now where the stairway climbed no more
and there we came to a halt, like a ship
that stands at rest when it has reached the shore.

I listened a while to see if I could hear
any sound coming from the new circle,
and then I turned to my master and said,

“Tell me, sweet father, what sin is purged
here in the circle where we are standing?
Our feet may be stayed, but do not stay your speech.”

And he said to me, “In this circle is restored
the love of good that was less than it should be;
here the idled oar is plied once again.

But so that you may understand more clearly,
turn your mind toward me, and you will gather
some good fruit or other from our delay.”

And he went on, “Neither Creator nor creature
was ever without love, either natural
or of the mind, and this you already know.

Natural love is always inerrant,
but the other may err through an evil object
or through having too much or too little vigor.

While it is directed toward the Primal Good
and observes due measure with secondary goods,
it cannot be the cause of sinful pleasure.

But when it is twisted toward evil, or runs
with too much zeal, or too little, toward good,
the creature works against its own Creator.

And so you can see that love must be
the seed of every virtue within you
and of every act that deserves punishment.

Now, since love can never turn its sight
from its subject’s well-being, all things
are secure from ever hating themselves;

And since no being can be thought of as severed
from the First, and as standing on its own,
no being can possibly ever hate Him.

Therefore, if I distinguish correctly,
the evil we love must be our neighbor’s,
and it is born in three ways in your mortal clay.

There is he who hopes to excel
by his neighbor’s fall from greatness
and desires his fall for just this reason.

There is he who fears to lose power, favor,
honor, and fame by another’s exaltation
and is so grieved by it that he loves the contrary.

And there is he who seems so outraged
by injury that he lusts for vengeance
and so needs to contrive another’s hurt.

This threefold love is lamented down below.
Now I would have you hear of the other,
which strives for the good in undue measure.

Everyone dimly apprehends a good
where the mind may find rest. Desiring it,
everyone tries to attain that good.

If it is a sluggish love that draws you
to see and attain it, this terrace here
torments you for it, after due repentance.

And there is another good, one that does not
make man happy, for it is not the essence
of every good, its source and its fruit.

Love that gives itself to this with abandon
is wept for in the three circles above,
but the nature of its threefold division,

So you may seek it yourself, I will not speak of.”

CANTO XVIII

VIRGIL PAUSES IN HIS DISCOURSE to see if Dante has understood and, perceiving a continued doubt in his pupil, encourages him to say what is on his mind. Dante asks him to explain love. Virgil continues at length his philosophical discourse on the nature of love and free will. By the time Virgil has finished his explanation the moon is rising and Dante is beginning to feel drowsy. There suddenly breaks upon the scene a great crowd of people, running. These are the slothful who call out exempla of zeal. Virgil asks the souls to show them the way to ascend, and one of them replies. This is the abbot of San Zeno. After he has run off, two further souls appear who are calling out examples of Sloth. The canto ends with Dante’s thoughts wandering as he falls into sleep.

After the exalted teacher had finished
his lecture to me, he gazed intently
at my face to see if I was satisfied.

I was thirsty for more, and though outwardly
I said not a word, inside I was saying,
“Maybe I’m annoying him with my questions.”

But, dear father that he was, he was aware
of my undeclared and timid desire

and spoke to give me courage to speak.

And so I said, "Master, my vision becomes
so keen in your light that I clearly see
each distinction you make, and all you describe.

Therefore, sweet father dear, I beg you,
explain to me love, to which you reduce
every good action and its opposite."

"Direct upon me," he said, "the sharp eyes
of your intellect, and you will soon see
the folly of the blind leading the blind.

The mind, which is created ready to love,
moves toward anything that pleases it
as soon as that pleasure wakes it to act.

Your perception draws from real objects an image
and unfolds it within you in such a way
that your mind turns its attention there,

And if the mind, so turned, inclines toward it,
that inclination is love, and it is nature,
bound up anew in you through pleasure.

Then, as fire, which is born to ascend,
moves upward in its very essence
to survive in its natural element,

Just so the captive mind attains its desire,
a movement of the spirit that never rests
until it enjoys the thing that it loves.

Now you can see how hidden is the truth
from people who insist that every love
is worthy of praise in and of itself,

Perhaps because in its substance love
always seems good. But not every seal
is as good as the wax used for the imprint."

"Your words and my wit in following them,"
I said, "have revealed the nature of love to me,
but that has filled me with even more doubt.

For if love is offered from outside of us,
and if the soul moves on no other foot,
it has no merit in going straight or crooked."

Then he said, "As far as reason can see here,
I can tell you. Beyond that you must look
to Beatrice, for it has to do with faith.

Every substantial form that is distinct
from matter and yet united with it
contains its own distinctive power,

One not perceived except in action
nor ever shown except by its effect,
as green leaves show the life of a plant.

Therefore, no one knows where the intellect
gets its first principles, or its affection
for primordial objects of desire.

They are in you as zeal for making honey
is present in bees, and this primal will
does not admit of either praise or blame.

Now so that every other will conforms to this,
there is innate in you a sense of judgment
that must hold the threshold of assent.

This is the principle that justifies merit
for what you do, according to how
it garners and winnows good and evil loves.

Those who reasoned this through to the root observed
this inborn free will, and they were the ones
who left to the world a system of ethics.

So even supposing that every love
is kindled in you through necessity,
the power to restrain it is still within you.

Beatrice understands this noble virtue
as free will; therefore you should have it in mind
if ever she should speak of it to you."

The moon, rising just before midnight
like a glowing copper pitcher, made the stars
seem fewer to us than they had earlier,

And it moved through the sky along the course
that the sun inflames when the Romans see it
setting between Sardinia and Corsica.

That noble shade through whom Pietola
is more renowned than any Mantuan town
had laid down the load I had placed on him,

So that I, having reaped his lucid answers
to the questions I had posed, was left
to vague, drifting thoughts in my drowsiness.

But that drowsiness was lifted from me
all of a sudden by a crowd of people
who had come round to us from behind our backs.

And just as the Ismenus and Asopus saw
a furious crowd along their banks at night
whenever the Thebans would summon Bacchus,

So too these souls, from what I saw of them,
rounding the circle's bend and coming on
with Right Will and Just Love riding them.

They were upon us in no time, the whole throng
all moving together in one mass sprint,
and two in the front shouting through their tears,

"Mary ran in great haste to the mountains"
and "Caesar, to subdue Lerida,
fainted at Marseilles and then ran on to Spain."

"Faster, faster, so that no time be lost
through little love," cried the others behind them,
"and so that zeal to act may renew God's grace!"

"O souls in whom keen fervor now perhaps
makes up for the negligence and delay
in doing good that your lukewarmness caused,

This man here, who is alive—and I do not lie—
would like to ascend as soon as it is light,
so tell us where the opening is at hand."

These were the words of my leader,
and one of the spirits responded, "Come
behind us and you will find the gap.

We are so filled with desire to move
that we cannot stay, so pardon us
if our penance seems to be rudeness to you.

I was abbot of San Zeno in Verona
under the rule of the good Barbarossa,
of whom Milan still speaks with sorrow.

And there is one with one foot in the grave
who will soon lament that monastery
and grieve that he ever had power there,

Because his son, crippled in his body,
worse in his mind, and born to woe,
he has put there in place of its lawful pastor.”

I do not know whether he said more
or if he was silent, he’d run so far ahead,
but this much I heard and was pleased to retain.

Then he who was my constant salvation
said to me, “Turn around so you can see
two of them coming and giving a bite to sloth.”

At the rear of the pack these two were saying,
“The people for whom the Red Sea opened
were dead before Jordan saw its heirs;

And those who did not maintain their effort
all the way to the end with Anchises’ son
made for themselves a life without glory.”

When those shades had left us so far behind
that they could no longer be kept in sight
a new thought took form within my mind,

And this to a number of others gave rise,
so that, roaming from one to another theme
in my mental wandering, I closed my eyes

And transmuted my musing into a dream.

CANTO XXVII

THE TRAVELERS COME TO THE angel of the terrace of Lust,
who pronounces a Beatitude. He informs the travelers that they too
must pass through the wall of flames in order to continue their jour-
ney. Dante is terrified and Virgil must persuade him to go on. It is
only at the mention of Beatrice that the pilgrim agrees to continue.
Dante, Virgil, and Statius walk through the burning flames follow-
ing the sound of voices singing on the other side. Emerging from the
flames, Dante and his guides continue onward as the sun sets, finally

stopping when night has fallen. Dante falls asleep and dreams of a vision of Leah and Rachel. He awakens at dawn. Virgil addresses the pilgrim, telling him that he has nothing more to teach him and proclaiming Dante's freedom.

As when it strikes with its dawning rays
the place where its Maker shed His blood
while the Ebro falls beneath the zenith Scales,

And the Ganges' waters are scorched by noon,
so stood the sun. And so day was departing
when the blissful angel of God appeared.

He stood on the bank outside the flames
and was singing, "Beati mundo corde"
in a voice that was more alive than ours.

Then, "There is no going farther, holy souls,
if the fire does not bite you. Enter it,
and do not be deaf to the chanting beyond,"

He said to us when we were near to him,
and when I heard it I became like someone
who is about to be put into the pit.

I bent forward over my clasped hands, staring
into the fire and vividly imagining
human bodies I had once seen burned.

My noble escorts both turned to me,
and Virgil explained, "My son, there may be
torment here, but there is not death.

Remember, remember! And if I
guided you safely on Geryon's back,
what shall I do now, closer to God?

You can be sure that even if you stayed
a thousand years in the belly of this flame
you would not lose a single hair on your head.

And if you think that I am deceiving you,
go up to it and test it for yourself
holding out the hem of your robe in your hands.

Now put aside all your fear, turn this way
and walk right in there with confidence."
And I, against my conscience, would not budge.

When he saw me stand there obstinately
he said, a little annoyed, "Now look here, son,
between Beatrice and you there is this wall."

As Pyramus, dying, opened his eyes
when he heard Thisbe's name and looked at her,
that time when the mulberry first became red,

So too, my stubbornness melting away,
I turned to my wise leader when I heard the name
that wells up continuously in my mind.

He shook his head at this and said, "Well?
Do want to stay on this side?" And he smiled,
as if at a child won over with an apple.

Then he went into the fire ahead of me,
asking Statius, who had been between us
for a long way now, to bring up the rear.

As soon as I was in I would have thrown myself
into molten glass to cool myself down,
so beyond all measure was the burning there.

My sweet father, to comfort and encourage me,
went on talking about Beatrice, saying,
"I think I can see her eyes already."

Guiding us was a voice that chanted
from the other side; and, concentrating
on it, we came out where the ascent began.

"Venite, benedicti Patris mei,"
sounded from within a light that was there,
so overwhelming I could not bear to observe it.

"The sun is setting," it added, "and evening comes;
do not stop, but quicken your pace
before the western horizon blackens."

The way led straight up into the rock
at such an angle that my back intercepted
the rays of the sun, which was now quite low,

And we had managed only a few of the steps
when I and my sages saw my shadow fade out,
whereby we knew that the sun had set behind us.

Then, before the immense and varied expanse
of the horizon had all turned the same shade,
and night held sway in all her dominions,

Each of us took a stair as his bed,
for the mountain's nature dispossessed us
of the power and the will to climb anymore.

As goats become quiet when they ruminates
after being frisky and headlong
up in the mountains before they feed,

Standing silent in the shade on a summer day
and guarded by a herdsman, who leans
on his staff as he tends to their rest;

And as a shepherd, who lives in the open,
passes the night beside his quiet flock
and watches so a beast will not scatter it—

Such were the three of us during that night,
I as a goat and they as shepherds,
hemmed in on both sides by high walls of rock.

Little could be seen outside those walls,
but through that little I saw the stars,
larger and brighter than they usually are.

As I was ruminating and gazing at them
sleep overtook me, sleep that often
knows the news before the event.

At the hour, I think, when Cytherea,
who always seems glowing with the fire of love,
first shone on the eastern flank of the mountain,

I seemed to see in a dream a lady
young and beautiful, going through a meadow
gathering flowers and singing these words:

“If anyone asks my name, let him know
that I am Leah and I go about weaving
my fair hands around to make me a garland.

I adorn myself here so that my reflection
will please me, but my sister Rachel never leaves
her mirror, sitting before it all day long.

She is as eager to gaze at her own fair eyes
as I am to adorn myself with my hands.
She sees, and I do, and we are both satisfied.”

And now the splendors of the early dawn
that become more welcome to the pilgrim soul
the nearer he lodges to his home

Were putting to flight the shadows all around
and my sleep along with them. Up I rose,
seeing the great masters already risen.

“The sweet fruit that mortals desire
and search for through so many branches
day will lay your cravings to rest.”

Virgil addressed me with words of this sort,
and never have there been any gifts
that could give pleasure equal to these.

Desire upon desire to ascend
so overwhelmed me that with every stride
I felt that I was growing wings for flight.

When the stairs had all run out beneath us
and we were standing on the topmost step,
Virgil fixed his eyes on me and said,

“The temporal fire and the eternal
you have seen, my son, and now you have come
where on my own I can see no farther.

I have brought you here by my wits and skill.
Take your own pleasure as your guide now.
You are free of the steep way, free of the narrow.

Look at the sun shining on your brow,
look at the new grass, the flowers and trees
that the earth produces here on its own.

You may wander among them or sit in their shade
until the beautiful eyes come rejoicing,
the eyes that weeping made me come to your aid.

Expect no further word or sign from me.
Your will is free now, whole, and true;
not to follow its lead would now be folly.

Sovereign of yourself I crown and miter you.”

PARADISO

CANTO III

THE SOULS IN PARADISE do not have “virtual bodies” as did shades in Hell and Purgatory. Here in the heaven of the Moon they still have a vague human physiognomy, though indistinct, like watery reflections. Whereas in Purgatory the danger was to mistake images for solid things, here the pilgrim mistakes real beings for mere reflected images. The faces ready to speak to Dante appear only as faintly as “a pearl on a white brow” (14). White on white is difficult to discern, precisely because of lack of difference. We remember from the first canto that the diversity among things is what makes God’s image visible in His creation. Diversity among happy souls—who are not all alike—is the theme of this canto. These souls are said to be “relegated” to this lowest sphere because of a failure to keep their vows. Piccarda Donati, sister of Forese, whom we met among the gluttons in Purgatory, and of Corso, damnable leader of the Black Guelphs, tells Dante how she joined the order of the Poor Clares as a young girl in order to flee from the world, but that “men more used to evil than to good”—led presumably by her vicious brother—then “snatched [her] away from that sweet cloister” (106–7). Only God knows, she says, what her life then became. Piccarda and Constance, mother of Emperor Frederick II whom Piccarda goes on to introduce, are women who were forced into marriages—marriages which violated their monastic vows—against their will. To be rewarded with an inferior lot in Heaven seems a harsh justice and a defective happiness. Just as the spotty moon seemed defective, so too these saints seem second class. Transferring the astronomical lesson to people: difference does not mean defect. Dante’s first question is thus whether their ostensibly low status in Heaven is also against their will, against their deepest desires for a higher place. Piccarda’s answer, which has left many a reader unsatisfied, actually exemplifies the principle of ordered difference as an essential good, rather than as something defective. To desire exactly what one has is not so much required by an authoritarian God as it is necessitated by the definition of what it is to be blessed. It is the form, or essence, of that supreme happiness to desire exactly what God desires—“In His will is our peace” (85); in other words, to desire what is. Desires are movements that are quieted by being satisfied. When threatened with violence in life, these women acquiesced to evil. What makes them happy now is that they have acquiesced to the good—“charity / quiets our will” (70–71, my emphasis). In other words, they are completely satisfied with who they are. Exemplifying the “physics” of desire, Piccarda sinks upward, “like a weight through

deep water plummeting” (123), just as Dante’s own eyes follow her until they revert to Beatrice, “the vision that they desired most” (126).

The sun that first warmed my heart with love
had uncovered for me, by proof and rebuttal,
the sweet beauty of the face of truth;

And I raised my head, although no higher
than was necessary for me to confess
that I stood corrected and was assured;

But as I did so a sight appeared to me
that so strongly compelled my attention then
that I do not remember if I said anything.

Just as through smooth, transparent glass,
or through a pool of still, limpid water
not so deep that the bottom is lost,

The outlines of our faces return to us
so faint that a pearl on a white brow
does not come less quickly to our eyes.

I saw many such faces, eager to speak,
and I ran into the opposite error
than the one Narcissus made with the spring.

As soon as I saw them, taking them to be
reflected semblances, I turned my eyes
to see whose images they were.

Seeing nothing there, I turned my eyes back
straight into the light of my sweet guide,
whose holy eyes glowed as she smiled.

“Do not wonder,” she said to me, “that I smile
at your childish mind, for it does not yet
trust its footing on the truth, but instead

Turns you back, as usual, into a void.
These are real beings that you see,
relegated here for a broken vow.

Speak with them therefore, and hear and believe,
for the true light that gives them peace
does not let them turn their feet away from itself.”

So I addressed myself to the shade that seemed
most eager to talk, and, like a man confused

by excessive desire, I began,

“O spirit created for happiness, who
in the beams of eternal life feel the sweetness
that if not tasted is never understood,

It would be a kindness if you satisfied me
by telling me both your name and your lot.”
Then she, ready and with smiling eyes, said,

“Our charity does not shut doors in the face
of just desire, any more than does His
who wants all His court to be like Himself.

In the world I was a virgin sister,
and if you search your memory well
my being more beautiful will not conceal me,

But you will recognize that I am Piccarda,
put here with these other blessed ones,
and blessed am I in the slowest of the spheres.

Our affections, which are set alight only
in the pleasure of the Holy Spirit,
rejoice in being conformed to His order,

And this lot of ours, which seems so low,
has been given to us because our vows
were neglected and in some manner void.”

Then I said to her, “There shines forth from you
in your marvelous appearance something divine
that is different from my memory of you,

And that is why I was slow to remember.
But what you are saying now assists me
to recall more clearly the lines of your face.

But tell me, do you who are happy here
desire a higher place, in order that
you may see more and be more beloved?”

Along with the other shades she first smiled a little,
and then she responded to me so gladly
she seemed to be in the first fire of love.

“Brother,” she said, “the virtue of charity
quiets our will and causes us to wish for
only what we have and thirst for nothing more.

If we desired to be more exalted,
our desire would be discordant with the will
of the One who assigns us to this place,

And you will see that this cannot hold
in these circles, since love here is guaranteed,
if you consider well the nature of these spheres.

It is the essence of the blessed state
that we keep ourselves within the divine desire
so that our desires themselves may be unified.

Therefore our rank from tier to tier
within this kingdom pleases the whole,
as it does the King who wills our desires to His.

And in His will is our peace. It is the sea
to which all things move, both those things
that it creates and what nature makes.”

It became clear to me then that every where
in Heaven is Paradise, though the Supreme Good
does not rain grace everywhere equally.

But just as when we have enough of one food
but still crave another, and so we give thanks
for one thing as we ask for something else,

So too was I, trying with speech and gesture
to learn from her what was the web through which
she had not drawn the shuttle to the end.

“Perfect life and high desert,” she said to me.
“enheaven higher a lady by whose rule
they take the robe and veil in your world below,

So that until death they wake and sleep
with that Bridegroom who accepts every vow
that love conforms to what pleases Him.

As a young girl I fled from the world
to follow her, wrapped myself in her habit,
and avowed the way of her sisterhood.

Then men more used to evil than to good
snatched me away from that sweet cloister.
Only God knows what my life was then.

This other splendor that shows itself to you
here on my right and that kindles itself
with all of the light that our sphere contains

Applies to herself the same story as mine.
She was a sister, and in much the same way
the wimple's holy shade was taken from her head.

But even after she was returned to the world
against her will and against proper custom,
the veil was never stripped from her heart.

It is the light of the great Constance,
who bore to Swabia's second storm
the third and the last true emperor."

She said this to me and then began to sing
Ave Maria, and as she sang she vanished
like a weight through deep water plummeting.

My eyes followed her until she was lost
to my sight, and then they reverted
to the vision that they desired most,

Turning themselves upon Beatrice alone;
but she flashed on my gaze in such a manner
that my eyes at first could not bear how she shone,

And this made me slower to question her.

CANTO XXXIII

BERNARD'S PRAYER TO THE VIRGIN is a stilnovist love poem, that is, a poem of high praise, rife with oxymora ("virgin mother," "your own Son's daughter," "humblest and most exalted"). It celebrates the Incarnation in Mary's womb, where the divine "fit" into the human, the same mystery contemplated in geometric terms at canto's end as how the human image might "fit" into the triple circle of divinity. The final vision, the object of the prayer, is approached not alone but through a series of mediations. On the pilgrim's behalf, Bernard, together with a multitude of the blessed, prays to the Virgin, whose assistance is fundamental to anyone who seeks grace, and grace is itself a means. The final part of the prayer is for the time beyond the vision, beyond the end of the poem, when the poem's protagonist will have returned to earth. Just as he had with Beatrice throughout the *Paradiso*, Dante follows and imitates Mary's gaze upward into the beam of light. The remainder of the final canto is less about what

Dante sees than what he cannot remember about it. It is like the impression of a forgotten dream, the sweetness of a lost vision, the imprint of melted snow, the message of the Sybil's scattered leaves, the long gone shadow of a mythical ship passing over the head of a god, the incoherent speech of a nursing infant. The lost vision was the opposite of this—not scattered leaves, but the universe “bound by love into one volume” (86), the good all gathered into it in a universal knot, the human image fitted to the Trinity, the circle squared. The last lines of the poem, completing the triple rhyme over all three canticles on stelle (“stars”), describe life after the vision, no longer in heaven, but responsive to its impetus like the frictionless rotation of a planetary sphere.

“Virgin Mother, your own Son's daughter,
humblest and most exalted of creatures,
fixed point of heaven's eternal plan,

You are she who did so ennoble
our human nature that its Creator
did not disdain to be His creature's creation.

In your womb was rekindled the Love
by whose warmth this celestial flower
has blossomed in the eternal peace.

You are for us here the noonday light
of charity, and among mortals below
you are the living fountain of hope.

Lady so powerful and so great,
whoever seeks grace without turning to you
wishes to fly without having wings.

Your compassionate aid is not only given
to those who ask, but oftentimes also
is freely given before being sought.

In you is mercy, in you tender pity,
in you munificence. In you is joined
all the goodness found in any creature.

This man, who from the deepest abyss
of the universe up to this height
has seen one by one the lives of the spirits,

Now begs you, through grace, to give him the power
to rise higher still and with his own eyes
ascend to the vision of final salvation.

And I, who never burned for my own vision
more than I do for his, offer to you
all my prayers, and pray they not fall short,

Pray that you will disperse by your prayers
all of the mist of his mortality
so that supreme beauty may be revealed to him.

And this too I pray, Queen, for you are able
to accomplish your will: keep his heart pure
after he has had so great a vision;

Watch and vanquish his human impulses.
See Beatrice and how many of the blest
fold their hands to you for the sake of my prayer.”

The eyes beloved and revered by God,
trained on the suppliant, showed us clearly
how dear to her are the prayers of the devout.

Then she turned her gaze towards the Eternal Light,
into which it cannot be believed
another could penetrate with so clear an eye.

And I, who was approaching now at last
the end of all longing, now intensified
as well I ought, my burning desire.

Bernard smiled at me and gave me a sign
that I should look up, but of myself
I was already doing what the saint wished.

For my sight, becoming pure and clear,
was evermore deeply entering the beam
of the exalted light that is in itself true.

From that moment on, my vision became
vaster than our speech, which fails at such sight,
as memory, too, fails at such high excess.

Like someone who sees a thing in a dream
and after he wakes an impression remains
but nothing more returns to his mind,

So too am I, for the vision has almost
wholly faded away, yet still there drops
deep within my heart the sweetness it bore.

So snow loses its imprint under the sun,
and so when its leaves were blown by the wind
the oracle of the Sybil was lost.

O Supreme Light, so far above
all mortal conception, restore to my mind
a little of how you appeared to it then,

And allow my tongue to have power enough
to leave to people yet to be born
at least a spark of your luminous glory;

for by returning somewhat to my memory
and being voiced a little in these lines,
the better your triumph will be conceived.

I think that the keenness of the living ray
that I endured would have left me lost
if I had turned my eyes away from it,

And I remember that for this reason
I was more fervent to sustain it, until
my gaze reached the Infinite Goodness.

O abundant grace, which made me dare
to fix my eyes upon the Eternal Light
so long that I spent all my vision on it!

I saw that it contained within its depths,
bound by love into one volume, all that is
scattered in pages through the universe,

Substances, accidents, and their relations
fused together, as it were, in such a way
that what I speak of is a simple light.

I believe I saw the universal form
of this knot of things, because as I speak of it,
I feel the joy within me expand.

One moment created greater oblivion for me
than twenty-five centuries did for the quest
that made Neptune marvel at the Argo's shadow.

So my mind gazed, completely entranced,
still, focused, unmoving, intent,
and constantly rekindled by the gazing itself.

Whoever is in that light becomes such
that it is impossible ever to consent
to turn from it to any other sight.

For the good that is the object of the will
is all gathered into it, and apart from that light
all is defective that is perfect there.

Now my speech will convey even less
of what I remember than that of an infant
who still nurses at his mother's breast.

Not that there was more than a single aspect
to the living light upon which I gazed,
for it is ever the same as it was before,

But my sense of sight was gaining strength
as I continued to look, and as I changed
the simple appearance was transformed for me,

And in the profound and clear substance
of that high radiance three rings now appeared,
of three colors and equal circumference.

Two reflected each other, as rainbow
by rainbow, and the third seemed like fire
breathed forth equally from the other two.

Ah, how weak is language in comparison
to my conception, itself less than little
when compared to my actual vision.

O Light Eternal, that in Yourself alone abide,
that alone know Yourself and, known and knowing,
love and smile upon Yourself alone!

The circling generated in this style
appeared in You as a brilliant reflection,
and when my eyes had dwelled on it a while

It seemed that there was painted deep within
an image of ourselves, in its own color,
so that it held my complete attention.

Like the geometer who bends his will
to discover how the circle might be squared,
but cannot find the required principle,

So too I with this new sight at which I stared,
yearning to understand how our image fit
onto the circle and was itself there in-where.

This would have exceeded my own wings' ambit,
had not a sudden brilliance burst through my mind,
bringing all that I wished for along with it.

Here my high phantasy's power declined;
but, like a wheel whose motion never jars,
my will and desire now were turned in kind

By the Love that moves the sun and other stars.

