The Divine Comedy (Cantos 1-4 from Inferno)

1. In Cantos 1-2, Dante decides to go into Hell with the dead (and apparently reincarnate) poet Virgil (who represents reason), rather than walking away with wild beasts. In a paragraph of 120-140 words, explain the importance of Dante's decision: Why is it a better choice than the wild beasts?

In the beginning of Cantos 1, Dante is trapped within a forest and is trying to escape. When he reaches the edge, Dante runs into three wild beasts: a lion, a leopard, and a she-wolf. This forces Dante back into the forest and prevents his escape. Dante then sees the ghostly figure of Virgil, an ancient Roman poet. Virgil tells Dante that he will be killed if he tries to pass the wild beasts. He states that the she-wolf comes from Hell and kills anyone who approaches her. Virgil was sent from Hell to guide Dante through Purgatory and Hell in order to get to Heaven. In Cantos 2, Dante is hesitant to go with Virgil because he is scared he will not survive the journey. Virgil reassures Dante and tells him that he was sent by Dante’s wife Beatrice from Heaven to aid him.

2. Early in Canto 3, Dante gives us a sense of his own perception of “intellect,” which is different from our "modern limitation of intellect to the world of mere thought or academic consideration." In 120-140 words, explain how Virgil's comments on the fallen souls serve to explain Dante's views of the intellect.

In the beginning of Canto 3, Vigil explains to Dante, "Here thou must all distrust behind thee leave; Here be vile fear extinguish'd. We are come Where I have told thee we shall see the souls To misery doom'd, who intellectual good Have lost" (Dante). As they enter the Gate of Hell, Dante hears cries of torment and suffering all around him. Vigil describes to Dante how these are the souls of all the people and angels who did not commit to either good or evil. Both Heaven and Hell reject them, so they are stuck here suffering from flies and wasps constantly biting them and worms that eat their blood and tears. These suffering souls never chose a side in life and are now losing their minds in the “Ante-Inferno”.

3. In Canto 4, Dante visits the first circle in Hell, where some of the greatest thinkers and poets abide. However, Dante's description of this abode of "virtuous pagans" seems to be pleasant rather than grim. In 100-120 words, explain what you believe might be Dante's reasons for such a pleasant description.

Dante describes these great thinkers and poets as virtuous pagans because they were good people and inspired many people through their works. They aren’t allowed in Heaven because they either didn’t know about Christianity or they have not received a Christian baptism. When Dante visits the first circle of Hell, he sees some of the souls their including Homer, Aristotle, Aeneas and others. They are able to talk to each other and they don’t seem like they are suffering. Virgil also resides in the first circle of Hell, but he was allowed to leave to guide Dante on his journey. Virgil also tells Dante that some people get to leave Limbo and go to Heaven such as Noah, Moses, and others.

Dante, Alighieri. *The Vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise*. Translated by Henry Francis. Cary, Project Gutenberg, 2004, www.gutenberg.org/files/8789/8789-h/8789-h.htm#link3.