THE DIVINE COMEDY

DANTE ALIGHIERI

A new translation by
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With twenty-four
illustrations by
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CANTO I

This canto, the prologue to Dante's journey through the Inferno, acts also as an introduction to *The Divine Comedy* as a whole.

At the age of thirty-five Dante realizes he is lost in a dark, terrifying wood. He takes heart when he sees in front of him a hilltop shining in sunlight. But, as he starts to climb the hill, he is frightened by a leopard which obstructs him in a threatening manner, and then by an angry lion, and finally by a she-wolf – the most alarming animal of the three. So Dante is driven back into the darkness which – as we soon come to realize about everything in this poem – is both real and allegorical. (There are, throughout this poem, many kinds of allegory. For instance, the leopard, the lion and the she-wolf – emblems rather than symbols, and therefore in need of interpretation – are of a different order from the dark wood, whose import is obvious.)

A human figure approaches, and Dante, uncertain whether it is a living being or a ghost, implores its help. The figure explains that he is the shade of Virgil. This is the poet whom Dante, as he is quick to declare, admires more than any other. Virgil encourages Dante, and explains that he must travel by a different road if he is to find a way out of his difficulties.

After making an obscure prophecy about the coming of a hound which will kill the she-wolf and also be the saviour of Italy, Virgil says that he will guide Dante through the realms of the Inferno, inhabited by the souls of the damned, who are beyond all hope; and also through Purgatory, where the souls of those now doing penance for their sins are residing, glad to suffer because they have the certain hope of going ultimately to Paradise. Virgil, because he was a pagan who lived and died before Christ and so could not believe in Him, cannot accompany Dante into Paradise. But he says there is another guide who will take Dante there. Dante accepts Virgil's guidance, and they set off.

*

Halfway along our journey to life's end
I found myself astray in a dark wood,
Since the right way was nowhere to be found.
How hard a thing it is to express the horror
Of that wild wood, so difficult, so dense!
Even to think of it renews my terror.
It is so bitter death is scarcely more.
But to convey what goodness I discovered,
I shall tell everything that I saw there.
How I got into it I cannot say:
I'd fallen into such a heavy sleep
The very instant that I went astray.
But when I came beneath a steep hillside –
Which rose at the far end of that long valley
That struck my stricken heart with so much dread –
I lifted up my eyes, and saw the height

Covered already in that planet's rays[1]
Which always guides all men and guides them right.
And then the fear I felt was somewhat less,
Though it had filled my heart to overflowing
The whole night I had spent in such distress.
And as somebody, trying to get his breath,
Emerging from the sea, now safe on shore,
Turns round to look at where he cheated death,
Just so inside my mind, which was still fleeing,
I turned to look again upon that pass
Which never left alive one human being.
When I'd rested my body for a time,
I made my way across deserted foothills,
Keeping my low foot always the more firm.[2]
And then, just where the hill began to rise,
I saw a leopard, light upon its paws,
Covered all over in a spotted hide![3]
It would not move, but stood in front of me,
And so obstructed me upon my journey
I kept on turning round to turn and flee.
By then it was the first hour of the morning,
With the sun rising in the constellation
That came with him when stars we still see burning
Were set in motion by divine love first.[4]
And so I had good cause to feel encouraged –
About the lithe and gaily coloured beast –
By that glad time of day and time of year.
But not so much encouraged that a lion
Failed to inspire alarm as it drew near.
It did seem that the beast was drawing near,
With head held high, and so irate with hunger
The air itself seemed shivering in fear.[5]
And then a she-wolf! Though she was so lean,
She looked about to burst, being crammed with cravings,
She who'd made many draw their breath in pain.[6]
The pain she caused me was so terrible,
And such the terror coming from her sight,
I lost all hope of climbing up the hill.

1 According to the Ptolemaic system, accepted in Dante's time, the sun was one of several planets revolving round the earth. The dark wood and the comforting sunlight mark the beginning of that symbolism of light and darkness which runs through the whole *Comedy*.
2 He was climbing.
3 This leopard is an embodiment of the sin of lust, or sensuality in general, commonly associated with youth.
4 It was a common medieval belief that, when the world was created, the season was early spring, with the sun in the constellation of Aries.
5 The lion embodies the sins of wrath and pride, commonly associated with middle age.
6 The she-wolf embodies the sin of avarice, commonly associated with old age.

And like that miser, happy while he's gaining,
  Who when luck changes and he starts to lose,
  Gives himself up to misery and moaning –
That's how I was, faced by that restless brute,
  Which always coming nearer, step by step
  Drove me back down to where the sun is mute.[1]
Then suddenly, as I went slipping down,
  Someone appeared before my very eyes,
  Seemingly through long silence hoarse and wan.[2]
When I caught sight of him in that wide waste,
  "Take pity on me," I shouted out to him,
  "Whatever you are, a real man or a ghost!"
He answered: "Not a man, though I was once.
  Both of my parents came from Lombardy,
  And both of them were native Mantuans.
I came to birth *sub Julio*, rather late,[3]
  And lived in Rome under the good Augustus[4]
  When false, deceptive gods still held their state.
I was a poet, and I sang the good
  Son of Anchises who came out of Troy
  When Ilium was burned in all its pride.[5]
But you, why d'you go back to misery?
  Why don't you climb up the delightful mountain,
  The origin and cause of perfect joy?"
"Then are you Virgil, you, that spring, that stream
  Of eloquence, that ever-widening river?"
  I answered, red with reverence and shame.
"Oh every poet's glory and guiding light!
  May I be aided by the love and zeal
  That made me turn your pages day and night.
You are my only master and my author,
  You only are the one from whom I took
  That style which has bestowed on me such honour.
You see the beast that made me turn in flight.
  Save me from her, O famous fount of wisdom!
  She makes the blood run from my veins in fright."
"Now you must travel by a different road,"
  He answered when he saw that I was weeping,
  "If you wish to escape from this wild wood.

1 As an example of synaesthesia this may at first seem more striking than apt, but during the course of the *Comedy* light, or the lack of it, "speaks" volumes.
2 This is the shade of someone who has been dead a long time.
3 When Caesar was dominant in Rome, but too late to be acquainted with him.
4 The Emperor Augustus.
5 This is Virgil, and the poem he refers to is his *Aeneid,* whose hero, Aeneas, a refugee from Troy (or Ilium), is the son of Anchises. The theme of the *Aeneid*, the events leading up to the foundation of Rome, was particularly dear to Catholic Europe because Rome eventually became the seat of the Papacy.

This beast, the reason that you cry out loud,
  Will not let people pass along this way,
  But hinders them, and even has their blood.
She is by nature such an evildoer
  Her avid appetite is never slaked,
  And after food she's hungrier than before.
And many are the beasts she's mating with,[1]
  And there'll be many more, until the hound[2]
  Arrives, to bring her to a painful death.
This hound will not be fed with land or pelf,
  But rather feed on wisdom, love, and valour.
  He will originate in folds of felt.[3]
He'll be the saviour of low-lying lands
  Of Italy for which Camilla died,
  Turnus, Nisus, Euryalus, of their wounds.[4]
This hound will hunt that creature high and low
  Until he thrusts her back in the Inferno,
  Whence envy freed her first and let her go.
I therefore think and judge it would be best
  For you to follow me. And I shall lead
  You to a region that will always last,
Where you will hear shrieks of despair and grief,
  And see the ancient spirits in their pain,
  As each of them begs for their second death.
And you'll see spirits happy in the fire,
  Because they live in hope that they will come,
  Sooner or later, where the blessèd are.
And if you wish to join that company,
  One worthier than I will take you up.[5]
  I'll leave you with her when I go away.
That Emperor who has His kingdom there[6]
  Lets no one come through me into his city,
  Because I was a rebel to his law.[7]
He governs all creation, ruling where
  He has His capital and His high throne.
  Happy are those he chooses to have there!"
I answered: "What I beg of you is this –

1 Many people will indulge in the sin of avarice.
2 Variously interpreted as a political or religious saviour (there are many candidates) or – most satisfactorily – as a prophecy left deliberately vague.
3 Again obscure, but as translated here it suggests a humble origin.
4 All characters in the *Aeneid*.
5 Beatrice, the woman loved by Dante in his youth and a lasting means of grace leading him to God. Dante's own account of his love, *Vita Nuova* (*New Life*), a work in prose with lyrics interspersed, is by far the best introduction to the *Comedy*.
6 God. In the Inferno God tends to be alluded to rather than named, while Christ is never named.
7 Virgil was a pagan.

By that God whom you never knew – so that
I may escape this evil and much worse,
Take me to both those places as you said,
To see the gate kept by St Peter[1] and
Those souls you say are desperately sad."[2]
Then he set off. I followed on behind.

1 Either the gate of Purgatory, guarded by an angel obedient to St Peter, or the gate of Paradise.

2 Those in the Inferno.

CANTO II

The sun is now setting. This is a time when most creatures settle down to rest. Dante, however, is preparing himself for the coming day-long journey and its hardships.

He invokes the Muses to help him give a true account of his journey. Then he tells Virgil how he doubts his own ability to complete the task, and expresses his perplexity as to why he has been chosen for such an unusual enterprise. He can understand why Aeneas was chosen, the man of destiny who was to found the race that founded Rome, the ruling city of a great empire and the seat of the Holy See. But Dante cannot think that any such destiny is prepared for him. He can understand too why St Paul was taken temporarily into Heaven while still alive. But no one could believe that Dante is worthy of such a favour.

To these doubts Virgil replies by saying that Dante is simply afraid. To combat Dante's fear he will explain how he came to help him. Beatrice came to him in Limbo and asked for his help to save Dante from damnation. She promised in return to praise Virgil frequently in the presence of God. In answer to Virgil's question, Beatrice explains how she was not afraid to venture down from Heaven: the souls in bliss are not tormented by earthly things. Beatrice describes how Mary, the Mother of Christ, had asked St Lucy to help Dante, and St Lucy then asked her.

With three such ladies caring for him (an outstanding example of the communion of the saints, in contrast to the lack of a sense of community we find in the Inferno) Dante must have nothing to fear. Duly encouraged, Dante sets off with Virgil.

*

The light was failing, and the growing gloom
  Relieving every creature on the earth
  Of all its toil and trouble. I alone
Was getting ready to endure the stress
  Both of the road and the resultant anguish,
  Which never-erring memory will rehearse.
O Muses, O my genius, lend me aid!
  O memory, who wrote down what I saw,
  Here your capacity will be well tried!
I started: "Poet, you who are my guide,
  Consider if I have the strength and skill,
  Before you set me on this rugged road.
The father of Silvius,[1] as you tell it, while
  He was corruptible, travelled beyond
  This world of ours, being still corporeal.
And, if the enemy of all that's bad
  Did favour him, because of who he was
  And what he was, and what at last he did,
That must, to men of sense, seem not unfair,
  Since he was chosen in the highest heaven

1 Aeneas, the hero of the *Aeneid*. In the sixth book of that poem Aeneas journeys through the underworld and is rewarded with a prophecy of the future glory of Rome.

As father of great Rome and Rome's Empire.
The City of Rome, to tell the truth of it,
Was destined to become that sacred place
Where his successor[1] sits in Peter's seat.
On this strange journey you ascribe to him,
He heard of things that were to bring about
His triumph and the papal power in Rome.
That is a road the Vessel of Election[2]
Went upon also, strengthening the faith
Which starts us on our journey to salvation.
But why should I go there? By whose decree?
Aeneas I am not, and not Paul either.
That I am worthy no one would agree.
And so, if I agree to go that way,
I am afraid of being overbold.
You're wise. You understand more than I say."
Just as one is who unmeans what he meant,
Changing that mind of his on second thoughts,
Wholly diverted from his first intent –
That's how I stood upon that gloomy slope:
By thinking through it, I'd consumed the venture
For which I was so eager starting up.
"If I have understood your words aright,"
Answered the shade of that high-minded man,
"Your cowardly soul has simply taken fright.
Fear often faces men with obstacles
To make them turn from honourable endeavours,
As beasts fear shadows when the daylight fails.
That you may lose this fear and so come through,
I'll tell you why I came, and what I learnt
At the first instant when I pitied you.
I was among those souls who are suspended.[3]
A lady called to me, so bright and blessed
I asked her to make known what she commanded.
Her eyes were shining brighter than the stars.
She spoke in her own tongue, in gentleness,
And said in that angelic voice of hers:
'O Mantuan soul, the soul of courtesy,
Whose glory is still current in the world,
And shall endure till this world cease to be,
This friend of mine (though not a friend of fate)
Is so encumbered on the lonely hillside

1 St Peter's successor, the Pope.

2 St Paul, the "chosen vessel" mentioned in Acts 9:15. Paul himself describes how "he was caught up into paradise" (2 Cor. 12:2–4).

3 In Limbo, described in *Inf.* IV. Limbo is the part of the Inferno reserved for those who had lived virtuously but were not baptized, and so are held in suspense between their desire for God and the impossibility of ever seeing Him.

He has been driven from his path in fright.
It could be that he has already strayed
So far I'm here too late to give him succour,
Judging by what in heaven I have heard.
Now go, and with your noted eloquence,
And everything he needs for his escape,
Come to his aid. I shall take comfort thence.
For I am Beatrice putting you to work.
I come from where I'm anxious to return.
Love urged me on to this – Love makes me speak.
When I'm once more in presence of my Lord,
I'll sing your praises to him frequently.'
At that point she fell silent. Then I said:
'O lady full of virtue, and through whom
The human race surpasses everything
Beneath the narrow circle of the moon,[1]
I am so gratified by what you order,
If I'd obeyed already I'd be tardy.
There is no need to express your wishes further.
But tell me first the reason you don't spurn
Descending to this centre from broad spaces[2]
Where, as you say, you're anxious to return.'
'Because you feel the urge to understand,
I shall explain quite briefly,' she replied,
'Why I am not too frightened to descend.
We should be frightened of those things alone
Which have the ability to do us evil.
Things are not frightening if they do no harm.
I'm formed in such a fashion, by God's grace,
That your unhappiness does not affect me.
Nor do the fires that rage throughout this place.
A lady in heaven[3] has such great sympathy,
Given the encumbrances through which I send you,
That the stern judgement up above gives way.
She called on Lucy, and she said to her:
"One who is faithful to you now has need
Of you, and I commend him to your care."
St Lucy,[4] foe to all malignity,
Rose at those words and, coming where I sat
With venerable Rachel, said to me:

1 The moon was considered to be the planet nearest to the earth. All above its orbit was considered everlasting, and all below mortal.

2 "This centre" is the earth, seen in the Ptolemaic system as the centre of the universe. The "broad spaces" refers to the Empyrean, the highest heaven, the sphere farthest from the earth.

3 The Virgin Mary.

4 A saint to whom Dante was particularly devoted. Her name is derived from the Latin "*lux*" meaning light.

"Beatrice, veritable praise of God,
  Why do you not help him who loved you so
  That for your sake he stood out from the crowd?
Can you not hear his cries of misery?
  Can you not see him caught in a death struggle
  Upon that flood as fearful as the sea?"
Nobody in the world was ever so quick
  To seek advantage and to run from loss
  As I, the instant I had heard her speak,
Was quick to leave my seat among the blessed,
  Putting my faith in your fine honest speech,[1]
  Which honours you and those who read it best.'
As soon as she had said these words to me,
  She turned her eyes, shining with tears, aside,
  Which made me the more eager to obey.
And so I came since she requested it,
  And saved you from that savage beast that barred
  The short way up the mountain of delight.
What is it then? Why do you hesitate?
  Why do you relish living like a coward?
  Why cannot you be bold and keen to start?
Are not three blessèd ladies, after all,
  Concerned and speaking up for you in heaven?
  And does not what I've said promise you well?"
As tiny blossoms, when the cold night air
  Has made them droop and close, lift up their heads
  And spread their petals once it's dawn once more,
So I did also, after being exhausted.
  And such great ardour streamed into my heart
  That like somebody freed from fear I started:
"Oh how compassionate to bring me aid!
  And you, how courteous you were! When she
  Spoke those true words, how swiftly you obeyed!
You have instilled such longing in my heart
  To come with you, because of all you say,
  That I have now gone back to my first thought.
Now go, for we are thoroughly at one.
  You are my leader, my master, and my lord."
  Those were my words. And so, as he went on,
I started on that rugged, savage road.

1 Virgil's poetry, especially the *Aeneid*.

CANTO III

Dante sees the terrible words written over the gate of the Inferno, stressing divine justice and the everlasting nature of the punishment which it inflicts.

Dante is understandably perturbed, and Virgil has once again to remind him of the need for courage to face what lies ahead.

Inside the gate there is no light, no quiet, no rest. The damned are running continually, and to no purpose, after a banner whose significance is not specified. The souls here are of those who were neither for God nor against Him. Having shown neither the courage nor the energy to act decisively, they are now not good enough for heaven, and not evil enough for hell. So they exist in a sort of antechamber of the Inferno. As if to emphasize the contempt in which they should be held, not one of these souls is named.

Then Dante sees a crowd gathering on the bank of a river, the Acheron. A frightening, demonic boatman, Charon, comes towards them from the opposite bank to ferry them over. He curses them. He also tells Dante that, since he is still alive, he cannot go in this boat. Virgil silences Charon by mentioning the inescapable nature of the decision which has brought Dante there. He explains to Dante that normally only the damned can go that way.

As Charon's boat moves off, another crowd of damned souls is already gathering to be ferried across.

Suddenly, the earth quakes, there is thunder and lightning, and Dante falls down in a faint.

"You go through me to a city of lamentation.
You go through me to everlasting pain.
You go through me to the forsaken nation.
Justice inspired my maker up above.
I was established by omnipotence,
The highest wisdom and the primal love.
Nothing before me was created ever
But everlasting things.[1] And I shall last.
Abandon hope entirely, you who enter."
These were the very sentences I eyed,
Set out in sombre black above a gate.
Then I said: "Master, this seems very hard."
Then he to me, being quick to catch my mood:
"Here all misgivings must be left behind,
And all your cowardice be left for dead.
We come now to the region, as I said,
Where you will see the people steeped in sorrow,
Those who have lost all intellectual good."[2]
And then, when he had looked at me and smiled

1 The angels were created first (creatures who, not being corporeal, are not subject to mortality), and the Inferno was created to receive those angels who rebelled against God.

2 Nothing but the truth, which is God, can satisfy the intellectual longings with which human beings are born.

And pressed my hand, from which I drew some comfort,
He introduced me to the secret world.
From this point, sighs, laments, and piercing groans
Were echoing throughout the starless air.
Hearing them this first time, I wept at once.
Deformed and diverse tongues, terrible sounds,
Words venting misery, outbursts of rage,
Loud voices, soft ones, sounds of slapping hands
Combined into a turmoil always swirling
Throughout that unrelieved black atmosphere,
Like sand which rises at a whirlwind's whirling.
And I, my head surrounded by that horror,
Said: "Master, what's this noise that I can hear?
Who are these people crushed by what they suffer?"
He said: "This is the wretched way of these
Sorry creatures: the lives they lived were such
They earned no infamy, and earned no praise.
Now they are mingled with that wicked sort
Of angels who were neither with the rebels,
Nor true to God, but simply stood apart.
The heavens, lest their beauty should be flawed,
Reject them, whom deep hell cannot receive
Lest it should gain some glory on that head."
I asked: "What is it hitting them so hard
That they must answer with such loud laments?"
And he replied: "I'll tell you in a word.
These people have no hope of dying ever,
And their blind life is so contemptible
That they would barter it for any other.
The world accords them not the least renown.
Pity and justice scorn them equally.
Enough of this – you've seen them, now pass on."
I saw some kind of banner that was wheeled
Around, and racing round at such a rate
It seemed there was no breathing time allowed.
And after it there ran so long a line
Of people that I never would have thought
That death had gathered such a number in.
When I had recognized some of them there,
I saw and recognized the shade of him
Who made the great refusal, out of fear.[1]

1 There has been much discussion as to who this is. Some say it is Pope Celestine V (r.1294), who resigned the Papacy only five months after his election. Others suggest Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands at the trial of Christ. The second seems more appropriate, since this is the only shade in this canto who receives an individual mention, and Pilate's role in the Passion was so important. The point is that Dante leaves this character unnamed (in a poem which includes so many names) to imply that, since he is one of those who lived so unworthily that they "never really existed", he does not deserve to be named.

Immediately I understood how those
Were members of that dire denomination
Displeasing both to God and to his foes.
All these wretches, who'd never really existed,
Went naked and were fiercely goaded on
By blowflies and by wasps that buzzed and twisted.
These insects went on stinging them and streaking
Their faces with their blood which, mixed with tears,
Flowed down to where obnoxious worms were licking.
And then I saw, some way beyond all these,
A crowd upon the bank of a broad river.
That made me beg of Virgil: "Master, please
Tell me. Who are they? And what can incite
Them with such eagerness to cross the river,
As far as I can see in this dim light?"
And he replied: "All will be made quite plain
When we suspend our journey for a while
Upon the gloomy banks of Acheron."[1]
So then, with eyes cast down and full of shame,
Afraid that I might irk him with my speech,
I kept from talking till we reached the stream.
At that there came towards us in a boat
An old old man, whose hair was white with age.[2]
"Woe to you, wicked souls!" he shouted out.
"Do not expect to see the sky again!
I'm here to take you to the further bank,
To everlasting darkness, ice and flame.
And you, you over there, you living soul!
Keep well away from these. All these are dead."
But when he saw I made no move at all,
He said: "By other ways, another port,
You will arrive on shore, and not this way.
You must be carried in a lighter boat."[3]
My guide said: "Charon, do not fret and fuss.
This is wished there where whatsoever is wished
Is always done. There's nothing to discuss."
The shaggy jowls went silent. Nothing more
Came from the pilot of the muddy river,
Who had around his eyes such rings of fire.
But those souls – every troubled naked wretch –
Changed colour and their teeth began to chatter
Soon as they heard his rough-and-ready speech.
They cursed their God, their parents in one breath,

1 The classical river of the dead, which must be crossed to reach the underworld. Its name is derived from a Greek word meaning "pain" or "distress".

2 The classical ferryman of the dead. His Greek name is derived from his bright, fierce eyes.

3 The boat which carries the souls of the saved to the island of Purgatory.

All humankind, the time, the place, the seed
Of their conception and their very birth.
And they huddled together in a crowd,
Weeping loudly beside that wicked river
Which waits for all who have no fear of God.
The demon Charon, eyes like glowing embers,
Beckons to them and gathers them together,
And with his oar he beats whoever lingers.
As in the autumn, when the leaves descend
One after the other, till the boughs are left
With all that clothed them lying on the ground,
In the same fashion Adam's evil seed
Flew down towards the river one by one,
At Charon's nod, as birds do when they're lured.
They move away across the murky river,
And well before they reach the other bank
Another crowd on this side starts to gather.
"My son," my courteous master then explained,
"Those who have died still subject to God's anger
All come together here from every land.
And they are keen to reach the other shore,
Because celestial justice spurs them on
Until their fear is turned into desire.[1]
No soul that has been good passes this way.
So now, if Charon was annoyed with you,
You know exactly what he meant to say."
The instant this was said, the darkened land
Shuddered, so violently that once again
I'm bathed in sweat, calling it back to mind.
Out of the tearful, sodden earth a wind
Burst with the sound of thunder, sending up
Sudden vermilion flashes. I was stunned,
And sank like someone overcome by sleep.

1 It is as though the damned, in a very human way, wish to get the suspense over with, even though they are going to their punishment. There is also here a hint of something which becomes clearer and clearer in the course of the poem: divine justice consists in allowing people to have what they really want, and the damned have chosen damnation.

CANTO IV

Dante is aroused by a clap of thunder, to find himself on the other side of Acheron. He and Virgil are on the edge of the abyss which is the Inferno proper. Dante's fear is increased by the sight of Virgil's pallor. However, as Virgil explains, this pallor is not the result of fear, but of compassion for those who are suffering below. And so they enter Limbo, the first circle of the Inferno.

Here nothing can be distinguished at first but the sighs of the damned, who are not here because they have sinned, but because they were not baptized. Virgil himself is one of them. They sigh because of their spiritual grief: they endure no physical pain, but a strong and hopeless desire for God.

Dante asks if anyone was ever taken from this place to bliss, and finds that Virgil understands what is in his mind. Virgil describes the Harrowing of Hell – the rescue by Christ, after His resurrection, of Old Testament patriarchs, one matriarch and others too many to mention. These people worshipped the true God, even though they were not baptized, and they were the first to go to heaven.

Dante and Virgil see ahead of them a hemisphere of light, in which Dante imagines there may be great spirits. Virgil confirms this, and says a special place is allotted to them. A lone voice cries out to announce Virgil's return. Then they are approached by the shades of Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan, who welcome Dante because he too is a poet.

When they reach the light, they see it is a castle with seven high walls and a moat. Inside the castle are the shades of many celebrated people. These include, apart from the four classical poets, Trojan and Roman heroes, pagan intellectuals and three Muslims.

Dante and Virgil leave the four famous poets and go down to the second circle of the Inferno, where there is no light at all.

A sudden thunder broke the heavy sleep
I'd fallen into, and I shook myself,
As people do when roughly woken up.
From side to side I moved my rested eyes,
Standing erect, and staring fixedly,
In an attempt to find out where I was.
The truth is I was standing on the brow
Over the valley and the sad abyss,
Receptacle of never-ending woe.
It was so deep, profoundly dark, and full
Of mist that, though I peered and peered again,
I could not make out anything at all.
"Now down into a world where all is blind,"
Said then the poet, who was deathly pale.
"I shall go first, you follow on behind."
And I, who'd seen the pallor in his face,
Answered, "How can I come, when you're afraid
Who've always comforted my fearfulness?"

Then he to me, "The thought of those down there
In misery has painted on my face
That agony which you mistake for fear.
We must go now. The long way urges us."
And so he entered, and he made me enter
On the first circle that goes round the abyss.[1]
So far as I could tell by listening, here
There was no lamentation but of sighs,
That trembled through the everlasting air,
Arising from the grief, which is not pain,
Of all the innumerable multitudes
Of babies and of women and of men.
"You do not ask," my gentle master said,
"Who these spirits are that you are looking at?
You ought to know, before you go ahead,
They did not sin. And if they have some worth,
That's not enough, since they were not baptized:
Baptism is essential in your faith.[2]
They lived too early to be Christian,
And failed to worship God as people should.[3]
Among such spirits I myself am one.[4]
It is for such defects, not sin, we're here
Among the lost, and punished but in this:
That without hope we languish in desire."
My heart was sickened when I caught his sense,
Because I recognized some men of worth
Inhabiting that limbo in suspense.
"Tell me, my master and my lord, tell me,"
I said, because I wanted to be sure,
With faith that conquers all uncertainty:
"Has anyone ever, through the good he did,
Or others' help, gone out from here to bliss?"
And he, who knew what I had left unsaid,
Answered: "When I'd arrived but recently
I saw the coming of a mighty lord,[5]
Bearing the evidence of victory.[6]

1 The Inferno is in the shape of a hollow inverted cone. See the illustration on p. 4.
2 The Jews of the Old Testament – those who worshipped the true God and lived in hope of a Messiah – are exempted from this requirement. The exclusion of unbaptized virtuous pagans from heaven clearly troubled Dante.
3 That is, as was done by the Jews of the Old Testament who were faithful to their covenant with God.
4 The inclusion in Limbo of even Virgil, who was for centuries revered by Christians as a poet and a sage, stresses the limitations of human reason without God's grace.
5 Christ after His resurrection.
6 Medieval representations of the resurrected Christ often show him with a halo which encircles a cross.

He took from here our primal father's shade,[1]
The shade of Abel and the shade of Noah,
And Moses, who made laws and who obeyed,
The patriarch Abraham, David the King,
Israel with his father and his children,
And Rachel, won with so much labouring,[2]
And many others, whom he took to bliss.
And you must know, no human spirits ever
Were taken up to glory before this."
While he explained these things, we did not pause,
But kept on making progress through the wood –
I mean the wood of shades crowded like trees.
When we had still not travelled very far
From the circle's highest point, I saw a blaze
That overcame a gloomy hemisphere.
As yet we were some way away from it,
But not so far that I could not perceive
That there were honoured people in that light.
"O you who honour both knowledge and art,
Who are these men who are so highly honoured
Above the others that they're set apart?"
And he to me: "Their honourable name,
Still echoing throughout the world above,
Wins grace in heaven and thus advances them."
He'd scarcely finished when I heard a voice:
"Give honour to the celebrated poet!
His shade returns which had abandoned us!"
Then, when the voice had stopped and all was still,
I saw four lofty shades approaching us.
And they seemed neither glad nor sorrowful.[3]
My kindly master, when he saw them, said:
"Look well at him who has a sword in hand,[4]
And comes before the other three as lord.
Homer, the sovereign poet, is the first,
Satirical Horace is the next to come,
Ovid is third, and Lucan is the last.[5]
Since they, as well as I do, have by right
That name[6] the single person has pronounced,
They do me honour, and in that do right."
And as I watch, the glorious circle gathers

1 Adam.
2 Jacob, later called Israel, served Rachel's father for fourteen years to win her as his bride.
3 Because they were not physically tormented, but not in bliss either. Also, one traditional notion of a sage was of someone not subject to emotion.
4 Indicating his authorship of the warlike epic, *The Iliad*.
5 Homer's work was known to Dante only by reputation, but the three Roman poets were among his favourite writers.
6 The name of poet.

Around that master of the highest style[1]
Who like an eagle soars above all others.
When they had talked a little while together,
They turned to me and made a sign of welcome,
At which my master smiled in simple pleasure.
An even higher honour came my way,
For they invited me to join their circle:
I was the sixth, with such great minds as they.[2]
So we continued till we reached the light,
Speaking of things of which I must be silent,
Just as to talk about them then was right.
We came at last to a noble castle's foot,
Surrounded seven times by soaring walls,[3]
Round which a little stream served as a moat.
We went across this stream as on dry land –
I went through seven gateways with these sages.
We reached a meadow growing green, and found
People there whose eyes were grave and slow:
They looked as though they had authority –
They seldom spoke, and then gently and low.
We drew apart onto some rising ground,
Into an open area full of light,
From which we could see everyone around.
In front of me, on the enamelled green,
All those great spirits were revealed to me:
I still rejoice to think what I have seen.
I saw Electra there, with all her seed,
Among whom there were Hector and Aeneas,
And Caesar, all in armour and hawk-eyed.[4]
I saw Camilla and Penthesilea,
And King Latinus on the other side,
Sitting beside his child, Lavinia, there.[5]
I saw that Brutus who drove Tarquin out,
Lucrece and Julia, Marcia and Cornelia.
And I saw Saladin, alone, apart.[6]
I had to raise my eyes somewhat to see
Where the great master of the men who know[7]

1 The epic style.
2 Dante is welcomed by them as a fellow poet.
3 Opinions vary, but probably best interpreted as referring to the seven liberal arts – grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, music, geography and astronomy.
4 In this tercet: mother of Troy's founder; defender of Troy; refugee from Troy who founded the Latin race; Julius Caesar.
5 In this tercet: queen killed by Aeneas; Amazon killed by Achilles; King of Latium before Aeneas; Aeneas's third wife.
6 In this tercet: Junius Brutus; four virtuous women of republican Rome; Sultan of Egypt who inflicted severe defeats on crusaders, yet had a high reputation in Europe.
7 Aristotle.

Sat with his philosophic family.
They all look up to him, all do him honour:
I saw both Socrates and Plato there,
Standing closer to him than any other,
Democritus, who puts all down to chance,
Diogenes, Empedocles and Zeno,
Heraclitus and Thales, Anaxagoras.[1]
I also saw the worthy herbalist
Dioscorides; Linus and Orpheus,
Tully and Seneca the moralist,[2]
Euclid the geometer and Ptolemy,
Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna,
Averroës who wrote the Commentary.[3]
I cannot now give details of them all:
My long theme urges me, and very often
What's said falls short of what there is to tell.
The company of six now disassembles.
My leader takes me on a different trail,
Out of that calm, into the air that trembles.
I come to where there is no light at all.

1 Greek philosophers of the pre-Christian era.

2 In this tercet: Greek physician of the first century AD; two mythical Greek poets; Cicero (Roman statesman and orator); Roman tragedian (*d.*65 AD).

3 In this tercet: Greek mathematician (*c.*300 BC); Greek astronomer (second century AD); Greek physician (*c.*400 BC); Greek physician (second century AD); Arab philosopher (*d.*1037); Arab philosopher from Spain whose Commentary was on Aristotle.

CANTO V

Dante has left Limbo behind: now all the shades he meets have damned themselves by their own actions. This second circle contains the lustful: worse sins are punished lower down in the Inferno. King Minos of Crete is here as judge, and he consigns the damned to an appropriate circle of the Inferno, winding his tail around himself a certain number of times to indicate how many circles down the sinner must go. Like Charon, he tries to warn Dante off, but is rebuked with the same words which Virgil used to Charon.

This circle resounds with cries of lamentation, mixed with the bellowing of opposing winds on which the spirits are carried higgledy-piggledy, as once they allowed themselves to be swept along by their passions.

Virgil names some of these spirits, all of them more or less legendary people, for whom the reader may well feel sympathy, so striking are their stories. But then Dante speaks to two people who had certainly existed and died during his lifetime – Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini. It is clear why these two spirits are associated with the others: the immediate cause of their sin was their reading of a romantic episode of the Arthurian legends. Their fate is pitiful, and it disturbs Dante so much (he has, after all, himself been much concerned with literary depictions of love) that he faints.

This, justly one of the most famous episodes in the *Comedy*, has itself become part of the literature of romantic love. But a merely romantic interpretation of it would be inadequate. Francesca is damned out of her own mouth. All the souls have to reveal their unvarnished sins to Minos; but when she is speaking to Dante, Francesca tries subtly to exculpate herself, revealing the very irresponsibility which led to the damnable sinful act. We find ourselves sympathizing with Francesca, not because the judgement on her is too hard, but because we have similar defects ourselves. The seriousness of the sin, with its dreadful consequence of three damnations, is neither glossed over by Dante nor blurred in a legendary mist.

*

And so from the first circle I descended
Into the second, which contains less space[1]
And much more woe, whence shouts of pain ascended.
Minos[2] is there, most horribly, and grinding
His teeth. He judges guilt as people enter,
And places them according to his winding.
I mean that when the spirit born for ill
Comes in his sight, it makes a full confession;
And then that expert on all sin can tell
What depth of Hell is most appropriate,
Winding his long tail round himself to number
How many circles down it must be put.
Always there are large crowds. Each one in turn
Must stand in front of him to hear his judgement.

1 All the circles become smaller as Dante descends further into the Inferno. See *Inf.* IV, 24 and note.

2 Mythical King of Crete, generally regarded as a just ruler who became judge of the dead in Hades.

They speak, they hear, they're straight away sent down.
"O you, arriving where the wretched dwell,"
Cried Minos when he saw me there, neglecting
To carry out his task as usual,[1]
"Watch how you enter and in whom you trust!
The entrance is so wide it may deceive you!"
My leader answered him: "Why this outburst?
Do not obstruct his fated journey thus.
This is wished there where whatsoever is wished
Is always done. There's nothing to discuss."[2]
And now there is the sound of voices, loud
With lamentation, and I have arrived
Where outcries strike my ears from every side.
I have come somewhere where all light is mute,
Where there is bellowing like a storm at sea,
With wild opposing winds fighting it out.
This hellish storm, that does not slacken ever,
Whirls all the spirits irresistibly
Along with it, and beats and bowls them over.
And when they come where rocks have fallen down,[3]
Why then what outcries, wailings, and laments!
And how they curse the power that is divine.
I understood how all such torments are
Destined for those whose sins are of the flesh,
Those who subject their reason to desire.
And like a flock of starlings on the wing
In the cold season, crowded all together,
So the bad spirits in that blustering
Are carried here and there and up and down:
They are not comforted by thoughts of rest,
Or even diminution of their pain.
And like a flock of loud lamenting cranes
Making themselves a long line in the air,
I saw shades coming and emitting groans,
Borne on the onrush of that windy war.
So that I questioned: "Master, who are these,
Punished so hard in this black atmosphere?"
My master answered me: "The first of those
Of whom you wish to be informed was empress
Of many lands and many languages.
She was so vicious, unrestrained, and lewd
That she made licence licit in her laws
To take away the blame she had incurred.[4]

1 His allocation of the damned to their appropriate circle.

2 See *Inf.* III, 95–96.

3 The result (as we are told in *Inf.* XII) of the earthquake which occurred at the time of the Crucifixion.

4 By her incest with her son.

She was Semiramis – we read of her
That she was Ninus' wife and his successor.
She ruled the land now in the Sultan's power.[1]
That other killed herself in love's despair,
Breaking her faith with the ashes of Sychaeus.[2]
Then Cleopatra[3] is the next one there.
See Helen, for whose sake the times were cursed
With crime and woe, and see the great Achilles:
He too was overcome by love at last.[4]
See Paris,[5] and see Tristan."[6] And he showed
A thousand shades and more to me, and named them,
Of those whom love and lust had left for dead.
When I had heard my teacher to the end,
Naming the ancient ladies and the knights,
Such horror seized me that I almost swooned.
I started: "Poet, I would be inclined
To talk with those two who go yoked together
And seem to be so light upon the wind."
Then he to me: "You try it when those two
Have come much nearer. Beg them by that love
Which drives them on, and they will turn to you."
Once they were blown towards us by the wind,
I spoke: "O terribly tormented souls,
Come here and speak to us, if that's not banned!"
And just as doves, attracted by desire
Into their nest, their wings outspread and still,
Glide with a clear intention through the air,
So these two left the throng where Dido was,
And came to us through that foul atmosphere,
Such was the power of my affectionate cries.
"O living being, so gracious and so good
That you come visiting, through pitch-black air,
Us who once stained this world of ours with blood,
Oh, if the Lord of all were but our friend,
We would appeal to Him to give you peace,
Since you show sympathy with our sad end.
And anything you wish to talk about,
Whatever it is, we'll talk of it with you,

1 Egypt.
2 In the *Aeneid*, Dido Queen of Carthage had vowed to remain faithful to the memory of her dead husband. She violated this oath by her love for Aeneas, and killed herself when Aeneas forsook her.
3 Queen of Egypt, lover of Julius Caesar and later Mark Antony, who killed herself to avoid being captured by Octavius after the Battle of Actium.
4 Because of his love for Polyxena, daughter of Priam, King of Troy, he let himself be ambushed and killed.
5 The son of Priam, he stole Helen from Menelaus, causing the Trojan wars.
6 The adulterous lover of Isolde, who was killed by her husband.

In these few moments while the storm is mute.
I must explain my native city lies
Upon that seacoast where the Po descends
To the calm sea with all its tributaries.[1]
Love, kindling quickly in the noble heart,
Seized him: he was enamoured of this body
Killed in a way from which I suffer yet.[2]
Love, who insists all loved ones must requite
Their lovers, seized me so with love's enjoyment
That, as you see, love does not leave me yet.
Love chose a single death for both of us.
Caïna[3] waits for him who took our lives."
Such were the words of hers which came across.
I, when I'd heard these stricken souls, inclined
My head, and for a long time held it down.
At length the poet asked: "What's in your mind?"
Then I replied to him and said: "Alas!
How many pleasant thoughts, and how much ardour
Have brought this wretched pair to such a pass!"
And then once more I turned to them to speak
And said: "Francesca, seeing how you suffer
Makes me weep tears of sympathy and grief.
But tell me: in the time of gentle sighs,
By what and in what way did Love permit you
To recognize your dubious desires?"
She said: "There is no greater wretchedness
Than calling back to mind a happy time
In misery – your teacher[4] too knows this.
But, if you want to understand the root
Cause of our love – it seems you really want to –
I'll tell you, though I weep describing it.
We were reading one day for delectation
Of Lancelot and how love held him close.[5]
We were alone and quite without suspicion.
At several points that reading drew our eyes
Together, drained the colour from our cheeks.
But one point only took us by surprise.
When we read how the smile of the belovèd
Was kissed by such a celebrated lover,[6]

1 The speaker is Francesca da Rimini. Born in Ravenna, she was married to Gianciotto Malatesta, but fell in love with his brother Paolo. Her husband came upon the guilty pair and killed them.
2 Not only was her death violent, but it allowed her no time to repent.
3 A zone of the lowest circle of the Inferno (XXXII), reserved for those who betray their relatives. It is named after Cain, who murdered his brother Abel (Gen. 4:8).
4 Virgil.
5 The adulterous love of Lancelot for Guinevere, the wife of his lord King Arthur.
6 Guinevere was kissed by Lancelot.

This one,[1] from whom I never will be severed,
Kissed me upon the mouth, trembling all over.
That book's a pander, and the man who wrote it:
And on that day we read in it no further."
While the one spirit said all this to me,
The other wept, and my disquietude
Brought on a fainting fit. I seemed to die,
And fell down as a body does when dead.

1 Paolo.