

DANTE

THE DIVINE
COMEDY

A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION BY
CLIVE JAMES

PICADOR

CONTENTS

Introduction by Clive James . . . xv

Translator's Note . . . xxv

Acknowledgements . . . xxix

A Note on the Translation by Dennis Looney . . . xxxi

THE DIVINE COMEDY

BOOK I: HELL . . . I

BOOK II: PURGATORY . . . 173

BOOK III: HEAVEN . . . 347

INTRODUCTION

Many people, not all of them outside Italy, think that the *Divine Comedy* is a rather misshapen story. And indeed, if it were just a story, it would be back to front: the narrator has an exciting time in Hell, but Purgatory, when it is not about art, is about theology, and Heaven is about nothing else. What kind of story has all the action in the first third, and then settles back to stage a discussion of obscure spiritual matters? But the *Divine Comedy* isn't just a story, it's a poem: one of the biggest, most varied and most accomplished poems in all the world. Appreciated on the level of its verse, the thing never stops getting steadily more beautiful as it goes on. T. S. Eliot said that the last cantos of *Heaven* were as great as poetry can ever get. The translator's task is to compose something to suggest that such a judgement might be right.

This translation of the *Divine Comedy* is here today because my wife, when we were together in Florence in the mid-1960s, a few years before we were married, taught me that the great secret of Dante's masterpiece lay in the handling of the verse, which always moved forward even in the most intensely compressed of episodes. She proved this by answering my appeal to have the famous Paolo and Francesca episode in *Inferno* 5 explained to me from the original text. From various translators including Byron we can see what that passage says. But how did Dante say it? My wife said that the *terza rima* was only the outward sign of how the

thing carried itself along, and that if you dug down into Dante's expressiveness at the level of phonetic construction you would find an infinitely variable rhythmic pulse adaptable to anything he wanted to convey.

One of the first moments she picked out of the text to show me what the master versifier could do was when Francesca tells Dante what drove her and Paolo over the brink and into the pit of sin. In English it would go something like:

*We read that day for delight
About Lancelot, how love bound him.*

She read it in Italian:

*Noi leggevamo quel giorno per diletto
Di Lancelotto, come l'amor lo strinse.*

After the sound “-letto” ends the first line, the placing of “-lotto” at the start of the second line gives it the power of a rhyme, only more so. How does that happen? You have to look within. The Italian eleven-syllable line feels a bit like our standard English iambic pentameter and therefore tends to mislead you into thinking that the *terzina*, the recurring unit of three lines, has a rocking regularity. But Dante isn't thinking of regularity in the first instance any more than he is thinking of rhyme, which is too easy in Italian to be thought a technical challenge: in fact for an Italian poet it's *not* rhyming that's hard.

Dante's overt rhyme scheme is only the initial framework by which the verse structure moves forward. Within the *terzina*, there is all this other intense interaction going on. (Dante is the greatest exemplar in literary history of the principle advanced by Vernon Watkins, and much approved of by Philip Larkin, that good poetry doesn't just rhyme at the end of the lines, it rhymes all along the line.) Especially in modern times, translators into English have tended to think that if this interior intensity can be duplicated, the grand structure of the *terzina*, or some equivalent rhymed frame-

work, can be left out. And so it can, often with impressive results, each passage transmuted into very compressed English prose. But that approach can never transmit the full intensity of the *Divine Comedy*, which is notable for its overall onward drive as much as for its local density of language.

Dante is not only tunnelling in the depths of meaning, he is working much closer to the surface texture: working within it. Even in the most solemn passage there might occur a touch of delight in sound that comes close to being wordplay. Still with Paolo and Francesca: in the way the word “*diletto*,” after the line turning, modulates into *di Lancelotto*, the shift from *-letto* to *-lotto* is a modulation across the vowel spectrum, and Dante has a thousand tricks like that to keep things moving. The rhymes that clinch the *terzina* are a very supplementary music compared to the music going on within the *terzina*’s span.

The lines, I found, were alive within themselves. Francesca described how, while they were carried away with what they read, Paolo kissed her mouth. *Questi* (this one right here), she says, *la bocca mi basciò, tutto tremante* (kissed my mouth, all trembling). At that stage I had about a hundred words of Italian and needed to be told that the accent on the final “*o*” of *basciò* was a stress accent and needed to be hit hard, slowing the line so that it could start again and complete itself in the alliterative explosion of *tutto tremante*. An hour of this tutorial and I could already see that Dante was paying attention to his rhythms right down to the structure of the phrase and even of the word.

The linked rhymes of the *terza rima* were a gesture towards form, marking the pulse of the onward surge of the great story, which was driven by its poetry; and would be infinitely less great without its poetry, just as Wagner’s *Ring* cycle would be infinitely less great without its music. But Dante’s formal requirements for himself went down to the very basics of the handling of language. It was all very precise, and yet it all added up. Though it was assembled from minutely wrought effects, the episode really did have rhythmic sweep. My wife, clearly touched by my sudden impersonation of a proper student, said all the rest of the poem

was like that too, including the supposedly colourless theological bits. Every moment danced, and the dance was always moving forward.

Over the next year or so, while I was reading Dante in the original to satisfy the requirements of the English tripos at Cambridge, I looked at several rhymed translations and found them strained. On the other hand the translations done in prose had whole chunks that were too dull to read, especially in the second and third books. The total effect of looking at so many translations was to be convinced that the job was thankless. One thing I could see clearly, however, was that any even halfway successful translation would have to rhyme, although the question was how, especially in those long stretches, later on in the poem, where not a lot seemed to be happening.

You could see easily why Byron went no further than his Paolo and Francesca; he couldn't keep up the excitement if there was nothing for the excitement to bite on, as it were. Starting from the level of incident, he, or any other translator, couldn't get down to the level of language. They could raise themselves to the level of thought: some of the translators were, *mutatis mutandis*, as educated as Dante was, who was one of the most educated men of his time even in the conventional sense, quite apart from the proto-scientific sense in which he was original without parallel. But they couldn't, or wouldn't, get down to the level where syllables met each other and generated force. That had to be the aim, impossible as it seemed; to generate the force, both semantic and phonetic: the force of both meaning and sound. Indeed, in the original, some of the meaning was *in* the sound. Unless a translator did something to duplicate how the poem sounded, he, or she, wouldn't get near what it meant.

So the task, if task it was, went on the back burner and stayed there for about forty years. I was barely aware that I was even thinking about it. Helping me to be diffident on the topic were my memories of what my wife had said about the Dorothy Sayers

translation. Back at Sydney University, when we first met in the late 1950s, she was studying Italian: the beginning of what would turn out to be a distinguished lifelong career of teaching and editing Italian literature, with particular attention to Dante. As part of the course, she had been required to produce a substantial paper; and she had made her subject the Dorothy Sayers translation, which was famous at the time and indeed is still well-known now: the total amount of money it has made for Penguin must be colossal. But my wife, always the closest of readers, was able even then to detect that Sayers had simultaneously loaded her text with cliché and pumped it full of wind.

Finally, not long after I retired, I thought I could see how a translation might work. I started by drawing the necessary conclusions from my knowledge of what to avoid. The first thing I had learned was that a strict *terza rima* was out of the question. Even Louis MacNeice, one of the great verse technicians of modern times, had resorted to half-rhyme in order to sustain a long poem in *terza rima*. And the sad truth about *Autumn Sequel* is that it is simply terrible. Its predecessor, *Autumn Journal*, had been a triumph—it should be ranked, in my view, as the great long poem of its time—but for that work he had allowed himself access to his vast stock of classical metres. In *Autumn Sequel* he stuck himself with the *terza rima*, and with a not very attractive version of it. I tried writing a longish poem in strict *terza rima* and could see that it was creaking with strain the longer it went on, thereby accomplishing the opposite of the desirable effect of a narrative form, which is to get you into the swing of the thing. With the dubious exception of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, nobody has ever written a *terza rima* poem in English that makes you forget the form in which it is composed, and a *terza rima* translation of Dante like Laurence Binyon's makes a feature of Binyon's virtuosity rather than Dante's mastery.

So if it couldn't be in strict *terza rima*, and if a loosely rhymed *terza rima* wasn't worth writing, what regular measure would carry the freight? Over the years I had written thousands of couplets and although I enjoyed using them for comic effect I knew that they wouldn't fit this task. The *Divine Comedy* isn't comic. A few

couplets might come in handy to clinch each canto but on the whole the couplet suffers the drawback that Johnson spotted in the work of Pope: in a rhyme-starved language like English, the same rhyme sound keeps cropping up too early. Even if the words that rhyme are kept deliberately different each time—night/bright, light/sight, etc.—the sound is the same, and calls the wrong kind of attention to itself. And yet I wanted the rhyming words to be close enough together to be noticed.

Finally I realised that I had been practising for this job every time I wrote a quatrain. In my poems, ever since I started writing them in the late 1950s, the quatrain was the most common measure unless I was writing in free verse. Decades of practice had made the quatrain so natural to me that it had become a mode of thought. For this project, if the quatrain could be augmented with extra lines whenever the occasion demanded or opportunity offered, it would yield the ideal combination of strictness and ease. To reinforce the strictness, I would avoid feminine rhymes. When writing couplets, one veers inexorably towards feminine rhymes, and the effect, though often usefully flippant, is always in danger of recalling Gilbert and Sullivan. To match Dante's gravitas, a strong, solid dignity would be required. Well, I had had plenty of practice in writing quatrains with masculine rhymes. So really I had spent all this time—the greater part of a lifetime—preparing my instruments.

Quietly I got the project under way, starting with the first line of the first canto. It would be a mistake to do the famous passages and then join them up: the welds might show. If my modified quatrain measure was to justify itself, it would have to work from the beginning, and be still working at the end—because the *Divine Comedy* ends as it begins, with the same feeling of exuberance that has been maintained throughout. Dante registers this exuberance even in his most desperate moments. He doesn't stop singing just because something dreadful is happening. What he says is: something dreadful is happening *even as I sing*. It's an interplay of form and content: the most ambitious that any literary artist ever attempted. Dante's torrential cascade of poetic effects adds up to

a claim. No poem could be equal to my subject: no poem except this poem.

I wanted my translation to provide parallels for such effects while maintaining all of Dante's sense of economy. No poet, not even Shakespeare, could say quite so much so quickly, so the translator must know how to be brief. But there are things he can add without slowing the pace. (Or, indeed, taking more space: since English needs less room than Italian, there is latitude for adding things while keeping to the same length as the original.) Dante had barely finished the poem before the first commentaries began appearing. Commentary was thought necessary because Dante had composed every canto of his poem as if it were a weekend article based on news that had only just happened, and whose details did not need to be outlined. There must have been readers who, not having heard the news about who robbed whom and which pope double-crossed which prince, were puzzled even at the time.

Since then, the chances of being puzzled have multiplied, and there is also the increasingly pressing matter of making even references to the Gospels clear to readers who might not be familiar with them. The first commentaries inaugurated seven hundred years of scholarship and criticism which have gone on to this day, and the summary of all that knowledge and informed speculation is there at the foot of the page in any scholarly edition. But this translation would be for non-scholars in the first instance. Footnotes would be a burden to it. Ideally, the thing itself should carry all the information it would need. How to do this?

The reservoir of material at the foot of the page of a scholarly text (sometimes there are five lines of text and fifty of apparatus) provides the translator of the poem with an ideal opportunity to upload salient facts into the verse narrative and make things clear. There are stretches in all three books when it really helps to be told who belongs to which family; whether one family is at war with another; and what precisely happened to which city when it was betrayed. On the vexed question of theology—this crops up especially in the third book, *Heaven*—it can help to be told that a certain scholar represents a certain position. Almost always the

relevant information is there on the page, down at the bottom. In numerous instances I felt justified in lifting it out of the basement and putting it on display in the text. It might seem bold to assume that Dante, if he thought the reader might not know, would have explained which features of a certain scholarly dispute he was referring to, but we can also assume that he didn't want the reader to be presented with an insoluble puzzle. Dante wanted to be read. Every stratagem he employed tells us that. He was talking about the whole of creation at once but he wanted to glue the reader to the bench.

To help him do it for the present age, I opened up a way to make simple, sparing but sufficiently wide-ranging use of what we might call the basic scholarly heritage. My aim, when importing an explanatory detail, was to make the text more readable instead of less. Also I have cut back on his lists of names here and there, when a list is all it is. Perhaps boldly, I would say that all the reader needs to know is in the poem as I have presented it. As Dante, in Heaven, travels all over the sky, some of the references to the Zodiac might seem obscure, but they probably seemed so at the time: and really that's all you have to know, that the references sounded learned. Dante's first readers could take the more obscure points for granted while they followed the main points. My job was to make some of the main points more self-clarifying by putting in some of the explanations that had been accumulating at the bottom of the page for the best part of a millennium, but to do so without slowing the tempo. The result one hopes for is a readily appreciable outline of Dante's Christian vision. Is it possible, though, in an age without belief?

Well, how much does Dante believe? The truth is that he didn't want to believe anything if he couldn't test it. As we trace the story through one hundred cantos, three regions and every shade of emotion from despair to bliss, we find that he believed in his journey to salvation. But if his belief had been without its doubts, there would never have been a journey; and at the very end we find ourselves concluding that the great poet, setting out the reasons for his faith, has reached conclusions that will eventually make

blind faith impossible. Dante could ask questions about theology because he was in love with questioning itself; he was in love with the design of the divinely inspired universe because he was in love with design, which he could see in a fold of cloth and a fallen leaf.

Dante had a scientific mind: one of the first scientific minds we know of in the modern age, for which, indeed, he can be said to have built the foundations. His poem stands at the dawn of modern science, and therefore of the times we live in now: its essential moment is in its final vision, when Dante the traveller, at the apex of heaven, looks into the source of creation and sees the imprint of a human face. The *Divine Comedy* is the precursor of the whole of modern history, and I hope this translation conveys enough of its model to show that he forecast the whole story in a single song: a song of lights. The joy of discovery is what drives the poem, and if my translation gets some of that exultation into English verse then it will have done its work.

For all his majestic weight, there is also a lightness to Dante, and I hope to have got that in. Finally but essentially, tempo is one of the two main poetic elements in play. The other is texture. What we have, in this miraculous work of art, is a mutually reinforcing balance of tempo and texture, of a kind that had never been heard before over such a distance: fourteen thousand lines of it. Much as he worshipped Virgil, Dante was better at it than his master. If he could have read Homer, he would have found that he was better at it than Homer too. In the original Italian, you can hear it. But most of us will never read Dante in the original Italian. It's a pious wish that translators are always making: they hope that the reader, intrigued by the translation, will be driven to learn Italian, etc. Common sense tells us that it will seldom happen.

To know a foreign language thoroughly is a big task, and to know its literature is a full time job. For more than fifty years, my wife's scholarship, her tenacity and seriousness of purpose, have been there to remind me of what it means to be dedicated to Dante and to help pass on the body of knowledge associated with his name. Her work culminated first with her gold-medal-winning edition of Dante's *Monarchia* for the Società Dantesca Italiana, the

only national edition of any work of Dante edited by a non-Italian, and a labour of love that took her thirty years. It culminated all over again with the completion of her digital edition of the *Divine Comedy*'s manuscript tradition, a tool for all Dante scholars, and a thing of extraordinary beauty and utility. I hope she will forgive me for straying onto her territory, but really there is no contest. Beside her lucid and scrupulous scholarship, a translation counts for very little. But I have done my best with it, always encouraged by the memory of how, in Florence, she first gave me an idea of what it meant to be in the service of her great poet.

—LONDON, 2012

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

For Dante it was a strict rule not to rhyme the word “Christ” with any other word except itself. I have followed him in that, as in any other matter of decorum. But when it comes to vocabulary, the translator needs a decorum of his own. Dante, the man on the spot, never had to think about whether his words were apt to the age, whereas the translator, if he is not careful, will find himself thinking of nothing else. Not wanting to get between the reader and the original, I have tried to avoid anachronistic language except when it could hide itself in the blur of time. I used the word “*bastille*” only after checking that it might—just might—have reached Florence from Paris in time for Dante to hear it. “Breaker’s yard” is no doubt a modern term, but for a long time there have been ships and there were always places where they were broken up, so I thought a term like that might be slipped in, whereas one could not possibly use, say, “napalm,” a word which would have been very employable in the lower regions of Hell. Such a modern coinage would stand out like a phrase of recent slang in one of those television dramas where millions have been spent on the look of the thing but the whole effect is dissipated by an untimely phrase coming out of an actor’s mouth. Down among the Evil-Claws, however, I used modern low-life filth because a shock effect is exactly what such scatological language is always after.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, on numerous occasions I thought it useful to employ the time-honoured consensus of the

scholarship in the interests of clarity, and lift a name, as it were, from the footnotes to the text. Let one instance stand for many. For hundreds of years it has been more or less agreed among the scholars that one of the animals Dante meets early in the poem is a symbol for Avarice. So I put that in. On the other hand, I have left some of the mysteries unsolved because there has never been an answer to them. Who was the Veltro? Scholars are still wondering, so the reader of this translation will have to wonder too. Such a question will soon become recognizable as a Dantesque puzzle. The renowned German scholar Karl Vossler once said that Dante was a great mystifier. And so he was, but not as much as he wasn't. Really he was a great clarifier. The *Divine Comedy* is a vast act of illumination. Even for Hell, Gustav Doré was too dark an illustrator, and by the time we get to Purgatory the whole universe is lighting up, so that you can see, in fine detail, everything that the poet refers to. I may have taken a liberty, towards the very end, in making Dante seem to intuit the space-time continuum. Nobody ever intuited that before Einstein. But one of the tributes we must pay Dante's great poem is that all subsequent human knowledge seems to unfold from it.

As to my chosen stanza form, there are no puzzles at all. The form is a quatrain, either simple or augmented, and any augmentations use the same rhymes, so *abab* might grow to *ababa* or *ababab* or sometimes more. The aim is an easy-seeming onward flow, except at the end of the canto, where a couplet closes the action with a snap. In every other formal respect, the layout is established by Dante himself. It was his idea to have one hundred cantos divided into three lots of thirty-three, with a single canto to start things off. These three groupings of cantos are known to scholars as canticles, but it is perhaps less ponderous to call them books. Dante ends each book with the word "stars." It would be nice if the translator could do the same, but in English the word "stars" has very few words with which to rhyme. Rather than write a strained couplet to close each book, I wrote a final line in which the stars indeed show up, but not as the last word.

In the poetic world of Dante, things happen in a certain order;

with the words, from start to distant finish, always sounding inevitable. Therein will lie the translator's most daunting obstacle. Some of the phrases, known by heart to every educated person in Italy, sound more wonderful in Italian than they ever can in English. It was bound to happen, because different languages have different words for the same thing. In Italian, for example, there is the beautiful word "*sinistra*." In English we just say "left": nothing like as sinuous. By extension, there will be Italian phrases that the translator can't hope to equal for their sonority. But working on such a large scale, there will be other Italian phrases that will offer opportunities to be rendered in English words as resonant as he knows how to make them. Finally, then, it will come down to what he can do with verse. The poet will be on his mettle. Part of his consolation, as he cudgels his brains through the long nights, is that Dante thought the same about himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to both of my publishers, Robert Weil at Liveright in New York, and Don Paterson at Picador in London. Each of them saw the text before it was finished and to neither of them did it occur that I might be overambitious for wanting to press on to a conclusion: or if it did, they didn't say so. In America, Dennis Looney agreed to vet the text: not necessarily a comfortable offer from my angle, because his standards of scholarship are high. His numerous corrections on points of fact have all been incorporated into the text, and his remarks about interpretation have been listened to at the very least: sometimes, after thinking it over, I simply decided he was right, and sat down to recast a line or even more. I should insist, though, that any moments of excess or carelessness are my responsibility. For his scrutiny of my versification, once again I thank Don Paterson, who has supervised my last two books of verse for Picador: to have his fine ear on the case is a great privilege. An even greater privilege was to have my family looking after me when I fell ill. The actual translation was already done, but the whole business of finalizing the text has taken place during the period of my bad health, and if I had not been looked after I would not have lived to see the book made ready for the press. In that regard, my particular thanks should go to my elder daughter, Claerwen, who made crucial suggestions about the order of events in the preliminary pages.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

In this new translation of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante speaks through Clive James with a strong voice in English we haven't heard before. The translator makes the unusual choice of recasting the original Italian into quatrains (not the tercets of Dante's *terza rima*), which he meticulously constructs with keen attention to rhythm and rhyme. The poetic metre imbues the narrative with a drive that propels the pilgrim on his journey from Hell to Heaven. And with it James develops and sustains an impressive periodic syntax—see, e.g., Adam's appearance in Canto 26 of *Heaven*—that pulls the reader in and pushes him along the poem's course too. Unsuspecting readers will find themselves snagged, and happily so, even in the poem's dense doctrinal passages, where often the most devoted fall by the wayside or simply skip ahead to what they imagine is the next good bit of poetry. Consequently, the Beatrice we hear speaking in these Jamesian quatrains (not to mention Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Peter Damian, among others) may be the most convincing in English verse. In this translation there are no lulls when scholastic doctors or purging souls or prolix demons hold forth. Like the pilgrim, you too, good reader—*lettor*, Dante calls you in more than one direct address—move swiftly to the ultimate destination at the end of the poem.

James also makes the laudable decision to flesh out the more obscure references in Dante's poetry by incorporating into the translation explanatory details culled from commentaries, which

are often necessary to understand fully Dante's point in a given passage. The translator decides where and when to add these for the sake of clarity. These additional bits, tipped in judiciously, actually bring the reader closer to the original by removing the necessity of having to consult notes. Some scholars may balk but the typical reader needs help in negotiating Dante's elaborate network of references and will appreciate not having to search it out in footnotes, endnotes or notes in an accompanying volume. Anyone comparing this translation with the original may wonder at times why Dante didn't do this himself. Clive James has given us a new Dante, a forceful Dante, a Dante who deserves to be heard.

—Dennis Looney

Dennis Looney, a professor of Italian and classics at the University of Pittsburgh, is the author of *'My Muse will have a story to paint': Selected Prose of Ludovico Ariosto* (2010) and *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy* (2011).

DANTE

THE DIVINE COMEDY

BOOK

I

—

HELL

CANTO 1

At the mid-point of the path through life, I found
Myself lost in a wood so dark, the way
Ahead was blotted out. The keening sound
I still make shows how hard it is to say
How harsh and bitter that place felt to me—
Merely to think of it renews the fear—
So bad that death by only a degree
Could possibly be worse. As you shall hear,
It led to good things too, eventually,
10 But there and then I saw no sign of those,
And can't say even now how I had come
To be there, stunned and following my nose
Away from the straight path. And then, still numb
From pressure on the heart, still in a daze,
I stumbled on the threshold of a hill
Where trees no longer grew. Lifting my gaze,
I saw its shoulders edged with overspill
From our sure guide, the sun, whose soothing rays
At least a little melted what that night
20 Of dread had done to harden my heart's lake—
And like someone who crawls, half dead with fright,
Out of the sea, and breathes, and turns to take
A long look at the water, so my soul,
Still thinking of escape from the dark wood

I had escaped, looked back to see it whole,
The force field no one ever has withstood
And stayed alive. I rested for a while,
And then resumed, along the empty slope,
My journey, in the standard crofter's style,
30 Weight on the lower foot. Harder to cope
When things got steeper, and a mountain cat
With parti-coloured pelt, light on its feet,
In a trice was in my face and stayed like that,
Barring my way, encouraging retreat.
Three beasts—was this the leopard, Lechery?—
Were said to block the penitential climb
For sinners and for all society,
And here was one, sticking to me like lime.
Not only did it hamper me, it made
40 Me think of turning back. Now was the time
Morning begins. The sun, fully displayed
At last, began its climb, but not alone.
The stars composing Aries, sign of spring,
Were with it now, nor left it on its own
When the First Love made every lovely thing
The world can boast: a thought to give me heart
That I might counter, in this gentle hour
Of a sweet season, the obstructive art,
Pretty to see but frightful in its power,
50 Of that cat with the coloured coat. But wait:
If fear had waned, still there was fear enough
To bring on Pride, the lion, in full spate:
Head high, hot breath to make the air look rough—
As rocks in summer seem to agitate
The atmosphere above them without cease—
So rabid was its hunger. On its heels
The wolf appeared, whose name is Avarice,
Made thin by a cupidity that steals
Insatiably out of its own increase,
60 Obtained from many people it made poor.

This one propelled such terror from its face
Into my mind, all thoughts I had before
Of ever rising to a state of grace
Were crushed. And so, as one who, mad for gain,
Must find one day that all he gains is lost
In a flood of tears, a conscience racked with pain,
Just so I felt my hopes came at the cost
Of being forced, by this unresting beast,
Little by little down towards that wood
70 Whose gloom the sun can never in the least
Irradiate. But all at once there stood
Before me one who somehow seemed struck dumb
By the weight of a long silence. "Pity me,
And try to tell me in what form you come,"
I cried. "Is it a shade or man I see?"
And he replied: "No, not a man. Not now.
I was once, though. A Lombard. Parents born
In Mantua. Both born there." That was how
His words emerged: as if with slow care torn,
80 Like pages of a book soaked shut by time,
From his clogged throat. "Caesar was getting on
When I was young. That's Julius. A crime,
His death. Then, after he was gone,
I lived in Rome. The good Augustus reigned.
The gods were cheats and liars. As for me,
I was a poet." He grew less constrained
In speech, as if trade-talk brought fluency.
"I sang about Anchises' son, the just
Aeneas, pious, peerless. When proud Troy
90 Was burned to ashes, ashes turned to dust
Which he shook off his feet, that marvellous boy.
He did what any decent hero must:
Set sail. But you, you turn back. Tell me why.
Why not press on to the delightful peak?
The root cause of all joy is in the sky."
Almost too shocked and overawed to speak—

For now the one who fought for words was I—
I asked him, just as if I didn't know:
“Are you Virgil? Are you the spring, the well,
100 The fountain and the river in full flow
Of eloquence that sings like a seashell
Remembering the sea and the rainbow?
Of all who fashion verse the leading light?
The man of honour? What am I to say?
Through learning you by heart I learned to write.
My love for your book turned my night to day.
You are my master author. Only you
Could teach me the Sweet Style that they call mine.
I could go on. But what am I to do
110 About this animal that shows no sign
Of letting me proceed? It scares me so,
My veins are empty, all the blood sucked back
Into the heart. There's nothing you don't know,
My sage, so tell me how this mad attack
Can be called off.” Then he: “You need to choose
Another route.” This while he watched me weep.
“This way there's no way out. You're bound to lose:
Bound by the spell of this beast pledged to keep
You crying, you or anyone who tries
120 To get by. In a bad mood it can kill,
And it's never in a good mood. See those eyes?
So great a hunger nothing can fulfil.
It eats, it wants more, like the many men
Infected by its bite. Its catalogue
Of victories will be finished only when
Another dog arrives, the hunting dog:
The Veltro. As for now, it's hard to see
Even his outline through the glowing fog
Of the future, but be assured by me—
130 The Veltro will make this thing die of shame
For wanting to eat wealth and real estate.
The Veltro's diet will be bigger game:

Love, wisdom, virtue. It will operate
In humble country, eat the humble bread
Of that sad Italy where Trojans fought
Our local tribes: the Latium beachhead.
The brave Princess Camilla there was brought
To death in battle, and Prince Turnus, too—
Killed by Aeneas, of whose Trojan friends
140 Euryalus and Nisus died. The new
Great Dog will harry this one to the ends
Of that scorched earth and so back down to Hell,
From which, by envious Lucifer, it was
First sent forth. But by now I've pondered well
The path adapted best to serve your cause,
So let me be your guide. I'll take you through
The timeless breaker's yard where you will hear
The death cries of the damned who die anew
Each day, though dead already in the year—
150 No dated stones remain to give a clue—
The earliest sinners died, when time began.
And you'll see, in the next eternal zone,
Those so content with purging fire they fan
The flames around them, thankful to atone,
Hopeful of being raised to join the blessed.
If you would join them too, we'll reach a stage
When only someone else shows you the rest:
Someone more worthy, though of tender age
Beside me. I can't tell you her name yet,
160 But what I can say is, the Emperor
Who reigns on high vows he will never let
A non-believer—though I lived before
Belief was possible—see where he sits
In judgement and in joy with the elect.”
Sad and afraid, but gathering my wits,
“Poet,” I said, “I ask you to effect,
In the name of that God you will never see,
An exit for me from this place of grief,

And then an entry to where I would be—
170 Beyond the purging flames of which you tell—
In sight of Peter's Gate, though that relief
Demands for prelude that I go through Hell.”
And then he moved, and then I moved as well.

CANTO 2

The day was dying, and the darkening air
Brought all the working world of living things
To rest. I, only, sweated to prepare
For war, the way ahead, the grind that brings
The battler to hot tears for each yard gained:
To bitter tears, and memories more real
Than what was real and which is thus retained
Unblunted, edged with even sharper steel.
My Muse, my schooled and proven gift, help me:

- 10 It's now or never. Fortify my mind
With the vivifying skills of poetry,
For what I saw needs art of a great kind.
I saw great things. Give them nobility.
Thus I began: "Poet I call my guide,
Judge first my powers. Will they serve so high
A purpose? Would you rather step aside
Than put me to this road? For you, not I,
Have told the world Aeneas, mortal still,
Went to another world, and not to die.
- 20 But if the Adversary of All Ill
Saw fit to let him live, thinking of who
And what he was—princely progenitor
Of everything that Rome would be and do
In times to come—who could deserve it more?

A man of intellect, the soul of Rome
And all its empire, he was singled out
There where the light eternal has its home,
At the Highest Level. Also, what about
That city? Though the world fell at its feet,
30 Rome was created first so that one day
Great Peter's followers might have their seat,
Enthroned by the divine will. When you say
Aeneas sailed to victory, what he heard
Along the way ensured not only that,
But the papal mantle. So the Holy Word,
Sent backwards into time, aimed only at
Your hero, hit the mark. And then Paul's ship,
The Chosen Vessel, came to Rome as well—
The vessel, in a sense, that Faith might sip
40 Renewal from, and did. But now, pray tell,
Why me? Who says that I get to go there?
Do I look like Aeneas? Am I Paul?
Not I nor anyone I know would dare
To put me in that company at all.
Therefore, if I persuade myself to go,
I trust I'll not be punished as a fool.
Wise man, what I have not said, you must know.”
Just so, obeying the unwritten rule
That one who would unwish that which he wished,
50 Having thought twice about what first he sought,
Must put fish back into the pool he fished,
So they, set free, may once again be caught,
Just so did I in that now shadowy fold—
Because, by thinking, I'd consumed the thought
I started with, that I had thought so bold.
“If I have understood your words aright,”
Magnanimously the great shade replied,
“Your soul is crumbling from the needless blight
Of misplaced modesty, which is false pride
60 Reversed, and many men by this are swayed

From honourable enterprise. One thinks
Of a dreaming beast that wakes with temper frayed
And finds the prowler into whom it sinks
Its teeth does not exist. Upon that head,
That you be free of fear, I'll tell you why
I came and what I felt when I was led
First to your quaking side by your far cry.
Along with all those caught between desire
To see the One Above and sheer despair
70 That they will never even see hellfire,
I was in Limbo. Out of the open air
She stepped, and stood, and then she called my name:
A woman beatific, beautiful.
Her scintillating eyes outshone the flame
Of stars. To disobey? Impossible.
I begged her to command me. She gave voice.
It was an angel's voice, restrained and sweet.
'Courteous soul of Mantua, rejoice:
Your fame lives on, exalted and complete,
80 And will throughout the world, from end to end,
Until the world ends. But I need you now.
In a deserted hillside field, my friend
Is fortune's enemy, and can't see how
To make his way. Terror could turn him back.
I'm not sure if he's not already dead
Or if I've come in time to clear the track
That leads him, as in Heaven I've heard said,
To salvation. So if you would obey,
Go to him, and with all your verbal art,
90 With anything it takes, show him the way.
Do this for me, for I am sick at heart.
My name is Beatrice. Now you know your task.
Where I come from, and long to be restored,
Love rules me. It determines what I ask.
When I am once again before my Lord,
Then I to Him, whom all praise, will praise you.'

Her melody was done. Then I to her:
'Woman of quality, know this is true:
One look at you and I knew who you were.
100 For only through that quality, the race
Of men raised by that quality, Virtue,
Can hope to set their eyes on the high place
Beyond any contentment they enjoy
Under the lower sky ruled by the moon.
So glad am I to be in your employ
I'd not have carried out my task too soon
If I'd already done it. Enough said:
I was persuaded even as you spoke.
But tell me this. Why do you feel no dread
110 Coming down here into this pall of smoke,
This ball of fire that pulses at the core
Of the higher world to which you would return?'
She spoke again: 'A little, but no more,
To satisfy a mind still keen to learn,
I'll tell you why to come here holds no threat
For me. Your Aristotle gets it right:
All fearful things we safely can forget
Except those which, allowed their freedom, might
Cause harm to others. God in mercy made
120 Me such that all your miseries touch me not,
Nor do the flames of this condemned arcade
Scorch one hair of my head. But now to what
Most matters. Take due note of this, great shade:
There is a woman in the sky laments
For the unfortunate I send you to.
Her pain at his entrapment is intense.
She is the Virgin, and, like me to you,
She told Lucy—the spirit of all Grace,
Grace that illuminates like the spring sun
130 The soul within: you see it in her face—
She told Lucy: "Right now your faithful one
Has need of you. You are my choice to go."

Lucy, beside whom cruelty has none
To match her as an enemy, did so,
And came to where I sat with dear Rachel,
The soul of contemplation, as you know:
You loved your books and candlelight so well.
“Beatrice,” said Lucy. “Hear me. You that are
The picture of God’s praise, why do you not
140 Bring help to him whose love for you so far
Exceeded that of all the common lot
Who loved you too? Do you not hear his screams
Of agony? Do you not see the death
He battles on the river of bad dreams
Deeper than any ocean?” In a breath—
For never was one quicker in the world,
Whether to gain a point or flee his fate,
Than I was when I heard those words—I hurled
Myself from that serene, unhurried state
150 Like a thrown stone down here, putting my trust
In you, your honest tongue that draws to you
Honour from all who listen, as truth must.’
Thus Beatrice. Then she turned away, a new
Lustre appearing in her shining glance:
Her tears, which spurred me quickly to your side,
As she asked, lest this beast should seize its chance
To cut the straightest road, and you abide
Far from the lovely mountain. So then, why?
Why falter, weakling? Why so faint a heart?
160 Why doubt there is a highway in the sky
That leads to where all doubts are set apart?
Where is your courage, where your inner steel?
Three women loved in Heaven do their best
To make you loved there too, and still you feel
No shame at shrinking down inside your nest,
Afraid of your first flight. This isn’t real.
And what of me, who promised you much good?
Much good it did. Claiming to like my book!

Does the hero's story shame you? So it should."
170 Catching the firmness in his still fond look—
As the little flowers, bent by the night's cold
And closed and smooth on the outside like gems,
When sunlight lights them straighten and unfold
And open opulently on stiff stems—
So did I find in my depleted strength
The strength of mind to lift my heart again.
I thanked them both at last, if not at length:
"Would she were here who came to my aid when
I was most lost. My thanks can have no end:
180 This is the start. And you, my guiding light—
Who listened to her like a loving friend,
Of mine as well as hers—with second sight
You saw into my soul, and said the things
That needed to be said for a return
To my first purpose. Thank you for what brings
My will and yours together: what I learn
From my teacher, master, leader." So I said.
On the high, hard road, I followed, and he led.