and live the religious life of the order. They prayed for the salvation of Eliduc's soul, and in his turn he prayed for both of them. He found out by messengers how they were, how they comforted each other. All three tried in their own ways to love God with true faith; and in the end, by the mercy of God in whom all truth reposes, each died a peaceful death.

The noble Celts composed this story long ago to enshrine the strange adventure of these three. May it never be forgotten!

DANTE ALIGHIERI

1265–1321

The greatest poem of the Middle Ages, called by its author a comedy and designated by later centuries *The Divine Comedy (La divina commedia)*, was written in the early fourteenth century. The poet, Dante Alighieri, was born in late May 1265, in Florence, Italy. In 1291 he married Gemma Donati, by whom he had two sons and one or two daughters. In 1295 he was a member of the "people's council" of Florence, and in 1300 served for two months, the usual term, as one of the six priors, or magistrates, of Florence. In 1302 the Blacks, opponents of the Whites (a political group with which Dante was affiliated), seized power in Florence, and he, with other White leaders, was exiled. Dante had gone to Rome on a mission to Pope Boniface in 1301, and as the decree of banishment was soon coupled with a condemnation to execution by fire (on false charges of corruption in office), he never returned to his native city. The last twenty years of his life, from 1301 to 1321, were spent in exile in various parts of Italy and possibly elsewhere. He died at Ravenna in September 1321.

The New Life was probably written about 1292. It consists of sonnets and odes with a prose account and running commentary by the poet; the poems were mostly inspired by Beatrice. *The Banquet*, of uncertain date, unfinished, is a work of encyclopedic scope in the form of a prose commentary on a series of the poet's odes *(canzoni)*. *On the Vernacular Language*, in Latin prose, of uncertain date, unfinished, is an essay on language and poetry, especially on the dialects of Italy and Provence; it is of great linguistic and literary interest. *On Single Government*, in Latin prose, of uncertain date, presents a closely reasoned defense of world government, together with an attempt to demonstrate the independent status of the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy.

The Divine Comedy (begun ca. 1301) was apparently finished shortly before Dante's death in 1321. The poem is in many ways both the supreme and the centrally representative expression of medieval man in imaginative literature. But to appreciate the poem adequately in this light a reader must know it in its entirety, since it is an organic whole designed with the utmost symmetry. The present volume contains the entire *Inferno* and several cantos from the other two divisions. It will be best to look rapidly at the general plan and then concentrate on the part included in this book.

The three great divisions of the poem, *Hell (Inferno)*, *Purgatory (Purgatorio)*, and *Paradise (Paradiso)*, are of identical length; each of the last two has thirty-three cantos, and the first, the *Inferno*, has thirty-four; but the opening canto is a prologue to the entire poem. The total, one hundred, is the square of ten, regarded in the thought of the time as a perfect number. The three divisions correspond in number to the Trinity. Nine, the square of three, figures centrally in the interior structure of each of the three divisions. In Hell, the lost souls are arranged in three main groups, and occupy nine circles. Most of the circles are themselves subdivided. Hell itself is a funnel-shaped opening in the earth extending from the surface to the center. Dante's journey thus takes him steadily downward through the nine concentric circles. The progression is from the least to the greatest types of evil; all the souls are irrevocably condemned, but all are not intrinsically equal in the degree or nature of their sinfulness. Thus, as we follow Dante in his descent, we find first an ante-Hell, the abode of those who refused to choose between right and wrong; then the boundary river, Acheron; then a circle for virtuous pagans who knew not Christ; and then a series of circles occupied by those guilty of sins of self-indulgence, or Incontinence, of all kinds. These include the illicit lovers, the gluttons, the hoarders and spendthrifts, and those of violent or sullen disposition. Comparable classes and subclasses are found within the other two main groups of sinners, those guilty respectively of Violence and of Fraud, the latter including treachery and treason. At the bottom is the fallen angel, Satan, or Lucifer.

Purgatory is situated on a lofty mountain rising on an island in the sea. It is divided into the ante-Purgatory, which is the lower half of the mountain; Purgatory proper, just above; and the Earthly Paradise, or Garden of Eden, at the summit. Purgatory proper is arranged in a series of seven ledges encircling the mountain, each devoted to the purification of souls from particular kinds of sinful disposition—Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Illicit Love. These seven divisions, plus the ante-Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise, make a total of nine.

The *Paradise* takes us, in ascending order, through the circles of the seven planets of medieval astronomy, the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn; then through the circles of the fixed stars and the *primum mobile*, or outermost circle, which moves the others; and finally to the Empyrean, or Heaven itself, the abode of God, the angels, and the redeemed souls. Again we have nine circles, besides the Empyrean, inclusion of which would give a total of ten. Such is the vast design and scope of *The Divine Comedy* as a whole.

INFERNO

The poem itself begins with action, not outline; explanations come along in suitable places; they are part of the traveler's experience. We shall do well to follow the hint. The incidents recounted in Canto I of the *Inferno* are concrete and definite; their literal meaning is perfectly plain. As critics have often said, Dante is a highly visual poet; he gives us clear pictures or images. Beginning with a man lost in a wood, hindered by three beasts from escape by his own effort, the canto might well be the start of a tale of unusual but

quite earthly adventures. But when the stranger Dante meets identifies himself as the shade of the poet Virgil and offers to conduct him through realms which, though not named, can only be Hell and Purgatory, we realize that there is a meaning beyond the one which appears on the surface. We recognize that the wood, the mountain, the sun, and the three beasts, though casually introduced, are not casual features of the scene. They represent something other than themselves; they are symbols. In the light of the entire poem, it is usually possible to tell what these other things are, and in this volume the headnotes and footnotes identify them. Occasionally, however, there is doubt. What do the three beasts stand for? A lack of certainty is not a serious disadvantage to readers; they should regard it as a challenge to reach a correct decision for themselves. Indeed, if they go on to read the entire poem, they may arrive at an identification that seems sounder and more consistent with the work as a whole than those proposed. Meanwhile, there is no ambiguity about the animals themselves; they are the satisfying and specific images of poetry.

The simple style of this first canto may surprise readers who have been told that *The Divine Comedy* is one of the five or six great poems of European literature, especially if they assume that it will sound like an epic. For Dante begins with neither the splendor of Homer nor the stateliness of Virgil nor the grandeur of Milton. Indeed, except for the use of verse, Canto I seems more like a narrative by Defoe or Swift, particularly at the outset. It is quiet, factual, economical; it convinces us by its air of serious simplicity. Dante called the poem a comedy, in accordance with the use of the term in his day, not only because it began in misery and ended in happiness, but also because in that literary form a sustained loftiness of style was not requisite. In other words, he is free to use the whole range of style, from the humblest, including the colloquial and the humorous, to the highest. There is, indeed, a great variety of tone in the poem. Yet readers will doubtless eventually agree that Dante strikes the right note *for him* at the beginning. Variation will result chiefly from change in intensity, achieved by differing degrees of concentration and repetition—rather than from a shift to the "grand style." This unpretentious manner is, we see, most suitable to a prolonged work of serious fiction in which the author is the central character. For *The Divine Comedy* is not primarily a Cook's tour of the world of the dead; it is an account of the effect of such a journey on the man who takes it—Dante. It is a record of his moral and spiritual experience of illumination, regeneration, and beatitude. We are interested partly because of the unique and individual character of the traveler—Dante as the man he was, the man revealed in the poem—and partly because the experience of the author is imaginatively available and meaningful to all of us.

In Canto IV we come to the first of the nine concentric circles of Hell. Here are the noble heroes, wise philosophers, and inspired poets of the ancient—and medieval—pagan world. They are excluded from Heaven because they knew nothing of Christ and his religion. This fate may seem harsh to us, but the orthodox view recognized only one gate to Heaven. These spirits suffer no punishment, Virgil (who is one of them) tells Dante, only "without hope, we live on in desire." Here Dante's fervent pity and sympathy at once nourish and mirror the reader's; but there is no rebellion

against God's decree. Further explanation, and thereby justification, in Dante's view, will come as the poem progresses toward its goal.

With Canto V we reach the second circle, the first of those containing souls guilty of active sin unrepented at the time of death, and hence suffering a penalty in Hell. Here, therefore, is found the contemptuous and monstrous judge Minos, another figure taken from classical myth and freely adapted to Dante's purposes. The souls assigned to the second circle are those guilty of unlawful love. The poet's method here, as throughout the journey, is first to point out a number of prominent figures who would be familiar to his fourteenth-century readers, and then to concentrate attention on a very few, one or two in each circle, telling more about them and eliciting his own story from each. In general, Dante lets the place and condition in which the sinners are found serve as a minimum essential of information. For the penalties in the various circles are of many different kinds. Their fundamental characteristic is appropriateness to the particular sin; this is one of the principal differences between the punishments in Dante's Hell and the miscellaneous and arbitrary horrors of many accounts of the place. In Dante the penalties symbolize the sin. Thus the illicit lovers of the second circle are continually blown about by storm winds, for their sin consisted in the surrender of reason to lawless passions.

Here we find Paolo and Francesca, the best-known figures of the entire *Divine Comedy*. Like all the human beings presented in the poem, they actually existed. They lived in Italy about the time of Dante's childhood and early youth, and were slain by Francesca's husband, a brother of Paolo. Dante's method, it is hence clear, is not to build up an allegorical cast of personified abstractions. Instead of, say, Passion and Rebellion, he portrays Paolo and Francesca. They represent, or symbolize, sinful love by example. They show how an intrinsically noble emotion, love, if contrary to God's law, can bring two essentially fine persons to damnation and spiritual ruin. The tenderness and the sympathy with which the story is told are famous. But its pathos, and Dante's personal response of overwhelming pity, should not blind us to the *justice* of the penalty. The poet who describes himself as fainting at the end of Francesca's recital is the same man who consigned her to Hell. His purpose is partly to portray the attractiveness of sin, an especially congenial theme when *this* is the sin involved—both for Dante and for most readers. But although Dante allows the lovers the bitter sweetness of inseparability in Hell, the modern "romantic" idea that union anywhere is sufficient happiness for lovers does not even occur to him. Paolo and Francesca indeed have their love; but they have lost God and thus corrupted their personalities—their inmost selves—from order into anarchy; they are the reverse of happy. In a sense, they have what they wanted, they continue in the lawless condition which they chose on earth. But that condition, seen from the point of view of eternity, is not bliss; it is, in effect, Hell.

In Canto X we are among the heretics in their flaming tomb in the sixth circle. Situated within the walled city of Dis—the capital, as it were, of Hell—this circle is a kind of border between the upper Hell (devoted to punishments for Incontinence) and the lower (concerned with Violence and Fraud). Here Dante portrays the proud aristocrat Farinata and his associate, the elder Cavalcante, father of Dante's closest friend. Their crime is heresy,

a flagrant aspect of intellectual pride. But there is a nobility in Farinata's pride; Dante, like the reader, admires the splendid self-sufficiency of a man who, in this situation, can seem "to hold all Hell in disrespect." And the essence of the aristocratic nature is distilled in his address to Dante as "the great soul stared almost contemptuously, / before he asked: 'Of what line do you come?' " and in his abrupt resumption of the conversation interrupted by Cavalcante. Alongside the haughtiness of Farinata, Dante sets the pathetic—and mistaken—grief of Cavalcante for his son; each portrait gains in effect by the extreme contrast.

Canto XIII shows us one group of those guilty of Violence; for the suicides have been violent against themselves. Here they are turned into monstrous trees, their misery finding expression when a bough is plucked. In the eyes of the Church, suicide was murder, in no way diminished by the fact that the slayer and the victim were the same. By representing in Pier delle Vigne a man who had every human motive to end his life, Dante achieves the deepest pathos and evokes our shuddering pity. As Francesca displays in her dramatic monologue the charm and the potential weakness of her character, as Farinata's manner of speech portrays his nature, so Pier delle Vigne by his exact and legal-sounding language lets us see the careful, methodical counselor whose sense of logic and sense of justice were so outraged that he saw no point in enduring life any longer. His judgment is still unimpaired; he does not reproach his king, only the jealous courtiers who misled him. The Wood of the Suicides is one of the greatest—among many admirable—examples of landscape in Hell assimilated to theme and situation.

Canto XV describes the meeting of Dante and his venerable teacher and adviser, the scholar Brunetto Latini. We are in another ring of the seventh circle, among more of those who have sinned through Violence. The impact of this scene results from the contrast between the dignity of the man and the indignity of his condition in hell, and by the tact with which both he and Dante ignore it for the moment. Brunetto, with the others guilty of homosexual vice, must move continually along a sandy desert under a shower of fiery flakes. Dante accords him the utmost respect and expresses his gratitude in the warmest terms; and something like their earthly relationship of teacher and pupil is re-enacted, for Brunetto is keenly interested in Dante's prospects in life. In the final image of Brunetto running, not like the loser, but like the winner of a race, Dante extracts dignity and victory out of indignity itself.

The presence of people like those we have been reviewing will remind the reader that Hell is not reserved exclusively for arrant ruffians, hoodlums, and scoundrels. They are there, of course; but so are many "nice," many charming, and some noble and great, men and women. These are in Hell because they preferred something else—no matter what—to God; at the moment of death they were therefore in rebellion against Him. God and Heaven would not be congenial to them, *as they are and as He is*; and there is no acceptable repentance after death. Hence they go on unchanged—only now experiencing the harsher aspects of the sin in which they chose to live.

In Canto XVII the travelers are carried on the back of the flying monster Geryon down the deep descent from the seventh to the eighth circle. With the face of a just man and the body of a serpent, Geryon symbolizes Fraud.

He is one of the most exciting figures in Hell. In an age before ferris wheels and airplanes, he gives our poets a ride that anticipates some of the terrifying thrill which a young child may feel in an airplane journey. The eighth circle is subdivided into ten chasms or trenches (Malebolge), each with its own kind of sinners: seducers and panders; flatterers; simoniacs (buyers and sellers of appointments in the Church); sorcerers; grafters; hypocrites; thieves; evil counselors; trouble-makers; forgers, and impostors.

Most readers will agree that the punishments here fit the crimes; indeed, reflection will usually intensify this conviction. It is a long catalogue of iniquity; much, but not all, is sordid. Dante has avoided monotony not only by the vividness and intensity of the separate scenes but also by their ingenious variety and by the frequent changes of pace in the narrative. The satirical situation and fierce denunciation of the simoniacs is followed by the quiet horror of the sorcerers with twisted necks. The hilarious episode of the grafters precedes the encounter with the solemn, slow-walking hypocrites; and these are succeeded by the macabre serpent-transformations of the thieves. Nevertheless, our steadily deepening descent in hell gradually produces a sense of oppressiveness. This is appropriate and deliberate; it is a part of Dante's total design. But he recognizes the need of momentary relief, a breath of fresh air, a reminder of the world above. These he provides, for example, in the long simile describing the shipyard in Venice (the opening of Canto XXI) or the picture of the peasant and his two sallies outside on a winter morning (the opening of Canto XXIV).

The episode of the grafters (Cantos XXI and XXII) probably has biographical relevance for Dante. During his absence from Florence on business of state, the opposing political party seized power and sentenced Dante to death if he should return to Florence. The quite unfounded charge against him was misappropriation of public funds. In these cantos Dante cuts a ludicrous figure: fearful, cowering, in constant danger from the demons. He escapes their clutches, first by a distraction and then by belated vigilance. The whole sequence affords an oblique and amusing view of an actual episode. It is worth noting also that here, and here only, in the poem, we find ourselves in the kind of hell known in popular lore and anecdote, with winged devils playing rough jokes on their human prey. Scenes, style, and language alike here show one extreme of the range of the poem—the "low" comic. Dante very unobtrusively indicates his awareness of this by the contrasting allusions found in Canto XX, line 113 and Canto XXI, line 2.

Cantos XXVI and XXVII take us among the wicked counselors, who occupy the eighth chasm, or subdivision, of the eighth circle. Appearing at a distance like fireflies in a summer valley, these souls are wrapped in individual, or occasionally twin, flames. Fire is a fit punishment for those who used the flame of intellect to accomplish evil. When the two poets approach more closely, Virgil identifies one flame as that of Ulysses (Odysseus) and Diomede, who burn together. Among the deceptions devised by Ulysses was the wooden horse, which made possible the capture of Troy. It will strike the reader as strange that a man should suffer for his powers as a military tactician. But the Greeks were enemies of the Trojans, whom the Romans and later most of the nations of Western Europe regarded as their ancestors. Ulysses was on the wrong side, and was responsible for his deeds; but Dante mingles

with his condemnation an admiration of the man's mental powers. Ulysses remains aloof; he does not converse with Dante, like most of the souls we have met. Instead, as Dorothy Sayers puts it in the notes to her translation of the poem, Virgil conjures the flame into monologue. Thus we are told how Ulysses determined not to return home after the Trojan War but to explore the western ocean instead. In this narrative, apparently invented by Dante, Ulysses becomes the type of the adventuring and searching spirit of man; the voyage is an act of the mind and soul as well as the body. When he has sailed within sight of a mountainous island, his ship is wrecked by a storm and he perishes. Since, as other parts of the poem indicate, this is the island of Purgatory, the episode clearly has symbolic significance. On this island is the Earthly Paradise, or Garden of Eden, lost to man by the sin of Adam. Man, unassisted by divine grace—pagan man, represented by Ulysses—cannot regain it by his own intelligence, although the effort toward that end is noble in itself.

The other evil counselor, Guido da Montefeltro, talks fluently in Canto XXVII; he shows a quite earthly eagerness for news, crafty, garrulous old intriguer that he is. It is a neat irony that, in spite of his deserved reputation for cleverness, Dante shows him twice deceived: first on earth, as he himself relates, and now in Hell—he does not want his story known and is convinced that Dante will never return to earth to tell it. He sketches in detail, with recollective acidity, the steps by which the pope led him, an aging and reformed man, to return for a moment to his old ways. He even includes the contest of St. Francis and the devil for his soul at his death, along with the devil's bitter witticism: you didn't think I was a logician, perhaps!

In Cantos XXXII and XXXIII we have reached the ninth and last circle, where the traitors are immersed in ice that symbolizes their unfeeling hearts. At the end of one canto we are shown the horror of Ugolino gnawing the skull of his enemy Ruggieri, both partly fastened in the ice. Dante does not concentrate on the acts which have put either man in Hell. Instead he lets Ugolino tell us, in the next canto, why his hatred of Ruggieri is so implacable. The fearful pathos, the power, and at the same time the restraint and compression of this narrative make it one of the finest episodes in the poem.

The last canto, Canto XXXIV, shows us the enormous shape of the fallen angel, Satan, fixed at the bottom of Hell, where the motion of his wings freezes the ice in which we have found the traitors immersed. In one of his three mouths he holds Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ; in the other two are Brutus and Cassius, who plotted the assassination of Julius Caesar. Dante did not regard them, as we generally do today, as perhaps misguided patriots; to him they were the destroyers of a providentially ordained ruler. Readers who remember Milton's *Paradise Lost* may be surprised at the absence of any interior presentation of Satan. One critic regrets that his suffering is not shown as different from that of the other inhabitants of Hell. But the fact is that his suffering is not presented at all; he is not a person, to Dante, but an object, a part of the machinery and geography of Hell. For *The Divine Comedy* is occupied exclusively with human sin, human redemption, and human beatitude.

PURGATORY

At the beginning of the *Purgatory*, Dante and Virgil have once more reached the surface of the earth and can look up and see the sky and the stars. Their long climb from the bottom of Hell, where they left Satan, has brought them out on the shore of the mountain-island of Purgatory. The scene and the situation are presented by Dante with a bold and happy use of imaginative symbols. Guided by Reason in the person of Virgil, Dante, a man still in the earthly life, has looked closely at sin and evil—in Hell—and turned away from them, and is now in search of the means of self-correction and purification. He arrives on the island shore, just before dawn, to find the reverend figure of Cato acting as guardian of the mountain. The austerely glorious figure of Cato, his face illumined by rays from stars representing the pagan virtues of Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice, embodies the highest moral and ethical ideal available to man without divine revelation, pre- or post-Christian. Dante meets him, appropriately, before dawn—before the sun of God's illumination has risen. These elements in the situation, together with the reference to his sojourn with Marcia, his wife, in the circle of virtuous pagans in Hell, make Cato a remarkable transition or border symbol, standing both between Hell and Purgatory and between Greco-Roman philosophy and ethics and the dispensation of the Old and New Testaments.

These opening cantos admirably set quite a new tone in the second great division of the poem. They show us joy and brightness, cheer and hope, contrasting totally with the darkness and misery of Hell. They show us an angel arriving with a cargo of souls, all joyfully singing. They accustom us to a different set of attitudes, a different kind of people, and especially, they portray the naïveté, the almost childlike lack of intellectual and moral sophistication, the need of orientation, which characterize the penitent soul at this point in its progress to perfection. As yet uninstructed and spiritually immature, it looks back, seeking to carry on the harmless but no longer suitable delights of earthly life. Dante—and Virgil—share this simplicity to the full.

Cantos III–XVIII, not included in this book, take the reader along the slopes of the lower half of the mountain—the ante-Purgatory, where some of the souls must wait for varying periods of time (and for different reasons) before entering Purgatory itself—and through four of the seven terraces, those devoted to purgation from Pride, Envy, Anger, and Sloth. In Canto XIX we go on to the fifth of the ledges encircling the mountain, that in which the souls are purified of Avarice. There we meet Pope Adrian, one of Dante's most vivid illustrations of the anguish of purification. Concisely he sketches for Dante the poignant story of his late conversion (to the reality of the Christian life), his repentance, and his present hard penance. Only when, after a life of self-seeking, he had attained the pinnacle of the papacy did disillusionment come—and spiritual discovery: "I saw no heart's rest there, nor ease from strife." Now he recognizes the equity of the reforming penalty:

> We would not raise our eyes to the shining spheres
> but kept them turned to mundane things: so Justice
> bends them to earth here in this place of tears.

Dante, on learning from Adrian's words that he was a pope, has knelt down in respect. But Adrian, perceiving this without lifting his eyes from the ground, peremptorily corrects Dante: there are no popes here. All the hierarchies and social orders of earth are annihilated in Purgatory—and, we may add, the hierarchy of Heaven is not that of earth. Having answered Dante's questions, Adrian bids him go on—he hinders the task of penitence. Finally, remembering that Dante had offered to carry news of him to those possibly dear to him on earth, which might lead to helpful prayers, the old man adds that he has only a niece there who, if not corrupted by the bad example of his family, could possibly help him. But for this soul, absorbed in his penance, the earth has receded far away, and Heaven is not yet attained; he is essentially alone with his suffering.

The remaining parts of the *Purgatory* included in this book, Cantos XXVII, XXX, and XXXI, add a dimension to Dante's role in the poem. He is, as has been said, the protagonist throughout; the journey and all its disclosures are carried out for his benefit. In Hell, to be sure, he could do little except look and learn; yet his emotional education through the revelation of perfected evil was a large and positive achievement. As a candidate for salvation, he has learned to abhor sin more completely in proportion as he has been shown its real nature; while, as a man of flesh and blood, he has felt alternate pity and hate for the sinners. Along the penitential ledges of Purgatory he has partially assimilated himself to the penitents; he has felt humility while among those purging themselves of Pride, and generosity among those seeking to root out Envy from their natures. On the seventh terrace, he has recognized an even closer kinship with those engaged in refining their love by fire. But now this same fire, it develops, is the boundary between Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise at the top of the mountain. To reach that goal, Dante must go through the fire. Remembering "human bodies / I once saw burned," he is overcome by a terrible fear. The encouraging words of the angel guardian of the ledge, the assurances of Virgil, who reminds him of perils safely passed— neither avail to move him until he is told that Beatrice is beyond the wall of flame. Then his resistance melts and he perseveres through the frightful but harmless fire. It is now nearly sunset, when all ascent ceases, but next morning Dante takes the few last steps to the Earthly Paradise. Here Virgil, who has guided him through Hell and Purgatory, gives him a farewell benediction. Dante, says Virgil, has explored evil in its final effects (Hell) and the means of correcting the human inclinations that produce it (in Purgatory). His regenerated will is now truly free, and he may fearlessly follow its direction. He no longer needs the guidance of a teacher of morality (Virgil) nor a political structure ("crown") nor an ecclesiastical institution ("mitre"). In short, he has regained the condition of man before the Fall.

These words apply to Dante in his role as a kind of Everyman, representing whoever has fully discerned the nature of evil and wholly freed himself from the impulses to sin. They apply to every soul when it completes the experience of Purgatory; if they did not, the soul would not be ready to go to Heaven, to enter the presence of God. But obviously they cannot apply, actually and practically, to any man still living on earth. That they were not meant as a literal description of Dante the Italian poet and political exile from Florence is clear enough from the events of Cantos XXX and XXXI. For if Dante has already perfected himself by penance, why should he now, in the scenes with Beatrice, repeat the painful experience of rebuke, confession, and satisfaction? It is this latter series of incidents that constitutes Dante's personal, individual experience of correction and purification.

In the midst of the celestial pageant that moves before Dante in the Earthly Paradise appears a lady whom he instantly recognizes as one who was the object of his idealizing love when she lived as a woman on earth. Turning excitedly to confide this to Virgil, he cannot find him anywhere, and is stricken with grief. Presently the Lady names herself as Beatrice—whom the reader will remember for two reasons: she sent Virgil to guide her endangered servant, Dante, through Hell and Purgatory; and to see her Dante forced himself to go through the barrier of fire. There is no cause to doubt that, like the other human beings in the poem, Beatrice is an actual person transformed by the shaping imagination of the poet. What she was to Dante in her earthly life he tells us in the *New Life (Vita nuova)*, written not long after her death in 1290. She was an incarnation of beauty and virtue; simply by existing, she engrossed the young Dante's ardent but remote devotion; her smile or greeting left him in trembling rapture. This was the full extent of the relationship between them. But the poems in the *New Life* are mostly inspired by the thought of her, whether on earth or in heaven. In short, she was a real woman who, even in this world, was an ideal for Dante, and after death became an even more glorious image of goodness and divine wisdom. The last section of the *New Life* records Dante's resolution to devote a great work to her, when he shall be qualified to achieve it; *The Divine Comedy* is that work. We have seen that he makes her the instigator of the imaginary journey through two realms of the life after death and the motive for his endurance of the fire. Now, as successor to Virgil, she comes to guide him herself through the heavenly paradise. In the same way that Virgil is Reason without ceasing to be Virgil, Beatrice fulfills the role of Divine Revelation without ceasing to be Beatrice.

It is in this dual character, part beloved woman and part the voice of divine wisdom, that Beatrice, in Canto XXXI, unsparingly rebukes Dante. He had loved her mortal beauty as an image of the immortal; when death destroyed it, his devotion ought thenceforth to have fixed itself on the immortal and indestructible virtue of which that beauty had been the image. Instead, he turned aside to the lure of material things. Dante accepts the reproach with the utmost contrition. It is quite probable that this episode is based on some actual lapse, in Dante's life, from his highest moral ideal. These passages, then, recount his own personal experience of purgation, the autobiographical analogue of the penitence and purification portrayed on the mountain as a whole.

PARADISE

Like the invocations of *Paradise Lost*, that with which Dante begins the third division of his poem expresses his sense of the loftiness of the theme. Like Milton, he is venturing things unattempted hitherto in prose or rhyme. The three invocations of *The Divine Comedy* are incremental; the first (in Canto II of the *Hell*) is brief and unobtrusive, the second (in Canto I of the *Pur-*

gatory) more extended, and the third (in Canto I of the *Paradise*) by its earnestness and solemnity indicates the epic stature, though not epic form, which he expects the poem to attain. The *Paradise* offers us an imagined experience of the entire celestial universe as it was charted by medieval astronomy. In that cosmology, the sun, the moon, and the rest, though immensely distant, had not retreated from the earth according to the scale established by modern knowledge. Dante's world is geocentric; the planetary circles, including those of the sun and moon, revolve about the earth, as does the circle of the stars—as does, in fact, everything except the "real" Heaven, or Empyrean, the abode of God and the saints and angels. The *Paradise* is the chronicle of an ascent from planet to planet, until finally Dante is in the Empyrean itself. In each planet a group of redeemed and perfected souls, come from their proper dwelling in the Empyrean, are present to converse with Dante and his guide, Beatrice. Their successive discussions set forth the essentials of Christian doctrine, along with the fundamental scientific concepts of the time; and they themselves exemplify various kinds and degrees of beatitude. For Dante—and the reader—the experience is educational, morally edifying, and spiritually preparatory for the vision with which the poem ends. In Canto III Dante learns of the hierarchy of souls in Heaven; not all are equal, indeed, no two are identical in bliss; yet each is completely satisfied, fulfilled, and happy—"in His will is our peace." Piccarda, the not wholly blameless nun who speaks these words, is among the souls encountered in the moon, the group of lowest rank in Heaven. From these we rise to higher and higher kinds of blessed souls, each rejoicing wholly in God in its predestined way and in accordance with its capacity.

When all the cycles of the cosmos have been traversed, we come, in Canto XXXI, to Heaven itself, the real home of the blessed. Here the souls are arranged in the form of a great white rose; God is at the center—an ineffable brightness—and the souls have the aspect of rows of petals. Here Beatrice, who has set forth the truths of Divine Revelation throughout the journey, goes back to her place in Heaven, and St. Bernard, the great mystic of the twelfth century, becomes Dante's guide, or rather sponsor. For what remains is that Dante should be vouchsafed a vision in which, for an instant, he may see God as He really is—in so far as his human capacity enables him to do so. The last canto, Canto XXXIII, opens with Bernard's prayer to the Virgin Mary for intercession in Dante's behalf. There is no religious lyric poetry of greater depth or simplicity or beauty than this prayer; its intimacy, tenderness, and humility are consummate.

To obtain, to endure, such a vision is just within the limit of Dante's powers. It transports him into an utterly different kind of being; it leaves him with the memory of an overpowering but indescribable experience. For of course no mystic can ever reveal the content of his vision; it does not belong to the order of reportable things. Dante can only tell us that he discerned with direct but momentary certitude the identity of God as inclusive of man and of universal love, and that he knew himself to be at that instant one with Him.

The Divine Comedy thus ends both quietly and climactically. For this union with God was the purpose of the entire long and arduous journey. This is the good which St. Thomas Aquinas, and Boethius before him, pointed out as the goal of man, as of the entire creation. But what the philosophers prove, Dante experiences, imaginatively. And we reach both center and summit of the medieval structure of human life in proportion as we can follow the record of that experience.

DANTE IN ITALIAN

This book presents the *Inferno* complete, together with several cantos of the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in English translation. Our translator is the contemporary American poet John Ciardi. As with some other poems in the book, the reader may find it interesting to have a brief look at the Italian text, so here are the opening lines of the *Inferno* in the original language.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi retrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ah, quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!

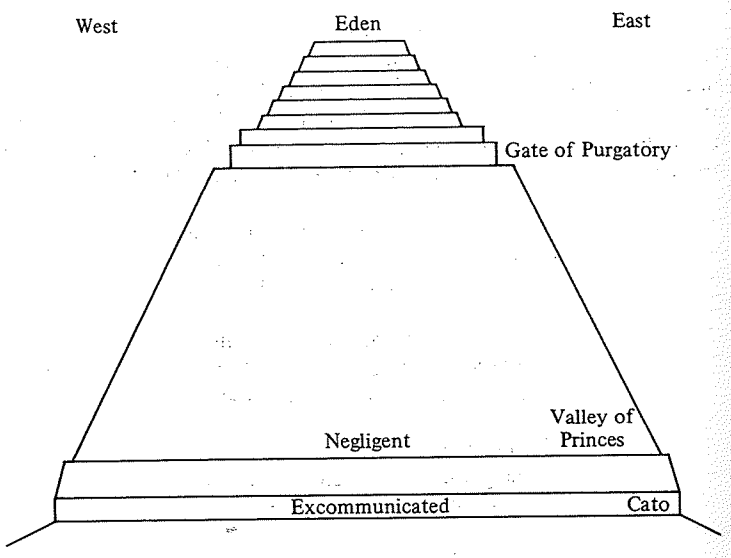
Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'io vi trovai,
dirò dell'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.

Io non so ben ridir com'io v'entrai,
tant'era pieno di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai.

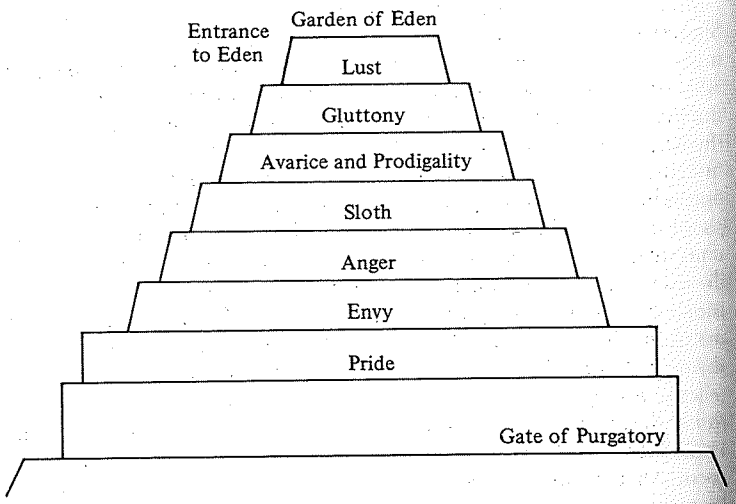
The individual lines are metrically similar to most lines in Chaucer or Shakespeare; they regularly have five metrical feet, each consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, or vice versa, with the possibility of an additional unstressed syllable or two somewhere within the line. But the most notable metrical feature of the *Divine Comedy* is the pattern of rhymes, or the *terza rima*. Thus the lines form groups of three: *vita* in the first line above rhymes with the last two syllables of *smarrita* in the third line, while *oscura* in the second line rhymes with *dura* in the first line and *paura* in the third line of the next group. Thus the groups are independent units interlocked by the sequence of rhymes. This overall structure reminds the reader of the Christian Trinity: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; it is one expression of the poet's religious devotion. In his translation Ciardi maintains the separation into groups of three lines: *astray* in the first line rhymes with *I say* in the third. But he does not keep the interlocking rhyme scheme: *myself* in line two of the first group does not rhyme with *drear* and *fear* in the second group. The sound structure of the Italian language makes Dante's rhyme patterns easier than this arrangement would be in an English poem. Attempts to reproduce it entirely have not been very successful in our language.

The best sources are T. S. Eliot, "Dante," most easily available in his *Selected Essays* (1932); George Santayana, "Dante," in *Three Philosophical*

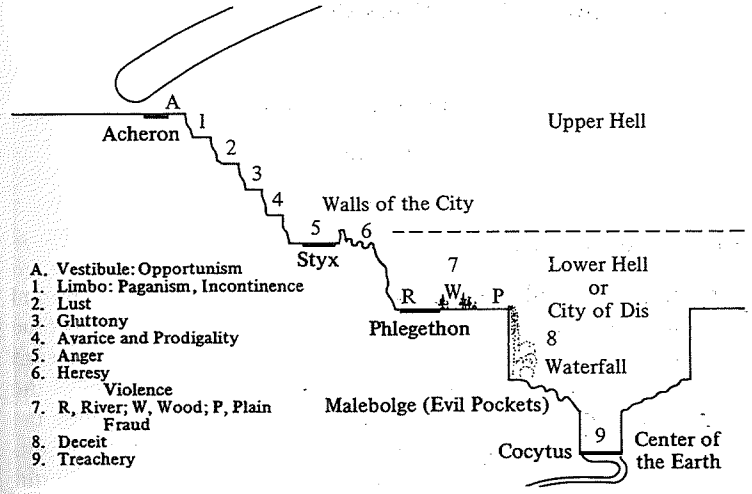
Island of Purgatory



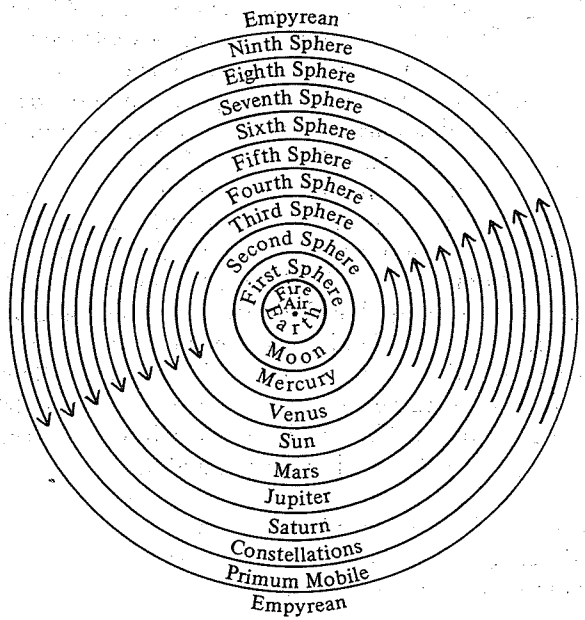
Eden and Purgatory



The Slope of Hell



The Heavenly Spheres



Poets (1910); and the introduction and notes by Dorothy Sayers to her translation of the *Inferno* (1949). See also her *Introductory Papers on Dante* (1954) and *Further Papers on Dante* (1957). Also helpful is Michele Barbi, *Life of Dante*, translated by Paul G. Ruggiers, 1954. Recent studies include R. Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's "Commedia"* (1969).

The Divine Comedy[1]

Inferno

CANTO I

The Dark Wood of Error

Midway in his allotted threescore years and ten, Dante comes to himself with a start and realizes that he has strayed from the True Way into the Dark Wood of Error (Worldliness). As soon as he has realized his loss, Dante lifts his eyes and sees the first light of the sunrise (the Sun is the Symbol of Divine Illumination) lighting the shoulders of a little hill (The Mount of Joy). It is the Easter Season, the time of resurrection, and the sun is in its equinoctial rebirth. This juxtaposition of joyous symbols fills Dante with hope and he sets out at once to climb directly up the Mount of Joy, but almost immediately his way is blocked by the Three Beasts of Worldliness: The Leopard of Malice and Fraud, The Lion of Violence and Ambition, and The She-Wolf of Incontinence. These beasts, and especially the She-Wolf, drive him back despairing into the darkness of error. But just as all seems lost, a figure appears to him. It is the shade of Virgil, Dante's symbol of Human Reason.

Virgil explains that he has been sent to lead Dante from error. There can, however, be no direct ascent past the beasts: the man who would escape them must go a longer and harder way. First he must descend through Hell (The Recognition of Sin), then he must ascend through Purgatory (The Renunciation of Sin), and only then may he reach the pinnacle of joy and come to the Light of God. Virgil offers to guide Dante, but only as far as Human Reason can go. Another guide (Beatrice, symbol of Divine Love) must take over for the final ascent, for Human Reason is self-limited. Dante submits himself joyously to Virgil's guidance and they move off.

Midway in our life's journey,[2] I went astray
from the straight road and woke to find myself
alone in a dark wood. How shall I say

1. The *Inferno* complete, with selections from the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Translated, with notes and commentary, by John Ciardi. 2. The Biblical life span is three-score years and ten. The action opens in Dante's thirty-fifth year, i.e., A.D. 1300.

what wood that was! I never saw so drear,
so rank, so arduous a wilderness!
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.
Death could scarce be more bitter than that place!
But since it came to good, I will recount
all that I found revealed there by God's grace.
How I came to it I cannot rightly say,
so drugged and loose with sleep had I become
when I first wandered there from the True Way.
But at the far end of that valley of evil
whose maze had sapped my very heart with fear,
I found myself before a little hill
and lifted up my eyes. Its shoulders glowed
already with the sweet rays of that planet[3]
whose virtue leads men straight on every road,
and the shining strengthened me against the fright
whose agony had wracked the lake of my heart
through all the terrors of that piteous night.
Just as a swimmer, who with his last breath
flounders ashore from perilous seas, might turn
to memorize the wide water of his death—
so did I turn, my soul still fugitive
from death's surviving image, to stare down
that pass that none had ever left alive.
And there I lay to rest from my heart's race
till calm and breath returned to me. Then rose
and pushed up that dead slope at such a pace
each footfall rose above the last.[4] And lo!
almost at the beginning of the rise
I faced a spotted Leopard, all tremor and flow
and gaudy pelt. And it would not pass, but stood
so blocking my every turn that time and again
I was on the verge of turning back to the wood.
This fell at the first widening of the dawn
as the sun was climbing Aries with those stars
that rode with him to light the new creation.[5]

3. The sun. Ptolemaic astronomers considered it a planet. It is also symbolic of God as He who lights man's way. 4. The literal rendering would be: "So that the fixed foot was ever the lower." "Fixed" has often been translated "right" and an ingenious reasoning can support that reading, but a simpler explanation offers itself and seems more competent: Dante is saying that he climbed with such zeal and haste that every footfall carried him above the last despite the steepness of the climb. At a slow pace, on the other hand, the rear foot might be brought up only as far as the forward foot. 5. The medieval tradition had it that the sun was in Aries at the time of the Creation. The significance of the astronomical and religious conjunction is an important part of Dante's intended allegory. It is just before dawn of Good Friday A.D. 1300 when he awakens in the Dark Wood. Thus his new life begins under Aries, the sign of creation, at dawn (rebirth) and in the Easter season (resurrection). Moreover the moon is full and the sun is in the equinox, conditions that did not fall together on any Friday of 1300. Dante is obviously constructing poetically the perfect Easter as a symbol of his new awakening.