

DANTE ALIGHIERI 1265–1321

DAH-N-EEY-
ah-fih-AYEH-ree

Certain writers come to represent the age in which they wrote, from whence their influence carries into the modern world: Homer and Confucius from ancient times, Shakespeare from the Elizabethan Age in England, Voltaire from the Enlightenment in Europe, and **Dante Alighieri** in the European Middle Period. In fact, Dante included himself among the six greatest writers of all time in Canto IV of *Inferno*, the first part of his literary masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, which like a Gothic cathedral embodies the elaborate construct of Christianity in the Middle Period.

At the outset it appears as if *The Divine Comedy* is solely a religious text reflecting the worldview of medieval Christianity: Dante's pilgrim travels the spiritual universe, from the underworld of Hell to the outer reaches of Heaven, a realm systematized into a single worldview and system of values by the medieval Roman Catholic Church. With Satan at the center of the earth and God on the outer circumference of the universe, the relative good or evil of an individual could be measured by his or her proximity to one or the other in the afterlife. Dante's pilgrimage has also been read as an allegorical journey of the soul or a psychological descent into the darkness within and subsequent ascension through knowledge, repentance, and a beatific vision. What gives depth as well as breadth to Dante's epic is the knowledge and history layered into the work, reflecting the diversity of learning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: philosophy, theology, poetry—including works by Muslim poets and scholars¹—, and Florentine, European, and papal politics. The term *architecture* is often applied to the "towering edifice" that Dante, one of the most learned men of the European Middle Ages, constructed out of words in his *Divine Comedy*, a truly timeless work of art, as interesting and profound today as it was in the fourteenth century.

Transforming Beatrice. Very little is known about Dante's early life in Florence or about his parents, although his father probably accrued some wealth as a money changer; his mother died when he was young. Nothing is known about Dante's formal education, but his scholarly and literary writings suggest that he studied the standard classical and medieval works of literature, rhetoric, and theology. Because of his evident talents he was entertained in the leading families of Florence. He married Gemma Donati in about 1285 with whom he had at least three children, one of whom, Pietro, became an important commentator on the *Comedy*. Undoubtedly the most important event of Dante's early life was his encounter with **Beatrice Portinari**. Nothing is known for certain about

Beatrice, and some have questioned her very existence. Tradition, however, has it that Dante first saw her when they were both nine years old, that he fell in love with her at first sight, and, although he saw her only a few times and they married others, that she had a tremendous impact on his life. Beatrice was married to Simone di Bardi and died in 1290, at twenty-five. It was perhaps her death at such an early age that allowed Dante to idealize her, to transform her into a spiritual symbol of inspiration for the sake of his writings and his own growth as a person. Influenced by the courtly love lyrics of the troubadours of twelfth-century France, especially those concerning love for a married woman,² Dante began his apprenticeship as a writer by composing prose and poetry celebrating Beatrice. By 1294 he had written thirty-one poems with prose commentary focusing on his devotion to her, published in a collection titled *The New Life* (*La Vita Nuova*). In this work Beatrice, whose name means "she who blesses," is already a religious, transcendent figure, capable of transformative power. Later she plays an even more important role in *The Divine Comedy*, becoming not only a divine intercessor for the protagonist but also ultimately a member of the inner circle of Christian divinites, the Holy Trinity itself.

Political Affairs. As a young man Dante became actively involved in the political affairs of Florence, which, with some eighty thousand inhabitants, was a city second only to Paris in size in Europe. When looking at Dante's time, local politics should be seen as part of the larger struggle between the church and secular powers, between the princes of the Roman Catholic Church and the princes of the Holy Roman Empire. Internal wars and divisiveness were tearing apart Florence and Italy in the thirteenth century, and, as a city official, diplomat, and essayist, Dante was passionately involved with the fate of both. In Florence, the **Guelphs**, who supported the Papacy, and the **Ghibellines**, who supported the Holy Roman Empire, were engaged in a civil war. On the side of the Guelphs, Dante probably participated in two decisive battles in 1289, Campaldino and the taking of Caprona, in which the Ghibellines were finally vanquished. The Guelphs then split over the issue of papal influence in Florence. Dante was a member of the White Guelphs, who sought to preserve an independent republic in Florence. The aristocratic Blacks sought power for themselves through collaboration with Pope Boniface VIII. Dante became one of six guild representatives who governed the city and, when the pope encroached on Florentine politics with threats of excommunication and confiscation of possessions, Dante and two others were sent on a mission to Rome in 1301 to query the pope about whether he intended to become actively involved and support the Blacks. Dante hoped that a secular leader of sufficient stature, such as

¹ Muslim . . . scholars: Dante had access to the learning and poetry of Islamic Spain; his descriptions of the infernal regions, the heavens, the circles of the mystic rose, and the choirs of angels are similar to the writings of Islamic poet Ibn al-Arabi of Murcia (1165–1240) in *Mecan Revelations*.

BEE-uh-tris

www For links to more information about Dante, a quiz on the *Inferno*, and information about the twenty-first-century relevance of Dante, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

GWELF-GIB-uh-teen

² Love . . . married woman: The troubadours were aristocratic poets in southern France who often addressed their poems to married ladies of the court from whom they sought patronage and favor. From the courtly love tradition came the idea that illicit love—that is, love outside the married state—was the most intense and inspirational.

the head of the Holy Roman Empire, might unify Italy and thereby bring peace to Florence.

Dante never returned to Florence. In a *coup d'état*, the Blacks gained power and took measures to eliminate the leaders of the Whites. When Dante chose not to return to Florence to face charges, he was sentenced to two years of exile and a large fine. This penalty was subsequently extended to permanent exile with the threat of being burned alive should he return to the city.

Life in Exile. As an exiled intellectual, Dante temporarily linked up with other exiled Whites and some Ghibellines; after becoming disillusioned with their plans for recapturing Florence, he wandered from town to town in Italy, finding temporary lodgings with a variety of patrons. In very poignant lines in the *Paradiso* (Canto XVII), Dante later described the painful experience of exile (Translation by John Ciardi):

All that you held most dear you will put by
and leave behind you; and this is the arrow
the longbow of your exile first lets fly.

You will come to learn how bitter as salt and stone
is the bread of others, how hard the way that goes
up and downstairs that never are your own.

He had already written several treatises connected to his studies. *The Banquet* (*Il Convivio*) was an extension of the autobiographical, philosophical *The New Life*, plus an explanation of Dante's literary views. *The Illustrations Vernacular* (*De vulgari eloquentia*), written in Latin during the same period, defends the use of Italian in serious literature and explores the role of the Italian writer in contemporary society. Later, the *Comedy* itself was written in vernacular Italian, leading to a broader audience and the promotion of cultural identity. Both *The Banquet* and *The Illustrations Vernacular* remained unfinished. A pamphlet written sometime between 1308 and 1317, *Monarchia*, placed hope for healing Italy's afflictions and divisiveness in a clear separation of the powers of the church and state and the investiture of two powerful leaders, a secular emperor and a sacred pope. Crowned in 1308, the new emperor Henry VII began to unite Italy, giving possible substance to Dante's vision; Florence, however, rebuffed him, and then the emperor died suddenly in 1313.

All the learning and the living that underlay Dante's early writings also became part of the complex fabric of the *Comedy*, to which Dante devoted himself for the rest of his life, from 1312 until his death in 1321. Published before the completion of the whole work, the first two parts of Dante's *Comedy*, the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, were immediately recognized as great works of literature. With the work Dante hoped to gain an honorable return to his beloved Florence, but that did not happen. After finishing the last cantos of *Paradiso*, Dante died in Ravenna of malaria at the age of fifty-six in 1321 and was buried there; Florence is still trying to procure his bones. Dante's great work was first called *The Divine Comedy* (*Divina Commedia*) by a Venetian publisher in 1555.

The Divine Comedy. *The Divine Comedy* is not an epic in the conventional sense, but if by epic one means a lengthy and elevated poem that deals with serious issues in a vast or cosmic setting, then Dante's extended narrative certainly qualifies. But his heroes are not Homer's or Virgil's warriors of the battlefield. They are warriors of the spirit, redefining the arena of adventure for the Middle Ages and beyond.

Dante called his monumental work the *Commedia*, a comedy because it had a happy ending. The story is essentially that of a pilgrimage by a person named Dante through the three spiritual realms of the Catholic world—Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven—during the Easter season. Because of the importance of the Trinity in Christian theology, the number three plays a key role in Dante's elaborate literary design. Each of the major divisions of the work points to a person of the Trinity and contains thirty-three cantos: the *Inferno*, identified with God the Father and judgment, includes one additional canto as a general introduction; the acts of the Son involving salvation are connected to *Purgatorio*; and the sustaining grace of the Holy Spirit is linked to *Paradiso*. Both *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* contain thirty-three cantos, bringing the total number of cantos of all three works to one hundred, a perfect number. (The Trinity squared equals nine plus one deity equals ten, which when squared, totals one hundred.) The Trinity is also reflected in the work's complex pattern of three-line stanzas and interlocking rhymes, called *terza rima*, in which the first and third lines rhyme and the second line sets up the rhyme for the next stanza. In addition, ideally each line contains eleven syllables, making the total number of syllables in each tercet thirty-three.

The overall geography of Dante's world in the *Comedy* follows generally the cosmic system devised by Ptolemy, the Alexandrian astronomer of the second century. The heavens with their planets revolve around the earth. The geographical center of the earth's surface is Jerusalem; at the eastern edge is the Ganges River and at the western edge of the Mediterranean is the Straits of Gibraltar. Directly opposite from Jerusalem is the mountain of Purgatory. In the center of the earth, at a point farthest from the warmth of God's love in the Heavens, is Hell, where Satan is frozen in ice. All the rivers of Hell, symbolizing the tears of human suffering, flow toward Hell in order to torment its residents.

The *Inferno* begins on the evening of Maundy Thursday, or Holy Thursday, with Dante lost in a wood. At dawn on Good Friday, he meets the poet Virgil, who serves as his guide through Hell, a funnel-shaped region extending from the earth's surface to the center of the earth, a depression formed when Lucifer plunged from Heaven into the earth. Nine separate descending circles are divided into three major divisions; those associated with the mildest of sins are located at the top and those with the worst at the bottom. *Inferno* ends on Easter morning, as Dante and Virgil arrive in Purgatory, a mountain on an island in the sea at the opposite end of the earth from Lucifer's fall.

From the beginning of *Purgatorio*, there is a joyful, hopeful tone totally different from the despair of the *Inferno*. Dante the pilgrim, having learned about avoiding sin in Hell, now learns of the virtues of being

[...] a turn to a religious view of man and his fate . . . meant freeing [Dante] as a poet to represent the human with a subtle, many-sided realism that had no parallel in his time, and has not been surpassed since. . . . He can, for the first, fill his poem with many spirits and many voices besides his own, and with all the sights and sounds and smells of God's world.

—FRANCIS FERGUSON, critic, 1966



Dante and Virgil, fourteenth century.
This illustration from the *Inferno* shows Dante and Virgil encountering a dragon and a sea monster. (Grazdon/Art Resource, NY)

purged of the seven deadly sins on the seven terraces in the middle of Purgatory. In Canto XXVII the poets cross through a wall of fire, a symbol of transformation, into Earthly Paradise. Virgil, having reached a place where he "can discern nothing further," gives a farewell speech. His job as guide comes to an end because Purgatory is as far as reason can carry the individual pilgrim, and Virgil is a virtuous pagan lacking belief in God, with only his reason to guide him. Dante then learns about the Earthly Paradise and experiences the freedom of action associated with being purged of sin. Finally, the epitome of beauty and virtue is introduced, the veiled Beatrice, who becomes Dante's next guide. She scolds Dante for lapsing into material desires, which is perhaps a confession by the poet of his own waywardness. After Dante has been bathed in the river Lethe, washing away all memory of sin, he is allowed to look at Beatrice without her veil and is blinded by the vision. His virtues are strengthened by drinking from the waters of the Eunoe; he is now ready to experience the celestial Paradise. Beatrice leads Dante through the three regions of this realm: the seven planets of ancient astronomy, the circles of fixed stars, and the Empyrean, or highest Heaven, which the pair witness at sunset on the Thursday following Easter.

As the third and final volume of *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradiso* is a celebration of the starry heavens of an earth-centered cosmos as understood by medieval astronomy. As Dante and Beatrice ascend from planet

to planet, various redeemed souls provide scientific explanations for the heavenly bodies. Appropriate Christian doctrines are also discussed. The seven planets plus the circle of fixed stars and the *primum mobile*² equal (again) the number nine; the Empyrean, or Heaven, is tenth, a symbol of unity and the totality of the universe. The last three cantos of *Paradiso* picture the saints of the Catholic Church arranged in a mystic white rose with God at its center. Canto XXXII identifies the thrones of the most blessed; Beatrice returns to her eternal throne and St. Bernard of Clairvaux becomes Dante's final guide to a climactic, beatific vision. Bernard's prayers on behalf of Dante lead to a final vision of the Holy Trinity and the oneness of the universe. This culminating vision of God represents a difficult task for the poet: to describe that which by definition transcends words—the ineffable. Dante's answer is to focus on the effect of the vision on its human witness rather than on the vision itself. The result of Dante's artistry is the experience of merging with the divine; the final and ultimate goal of the medieval pilgrim.

Inferno. Because sin is always more interesting than goodness, and because Dante's depictions of sin's punishments are so insightful and imaginative, the *Inferno* has been the most popular volume of the trilogy for modern readers. Canto I begins with the statement that the pilgrim for Dante, at thirty-five years of age, has lost his way and found himself in a "dark wood"—a different kind of beginning from those in Homer's epics or Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which a grand theme is explicitly announced. A very visual poet, Dante begins with what seems to be an ordinary situation in accordance with the manner of his narrator, who is a simplified, at times more naive, version of himself. Dante's style, however, becomes more elevated as his pilgrim advances—literally, climbs—to Purgatory and then Paradise. On the literal level, the poem follows the dramatic adventures of this Dante as he journeys through three realms, encountering various sinners and saints from both the ancient world and contemporary Italy, learning from their lives, and progressing from confusion to spiritual illumination.

The first lines of the *Inferno*, however, begin to hint at another layer of meaning, symbolic or allegorical. The pilgrim is at an age when questions traditionally arise about one's spiritual condition; the "dark wood" mirrors the inner confusion and fear people may experience when they reach middle age. When Dante sees the sunrise and decides to climb the Mount of Joy, where he confronts three symbolic animals, it is clear that Dante the poet is deliberately entering into metaphor.

The three animals that rebuff Dante represent the three major kinds of sins—incontinence (or lack of restraint), violence, and fraud—and correspond to the three divisions of Hell. The three beasts, which might also suggest lust, pride, avarice, or perhaps incontinence, malice, and bestiality, also represent political enemies: the Papacy, corrupt businessmen,

... Dante Alighieri, sometimes described as Shakespeare's one great equal... wrote explicitly and extensively about politics, philosophy, science, and especially literature, including a commentary on his own work... Dante wrote the story of his own life, presenting not the enigma of silence, but the greater mystery that grows from knowledge of a life.

—ROBERT PENEY,
poet, 2001

² *primum mobile*: In the Ptolemaic universe, this is the outermost sphere with the earth as its center, causing all the heavenly bodies to revolve with it.

Kahn-eroh pah-soh

fallen lovers, and ignorant intellectuals. Enter Virgil, who explains that he has been sent to guide Dante through a descent into Hell and an ascent to Purgatory, where he will be replaced by Beatrice. Virgil stands for reason and conscience as well as the best ideals of the Roman Empire. As a great poet, Virgil was a hero to Dante. Virgil sought to unify the Roman Empire with his own great epic the *Aeneid*, as Dante's poem would do for all of Italy, not just Florence. In addition, Virgil had written the *Fourth Eclogue*, which seemed to many Christians to have predicted the advent of a child messiah and, in Book IV of the *Aeneid*, he had described a descent into Hades, making him an appropriate guide for Dante. As Virgil tells him, Dante is to go on this journey to gain knowledge. Virgil engages in an ongoing dialogue with Dante, answering his questions and probing his understanding. In Canto III, the two poets pass through the Gate of Hell and view for the first time a *contra passio*, or symbolic retribution. In Dante's Hell, more picturesque and altogether different from most other literary depictions of Hell, where general horrors engulf an entire group of sinners, individual punishments are fashioned for different sins. Dante's view of accountability was consistent with medieval theology, which held that individuals had free will and therefore chose sin. Thus they could be awarded punishments as individuals, regardless of their family or social situations. For example, because wispy-waspy opportunists and the cowardly took no moral stand in life for either good or evil, they are adrift in Hell. Corrupt public officials who accepted bribes are boiled in pitch because, like bribes that cling to the sinner, pitch is sticky. And fortune-tellers and diviners who predicted the future during their time on earth now can look only backwards, as their heads have been turned around.

POW-loch
fah-oh-CHES-kah

CHAH-loch

The first circle of Hell, found in Canto IV, is for virtuous pagans. Modern readers might sympathize with the likes of Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, but the medieval Christian view was clear on this point: Jesus alone was the gateway to Heaven. Thus the noble and virtuous pagans were held here at the threshold of Hell. Souls guilty of carnal sin are found in Canto V. Those who are led by their desires are blown about by the winds of desire. Dante's method of depicting sinners is to present appropriate examples who would be known to his readers than to develop more complete portraits of just a few of them. He does not analyze the sin abstractly, but rather he vividly shows how people following their desires and yielding to temptation can drift into damnation, as is the case with the most famous couple in *The Divine Comedy*, Paolo and Francesca. Despite their condemnation, their story is told with great sensitivity and sympathy.

The first of several political prophecies about Florence is uttered in Canto VI by the glutton **Ciacco** the Hog, who is buried in swill. In subsequent cantos, Dante forthrightly locates his political enemies in various circles of Hell. In Cantos X and XI, the circle reserved for heretics serves as a mezzanine between the upper Hell, for sins of incontinence, and the lower Hell, for violence and fraud. After witnessing the instigators of war boiling in blood, Dante enters the memorable Wood of the Suicides in

pre-EHR
del-lah-VEEN-yah

Canto XIII, where the Violent Against Themselves are punished and their souls are denied human form. Even though the church considered suicide a sin, **Pier delle Vigne's** narrative elicits sympathy. In Canto XIV, Brunetto Latini, Dante's teacher and mentor, is also treated with delicacy and respect, despite the fact that his sin of homosexuality is acknowledged and punished with a burning rain. This canto is a reminder to the reader that Hell is filled with humans who might not have appeared evil but who nevertheless committed sins. In certain cases, however, Dante seems to be torn between the justice of a particular punishment and sympathy for the vagaries of human nature; after all, most human beings are a mixture of noble sentiments and carnal weaknesses.

In Canto XVII, Virgil and Dante descend into the third and lowest area of Hell—for premeditated fraud—on the back of Geryon, a marvelous monster with the face of a man and a serpent's body. The eighth circle of Hell called the Malebolge (evil ditches) is divided into ten trenches, or **Bolgia**, peopled with different kinds of sinners associated with fraud. The Simoniacs are set upside down in holes and their feet are on fire. Dante locates Ulysses (Odysseus), whom Homer describes in the *Odyssey* as quick-witted and clever, in Bolgia Eight (Canto XXVI), the place for evil counselors. Italians traced their ancestry back to the Trojans, and Odysseus was the architect of the ruse of the wooden horse, which led to the destruction of Troy in the Trojan War. Hidden in a great flame, a proud Ulysses recounts his exploration of the Western ocean. His death by shipwreck on Purgatory Mountain is a symbolic statement that courage and intelligence alone cannot save man.

The climax of the *Inferno* occurs in the last three cantos, when the poets reach the ninth circle of Hell. Here the sinners are so far from the warmth of God's love that they are frozen in a lake of ice, symbolic of the condition of their hearts. One of the lasting images of this section is Ugolino gnawing on the skull of **Ruggieri** in Canto XXXIII, in which Ugolino tells their story of betrayal and infamy. The great pathos associated with the starvation of children makes this episode one of the most memorable in the entire poem. In the final canto and at the utter bottom of Hell is the master of evil himself, Satan, with great flapping wings and a treacherous threesome in his mouths: Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius. For modern readers, Brutus and Cassius may not meet the same standard of evil as the betrayer of Jesus, and the portrait of Satan may not inspire fear.

Dante was a dramatist, a genius who created an imaginary world through which the attentive reader might journey. The encyclopedic, intimidating mountain of saints and sinners, virtues and deadly sins, bits of geography, elaborate political maneuvers from Florence and the Holy Roman Empire—all of which might have a literal, as well as other layers of meaning—fit somehow into Dante's own, esoteric vision of God's plan for the world. The almost immediate fame of the *Comedy* is testified to by several line-by-line commentaries by contemporaries of Dante, as if his work did indeed hold the key to salvation. Today there are hundreds of such line-by-line commentaries.

no-JEH-ree
oo-goh-LEE-no

Dante is an exiled, aggressive, self-righteous, salvation-bent intellectual, humbled only to rise assured and ardent, zealously prophetic, politically messianic, indignant, nervous, muscular, theatrical, energetic—he is at once our brother and our engenderer.
—ALLEN MANDELBAUM, translator, 1980

Translation Note. Italian offers so many possibilities for rhyme. In English, however, *terza rima* is nearly impossible to duplicate. The opening tercets (three-line stanzas) from Canto I of the original Italian *Inferno* provide a sample of Dante's language and form; following the Italian is a prose translation in English by John D. Sinclair:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che 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 trovai,
dirò dell'altre cose ch'è 'l'ho scorte.

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell of that wood, savage and harsh and dense, the thought of which renews my fear! So bitter is it that death is hardly more. But to give account of the good which I found there I will tell of the other things I noted there.

The Robert and Jean Hollander translation presented in full in the following pages stays very close to the language and phrasing of the Italian text in the manner of Sinclair's rendering but in tercets rather than prose, in very readable, contemporary English.

■ CONNECTIONS

Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 885. During the Middle Period, the sacred journey was central to Christians, whose ideal destination was Jerusalem, and to Muslims, for whom Mecca was the goal. For both religions the earthly pilgrimage was symbolic of the soul's journey from earth to heaven. In his *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer tells the stories of pilgrims who must substitute a journey to Canterbury in England for their spiritual nurturance. How does Dante blend symbolic and literal journeys in the *Inferno* to give his pilgrimage depth and relevance?

Beowulf, p. 481; Homer (Book I), *Odyssey*. Middle Period writers differ radically in their descriptions of the underworld, depending on whether they were pagan or Christian. The author of *Beowulf* drew on the traditional symbols of the feminine and water in his description of an underworld passage, linking his aristocrat to a classical tradition. Dante, like Christian theologians, transforms the underworld into Hell. Although Dante's Hell, vividly personal, is a dark realm, it is nevertheless lively and passionate. How does Dante's Christian version of hell differ from the pagan or classical version?

Virgil, *The Aeneid* (Book I). Roman and Italian writers from Virgil to Dante attempted to create a coherent history for Italy that stretched from myth and legend to the present political-historical reality. Virgil linked the founding of Rome to Aeneas and the Trojan War, which the Greeks won. How does Dante attempt to make a connection between his world and ancient Rome and Greece through his use of Virgil and other classical writers?

■ FURTHER RESEARCH

Translations

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■ PRONUNCIATION

Accorso: ah-KORE-soh
Acheron: AK-uh-rah-n
Acre: AH-kruh, AY-kur
Aldobrandi: ah-doh-BRAHN-dee
Amidei: ah-mee-DAY-ee
Ampharaus: am-fee-uh-RAV-us
Amyclas: uh-MIGH-klus
Anaxagoras: an-ak-SAG-oh-rus
Anchises: ang-KICH-seez
Antaeus: an-TEE-us
Arachne: uh-RAK-nee
Argenti, Filippo: ar-JEN-tee, fih-LEE-poh, fih-LIP-oh
Aries: ARL
Athenas: ATH-uh-nus
Averroes: uh-VEH-roh-ez
Averroes: av-uh-SEN-uh
Azzolino da Romano: ah-tsoh-LEE-noh dah-roh-MAH-noh
Bachiglione: bah-kee-LYOH-nee, lee-oh-nee
Beatrice: BEE-uh-teez, bay-uh-TREE-chay
Boigia: BOLE-jee-uh
Boniface VIII: BAH-nih-fus
Borsiere, Guglielmo: bore-SYAV-ray, goo-LYEL-moh, bore-see-AV-ray, goo-lee-EL-moh
Buondelmonte: bwone-del-MONE-ray
Cacciaguida: kah-chah-GWEE-duh
Cacus: KAK-kus
Caina: kah-EE-nuh
Capaneus: KAP-uh-noos

- Casiodori: kah-sah-LOH-dee
 Catine: KAT-ih-line
 Ceperano: chay-peh-RAH-noh
 Ciacco: CHAH-koh
 Cocytus: koh-SIGH-tus
contra passio: KAHN-truh PAH-soh
 Dante Alighieri: DAHN-tay ah-ih-GYEH-ree
 Dejanira: deh-uh-NIGH-truh
 Diogenes: digh-AH-jih-neez
 Dioscorides: digh-us-KORE-ih-deez
Divina Commedia: dih-VEE-nuh kah-MED-ee-uh
 Empyrean: em-PEE-ree-un
 Enryes: eh-RIN-ee-eez
 Euryalus: yoo-RIGH-uh-lus
 Fabricius: fuh-BREE-shus
 Farinata degli Uberti: fah-ree-NAH-tah DEH-lyee oo-BEHR-tee
 Feltro, Guido del Monte: FEL-troh, GWEE-doh del-MONE-tay
 Fiesole: fyeh-SOH-lay, fee-eh-SOH-lay
 Francesca: frahn-CHES-kah
 Gallehaut: gah-LOH
 Garsenda: gah-rih-SEN-duh
 Geryon: JEE-ree-ahn, GEH-ree-ahn
 Chibelline: GIB-uh-leen
 Glaucus: GLAW-kus
 Gratian: GRAY-shun
 Guadrada: gwah-DRAH-dah
 Gueph: GWELF
 Guerra, Guido: GWEH-ruh, GWEE-doh
 Holofernes: hoh-loh-FUR-neez
 Hyperion: high-PEE-ree-ahn, -un
 Hypsipyle: hip-SIP-uh-lee
 Judecca: joo-DEK-uh
 Maccabaeus: mak-uh-BEE-us
 Maleboige: mal-uh-BOWL-jay
 Malebranche: mah-uh-BRANK-eh
 Maremma: muh-REM-uh
 Monferato: mawn-feh-RAH-toh
 Montaperti: mawn-tah-PEHR-tee
 Mosca dei Lambert: MAW-skuh DAY-ee lahm-BEHR-tee
 Mucius Scaevola: MYOO-shus SEE-voh-luh, SEV-uh-luh, SIGH-voh-luh
 Obizzo da Este: oh-BIT-soh dah-ES-tay
 Orosius, Paulus: uh-ROO-zhee-us, PAW-lus, POW-loos
 Paolo: POW-loh
 Penthesilea: pen-thu-sih-LEE-uh
 Pettigiana, Pier: pet-in-YAH-nuh, pee-EHR
 Phlegyas: FLEG-ee-us
 Pier delle Vigne: pee-EHR deh-lah-VEEN-yah
 Pistoia: pis-TOH-yah
 Priscian: PRISH-un
 Quarnero: kwah-NAY-roh
 Rasca: RAH-shuh
 Rinier da Correto: reen-YEHR dah-koh-NAY-toh
 Rinier Pazzo: reen-YEHR PAHT-soh
 Romagna: roh-MAHN-yah

- Ruggieri: roo-JEH-ree
 Rusticucci: jaco-po: roo-sih-KOO-chee, JAH-koh-poh
 Santafiora: sahn-tah-FOH-rah
 Scipio: SKIP-ee-oh, SIP-ee-oh
 Semiramis: seh-MEE-ruh-mis
 Ser Brunetto Latino: sehr broo-NET-oh lah-TEE-noh
 Serchio: SEHR-koh
 Sichiæus: sih-KEE-us
 Strophades: STRAH-fuh-deez
 Tagliacozza: tahl-yah-KAWT-suh
 Tityos: TIT-ee-us
 Typhoeus: tigh-FEE-us
 Ubaldino: oo-bahl-DEE-noh
 Ugoilino: oo-goh-LEE-no

Inferno

Translated by Robert and Jean Hollander

CANTO I

Midway in the journey of our life¹
 I came to myself in a dark wood,
 for the straight way was lost.

Ah, how hard it is to tell
 the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—
 the very thought of it renews my fear!

It is so bitter death is hardly more so.
 But to set forth the good I found
 I will recount the other things I saw.

Inferno. The *Divine Comedy* is rather simple to describe from a distance: a middle-aged man named Dante has lost his way in life. In order to regain the path of virtue and faith leading to his own ultimate salvation, he is first guided miraculously by the ancient poet Virgil through the two worlds of Hell and Purgatory so that he might gain knowledge of his own sins and at some point be cleansed of them. Finally, with the aid of the beatific Beatrice, Dante enters Paradise, where he experiences a vision of the Holy Trinity. The complexity comes when one is closer to the text, with its many allusions to works of theology, philosophy, mythology, and history. If one reads the *Comedy* as allegory, one could say that Dante stands for the ordinary Christian layman; Virgil stands for reason; the three beasts for lust, pride, and avarice; Beatrice for divine love, and so forth. Rather than viewing the text in such simplistic terms, however, it is perhaps better to see allegorical

¹Midway . . . life: Dante was thirty-five at the time, 1300 C.E. This is a reference to Psalm 90, verse 10: "The days of our years are three score years and ten," meaning seventy years.

How I came there I cannot really tell,
I was so full of sleep
when I forsook the one true way.

But when I reached the foot of a hill,
there where the valley ended
that had pierced my heart with fear,

looking up, I saw its shoulders
arrayed in the first light of the planet;²
that leads men straight, no matter what their road.

Then the fear that had endured
in the lake of my heart, all the night
I spent in such distress, was calmed.

And as one who, with laboring breath,
has escaped from the deep to the shore
turns and looks back at the perilous waters,

so my mind, still in flight,
turned back to look once more upon the pass
no mortal being ever left alive.

After I rested my wearied flesh a while,
I took my way again along the desert slope,
my firm foot always lower than the other.

But now, near the beginning of the steep,
a leopard light and swift
and covered with a spotted pelt

meanings as clustered around certain characters, and not to force allegory on everything in this multifaceted, profoundly soulful work.

In the *Inferno's* intricate underworld geography and morality, poignant individuals manage to detach themselves from their coconspirators long enough to tell their stories, which Dante in his narrative genius somehow captures in but a few lines.

A note on the translation: The notes used in this selection are the editors'. They have been intentionally kept to a minimum and do not represent all possible meanings or explanations. Every third line is numbered in the following Hollander translation. Readers with more background in classical studies and Dante's *Comedy* might want to supplement our notes with more detailed commentaries available in the translations by Charles S. Singleton, Robert M. Durling, and Robert and Jean Hollander.

² first light . . . planet: The sun, symbolizing God.

refused to back away from me
but so impeded, barred the way,
that many times I turned to go back down.

It was the hour of morning,
when the sun mounts with those stars
that shone with it when God's own love

first set in motion those fair things,³
so that, despite that beast with gaudy fur,
I still could hope for good, encouraged

by the hour of the day and the sweet season,
only to be struck by fear
when I beheld a lion in my way.

He seemed about to pounce —
his head held high and furious with hunger —
so that the air appeared to tremble at him.

And then a she-wolf who, all hide and bones,
seemed charged with all the appetites
that have made many live in wretchedness

so weighed my spirits down with terror,
which welled up at the sight of her,
that I lost hope of making the ascent.

And like one who rejoices in his gains
but when the time comes and he loses,
turns all his thought to sadness and lament,

such did the restless beast make me —
coming against me, step by step,
it drove me down to where the sun is silent.

While I was fleeing to a lower place,
before my eyes a figure showed,
faint, in the wide silence.

³ first set . . . fair things: In Christian mythology, the stars were set in motion during Creation in the spring of the year, on the same date as the Crucifixion. This is the morning of Good Friday.

When I saw him in that vast desert,
 'Have mercy on me, whatever you are,'
 I cried, 'whether shade or living man!'

He answered: 'Not a man, though once I was.
 My parents were from Lombardy—
 Mantua was their homeland.'

'I was born *sub Julio*,⁴ though late in his time,
 and lived at Rome, under good Augustus
 in an age of false and lying gods.'

'I was a poet and I sang
 the just son of Anchises⁵ come from Troy
 after proud Ilium⁶ was put to flame.'

'But you, why are you turning back to misery?
 Why do you not climb the peak that gives delight,
 origin and cause of every joy?'

'Are you then Virgil, the fountainhead
 that pours so full a stream of speech?
 I answered him, my head bent low in shame.'

'O glory and light of all other poets,
 let my long study and great love avail
 that made me delve so deep into your volume.'

'You are my teacher and my author.
 You are the one from whom alone I took
 the noble style that has brought me honor.'

'See the beast that forced me to turn back.
 Save me from her, famous sage—
 she makes my veins and pulses tremble.'

'It is another path that you must follow,'
 he answered, 'when he saw me weeping,
 if you would flee this wild and savage place.'

⁴ *sub Julio*: Meaning "under Julius Caesar"; Virgil was born in 70 B.C.E.
⁵ son of Anchises; Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*.
⁶ Ilium: Troy or the citadel of Troy.

'For the beast that moves you to cry out
 lets no man pass her way,
 but so besets him that she slays him.'

'Her nature is so vicious and malign
 her greedy appetite is never sated—
 after she feeds she is hungrier than ever.'

'Many are the creatures that she mates with,
 and there will yet be more, until the hound
 shall come who'll make her die in pain.'

'He shall not feed on lands or lucre
 but on wisdom, love, and power.
 Between felt and felt⁷ shall be his birth.'

'He shall be the salvation of low-lying Italy,
 for which maiden Camilla, Euryalus,
 Turnus, and Nisus died of their wounds.'

'He shall hunt the beast through every town
 till he has sent her back to Hell
 whence primal envy set her loose.'

'Therefore, for your sake, I think it wise
 you follow me: I will be your guide,
 leading you, from here, through an eternal place'

'where you shall hear despairing cries
 and see those ancient souls in pain
 as they bewail their second death.'

'Then you will see the ones who are content
 to burn⁸ because they hope to come,
 whenever it may be, among the blessed.'

⁷ the hound shall come . . . pain: A prophecy by Dante possibly referring to Can Grande della Scala, the lord of Verona and Dante's benefactor during his exile from Florence.

⁸ Between felt and felt: Often translated as between Felto and Feltro, referring to Verona, which is in between the towns of Felto and Montebelluna.

⁹ Camilla . . . wounds: Four who die in Aeneas's conquest of Italy in *The Aeneid*.

¹⁰ second death: The second death is the suffering of the damned in Hell.

¹¹ to burn: The burning in Purgatory.

'Should you desire to ascend to these,
you'll find a soul more fit to lead than I:
I'll leave you in her care when I depart.

For the Emperor who has his seat on high
wills not, because I was a rebel to His law,
that I should make my way into His city.

In every part He reigns and there He rules.
There is His city and His lofty seat.
Happy the one whom He elects to be there!

And I answered: 'Poet, I entreat you
by the God you did not know,
so that I may escape this harm and worse,

'lead me to the realms you've just described
that I may see Saint Peter's gate!¹²
and those you tell me are so sorrowful.'
Then he set out and I came on behind him.

CANTO II

Day was departing and the darkened air
released the creatures of the earth
from their labor, and I, alone,

prepared to face the struggle—
of the way and of the pity of it—
which memory, unerring, shall retrace.

O Muses, O lofty genius, aid me now!
O memory, that set down what I saw,
here shall your worth be shown.

I began: 'Poet, you who guide me,
consider if my powers will suffice
before you trust me to this arduous passage.

You tell of the father of Sylvius
that he, still subject to corruption, went
to the eternal world while in the flesh.¹³

¹² Saint Peter's gate: The gate of penitence that leads into Purgatory.

¹³ went to . . . flesh: The visit of Aeneas to the underworld (*Aeneid* VI).

'But that the adversary of all evil showed
such favor to him, considering who and what he was,
and the high sequel that would spring from him,¹⁴

seems not unfitting to a man who understands.
For in the Emphyrean¹⁵ he was chosen
to father holy Rome and her dominion,

both of these established—if we would speak
the truth—to be the sacred precinct where
successors of great Peter have their throne.

'On this journey, for which you grant him glory,
he heard the words that prompted him
to victory and prepared the Papal mantle.¹⁶

Later, the Chosen Vessel¹⁷ went there
to bring back confirmation of our faith,
the first step in our journey to salvation.

'But why should I go there? who allows it?
I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul.
Neither I nor any think me fit for this.

'And so, if I commit myself to come,
I fear it may be madness. You are wise,
you understand what I cannot express.'

And as one who unwill's what he has willed,
changing his intent on second thought
so that he quite gives over what he has begun,

such a man was I on that dark slope.
With too much thinking I had undone
the enterprise so quick in its inception.

'If I have rightly understood your words,
replied the shade of that great soul,
'your spirit is assailed by cowardice,

¹⁴ the high sequel . . . from him: Aeneas as the ancestor of later emperors.

¹⁵ the Emphyrean: The highest domain of Heaven, where one is in the presence of God.

¹⁶ prepared the Papal mantle: The founding of Rome by Aeneas prefigures the founding of the Vatican in Rome and the Papacy.

which many a time so weighs upon a man
it turns him back from noble enterprise,
the way a beast shies from a shadow.

To free you from this fear
I'll tell you why I came and what I heard
when first I felt compassion for you.

I was among the ones who are suspended;¹⁷
when a lady called me, so blessed and so fair
that I implored her to command me.

Her eyes shone brighter than the stars.
Gentle and clear, the words she spoke to me—
an angel's voice was in her speech:

O courteous Mantuan spirit,
whose fame continues in the world
and shall continue while the world endures,

my friend, who is no friend of Fortune,
is so hindered on his way upon the desert slope
that, in his terror, he has turned back,

and, from what I hear of him in Heaven,
I fear he has gone so far astray
that I arose too late to help him.

Set out, and with your polished words
and whatever else is needed for his safety,
go to his aid, that I may be consoled.

I who bid you go am Beatrice.
I come from where I most desire to return.
The love that moved me makes me speak.

And when I am before my Lord
often will I offer praise of you to Him.¹⁸
Then she fell silent. And I began:

¹⁷ ones who are suspended: The virtuous heathen in limbo are suspended between punishment and bliss.

O lady of such virtue that by it alone
the human race surpasses all that lies
within the smallest compass of the heavens,¹⁹

so pleased am I at your command that my consent,
were it already given, would be given late.
You have but to make your desire known.

But tell me why you do not hesitate
to descend into the center of the earth
from the unbounded space you long for.²⁰

Since you are so eager to know more,²¹
she answered, "I shall be brief in telling you
why I am not afraid to enter here.

We should fear those things alone
that have the power to harm.
Nothing else is frightening.

I am made such by God's grace
that your affliction does not touch,
nor can these fires assail me.

There is a gracious lady²² in Heaven so moved
by pity at his peril, she breaks stern judgment
there above and lets me send you to him.

She summoned Lucy²³ and made this request:
"Your faithful one is now in need of you
and I commend him to your care."

Lucy, the enemy of every cruelty,
arose and came to where I sat
at venerable Rachel's side,²⁴

and said: "Beatrice, true praise of God,
why do you not help the one who loved you so
that for your sake he left the vulgar herd?"

¹⁸ smallest compass . . . heavens: The cycle of the moon.

¹⁹ a gracious lady: The Virgin Mary.

²⁰ Lucy: St. Lucy of Syracuse (third century), a martyr.

²¹ Rachel's side: Rachel is mother of Joseph and Benjamin in the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 29–35).

998 "Do you not hear the anguish in his tears?
999 Do you not see the death besetting him
1000 on the swollen river where the sea cannot prevail?"

1001 "Never were men on earth so swift to seek
1002 their good or to escape their harm as I,
1003 after these words were spoken.

1004 "to descend here from my blessed seat,
1005 trusting to the noble speech that honors you
1006 and those who have paid it heed."

1007 "After she had said these things to me,
1008 she turned away her eyes, now bright with tears,
1009 making me more eager to set out.

1010 "And so I came to you just as she wished.
1011 I saved you from the beast denying you
1012 the short way to the mountain of delight.

1013 "What then? Why, why do you delay?
1014 Why do you let such cowardice rule your heart?
1015 Why are you not more spirited and sure,

1016 "when three such blessed ladies
1017 care for you in Heaven's court
1018 and my words promise so much good?"

1019 As little flowers, bent and closed
1020 with chill of night, when the sun
1021 lights them, stand all open on their stems,

1022 such, in my failing strength, did I become.
1023 And so much courage poured into my heart
1024 that I began, as one made resolute:

1025 "O how compassionate was she to help me,
1026 how courteous were you, so ready to obey
1027 the truthful words she spoke to you!

1028 "Your words have made my heart
1029 so eager for the journey
1030 that I've returned to my first intent.

1031 "Set out then, for one will prompt us both.
1032 You are my leader, you my lord and master;
1033 I said to him, and when he moved ahead
1034 I entered on the deep and savage way.

CANTO III

1035 THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE CITY OF WOE,
1036 THROUGH ME THE WAY TO ETERNAL PAIN,
1037 THROUGH ME THE WAY AMONG THE LOST.

1038 JUSTICE MOVED MY MAKER ON HIGH,
1039 DIVINE POWER MADE ME,
1040 WISDOM SUPREME, AND PRIMAL LOVE.

1041 BEFORE ME NOTHING WAS BUT THINGS ETERNAL,
1042 AND I ENDURE ETERNALLY.
1043 ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE.

1044 These words, dark in hue, I saw inscribed
1045 over an archway. And then I said:
1046 "Master, for me their meaning is hard!"

1047 And he, as one who understood:
1048 "Here you must banish all distrust,
1049 here must all cowardice be slain.

1050 "We have come to where I said
1051 you would see the miserable sinners
1052 who have lost the good of the intellect."

1053 And after he had put his hand on mine
1054 with a reassuring look that gave me comfort,
1055 he led me toward things unknown to man.

1056 Now sighs, loud wailing, lamentation
1057 resounded through the starless air,
1058 so that I too began to weep.

²¹ THINGS ETERNAL: Primal matter, such as the heavens and divinities.
²² the good . . . intellect: Knowledge of God.

Unfamiliar tongues, horrendous accents,
words of suffering, cries of rage, voices
loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands—

all these made a tumult, always whirling
in that black and timeless air,
as sand is swirled in a whirlwind.

And I, my head encircled by error, said:
‘Master, what is this I hear, and what people
are these so overcome by pain?’

And he to me: ‘This miserable state is borne
by the wretched souls of those who lived
without disgrace yet without praise.

‘They intermingle with that wicked band
of angels, not rebellious and not faithful
to God, who held themselves apart.

‘Loath to impair its beauty, Heaven casts them out,
and depth of Hell does not receive them;²⁴
lest on their account the evil angels gloat.’

And I: ‘Master, what is so grievous to them,
that they lament so bitterly?’
He replied: ‘I can tell you in few words.

‘They have no hope of death,
and their blind life is so abject
that they are envious of every other lot.

‘The world does not permit report of them,
Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.
Let us not speak of them—look and pass by.’

And I, all eyes, saw a whirling banner
that ran so fast it seemed as though
it never could find rest.

Behind it came so long a file of people
that I could not believe
death had undone so many.

²⁴ *them*: Those who choose neither good nor evil but in the words of Revelation 3:16 “are lukewarm.”

After I recognized a few of these,
I saw and knew the shade of him
who, through cowardice, made the great refusal.²⁵

At once with certainty I understood
this was that worthless crew
hateful alike to God and to His foes.

These wretches, who never were alive,
were naked and beset
by stinging flies and wasps

that made their faces stream with blood,
which, mingled with their tears,
was gathered at their feet by loathsome worms.

And then, fixing my gaze farther on,
I saw souls standing on the shore of a wide river,
and so I said: ‘Master, permit me first

‘to know who they are and then what inner law
makes them so eager for the crossing,
or so it seems in this dim light.’

And he to me: ‘You shall know these things,
but not before we stay our steps
on the mournful shore of Acheron.’²⁶

Then, my eyes cast down with shame,
fearing my words displeased him,
I did not speak until we reached that stream.

And now, coming toward us in a boat,
an old man, his hair white with age, cried out:
‘Woe unto you, you wicked souls,

‘give up all hope of ever seeing heaven.
I come to take you to the other shore,
into eternal darkness, into heat and chill.

²⁵ *him who . . . refusal*: Pope Celestine V, who at the age of eighty was elected pope in 1294 and resigned five months later.

²⁶ *Acheron*: River of death in Greek mythology.

'And you there, you living soul,
move aside from these now dead.'
But when he saw I did not move,

he said: 'By another way, another port,
not here, you'll come to shore and cross.
A higher ship must carry you.'

And my leader: 'Charon,²⁷ do not torment yourself.
It is so willed where will and power are one,
and ask no more.'

That stilled the shaggy jowls
of the pilot of the livid marsh,
about whose eyes burned wheels of flame.

But those souls, naked and desolate,
lost their color. With chattering teeth
they heard his brutal words.

They blasphemed God, their parents,
the human race, the place, the time, the seed
of their begetting and their birth.

Then, weeping bitterly, they drew together
to the accursed shore that waits
for every man who fears not God.

Charon the demon, with eyes of glowing coals,
beckons to them, herds them all aboard,
striking anyone who slackens with his oar.

Just as in autumn the leaves fall away,
one, and then another, until the bough
sees all its spoil upon the ground,

so the wicked seed of Adam fling themselves
one by one from shore, at his signal,
as does a falcon at its summons.

²⁷ Charon: The boatman in Greek mythology who ferries souls across the river Styx to Hades.

Thus they depart over dark water,
and before they have landed on the other side
another crowd has gathered on this shore.

'My son,' said the courteous master,
'all those who die in the wrath of God
assemble here from every land.'

And they are eager to cross the river,
for the justice of God so spurs them on
their very fear is turned to longing.

'No good soul ever crosses at this place.
Thus, if Charon complains on your account,
now you can grasp the meaning of his words.'

When he had ended, the gloomy plain shook
with such force, the memory of my terror
makes me again break out in sweat.

From the weeping ground there sprang a wind,
flaming with vermilion light,
which overmastered all my senses,
and I dropped like a man pulled down by sleep.

CANTO IV

A heavy thunderclap broke my deep sleep
so that I started up like one
shaken awake by force.

With rested eyes, I stood
and looked about me, then fixed my gaze
to make out where I was.

I found myself upon the brink
of an abyss of suffering
filled with the roar of endless woe.

It was full of vapor, dark and deep,
straining my eyes toward the bottom,
I could see nothing.

'Now let us descend into the blind world
down there,' began the poet, gone pale.
15 'I will be first and you come after.'

And I, noting his pallor, said:
'How shall I come if you're afraid,
18 you, who give me comfort when I falter?'

And he to me: 'The anguish of the souls
below us paints my face
21 with pity you mistake for fear.

'Let us go, for the long road calls us.'
Thus he went first and had me enter
24 the first circle girding the abyss.

Here, as far as I could tell by listening,
was no lamentation other than the sighs
27 that kept the air forever trembling.

These came from grief without torment
borne by vast crowds
30 of men, and women, and little children.

My master began: 'You do not ask about
the souls you see? I want you to know,
33 before you venture farther,

'they did not sin. Though they have merit,
that is not enough, for they were unbaptized,
36 denied the gateway to the faith that you profess.

'And if they lived before the Christians lived,
they did not worship God aright.
39 And among these I am one.

'For such defects, and for no other fault,
we are lost, and afflicted but in this,
42 that without hope we live in longing.'

When I understood, great sadness seized my heart,
for then I knew that beings of great worth
45 were here suspended in this Limbo.²⁸

²⁸ Limbo: The place for unbaptized infants and virtuous pagans who, living before Jesus' time, could not have known him.

'Tell me, master, tell me, sir, I began,
seeking assurance in the faith
48 that conquers every doubt,

'did ever anyone, either by his own
or by another's merit, go forth from here
51 and rise to blessedness?'

And he, who understood my covert speech:
'I was new to this condition when I saw
54 a mighty one descend, crowned, with the sign of victory.'²⁹

'Out of our midst he plucked the shade
of our first parent, of Abel his son, of Noah,
57 and of Moses, obedient in giving laws,

'the patriarch Abraham, and King David,
Israel with his father and his sons,
60 and with Rachel, for whom he served so long.

'as well as many others, and he made them blessed.
And, I would have you know, before these
63 no human souls were saved.'

We did not halt our movement as he spoke,
but all the while were passing through a wood —
66 I mean a wood of thronging spirits.

We had not yet gone far from where I'd slept
when I beheld a blaze of light
69 that overcame a hemisphere of darkness,

though still a good way from it,
yet not so far but I discerned
72 an honorable company was gathered there.

'O you who honor art and knowledge,
why are these so honored they are set
75 apart from the condition of the rest?'

²⁹ Victory: A victory over Hell, referring to the belief that Jesus descended into Hell — after the Crucifixion and before the Resurrection — and rescued certain heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures. The event is called the Harrowing of Hell. (See the Gospel of Nicodemus.)

And he answered: 'Their honorable fame,
which echoes in your life above,
78 gains favor in Heaven, which thus advances them.'

81 Just then I heard a voice that said:
'Honor the loftiest of poets!
His shade returns that had gone forth.'

When the voice had paused and there was silence,
I saw four worthy shades approach,
their countenances neither sad nor joyful.

The good master spoke: "Take note of him who holds that sword in hand³⁶ and comes as lord before the three:

'He is Homer, sovereign poet.
Next comes Horace the satirist,
Ovid is third, the last is Lucan.'³¹

93 Since each is joined to me
in the name the one voice uttered,
they do me honor and, doing so, do well.

There I saw assembled the fair school
of the lord of loftiest song,
96 soaring like an eagle far above the rest.

After they conversed a while, they turned to me with signs of greeting, and my master smiled at this.

And then they showed me greater honor still, for they made me one of their company,

Thus we went onward to the light,
speaking of things that here are best unsaid,
just as there it was fitting to express them.

²⁰ him who . . . sword in hand: Homer is the supreme poet of war in the *Iliad*.
²¹ Horace . . . Lucan: Horace (65–8 B.C.E.), Ovid (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.), and Livian (70–66 C.E.) are Roman poets.

We came to the foot of a noble castle,
encircled seven times by towering walls
defended round about by a fair stream.

Over this stream we moved as on dry land.
Through seven gates I entered with these sages
until we came to a fresh, green meadow.³²

People were there with grave, slow-moving eyes
and visages of great authority.
They seldom spoke, and then in gentle tones.

When we withdrew over to one side into an open space, high in the light, we could observe them all.

There before me on the enameled green
the great spirits were revealed.
In my heart I exult at what I saw.

I saw Electra with many of her line,
of whom I recognized Hector, Aeneas,
and Caesar,³⁵ in arms, with his falcon eyes,

I saw Camilla and Penthesila.
Setted apart I saw King Latinus,
and next to him Lavinia, ³⁴ his daughter.

I saw that Brutus who drove out Tarquinius,
Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia.
And Saladin⁵⁵ I saw, alone, apart.

¹² **green meadow.** The setting is reminiscent of the Elysian Fields in Greek mythology, but the symbolism of the castle is disputed. Seven is an important number in medieval symbolism; perhaps the castle is a citadel of the seven liberal arts (ethics, metaphysics, etc.).

²³ Electra . . . Caesar: Like Iulius Caesar (d. 44 B.C.E.), these are prominent figures in Roman history. Electra, the mother of Dardanius, the founder of Troy; Hector, a Trojan hero; and Aeneas, the hero of the *Aeneid*.

³⁴ Camilla . . . Lavinia: Lavinia is Aeneas's wife. Camilla is founde of the Camilla and Lavinia is king of Latium (in Italy).

³⁵ **Brutus** . . . **Saladin**: Sultan (d. 1193) of Egypt and Syria. Saladin was famed for his courage in the Crusades and for having brought the Greeks and Latins to a truce in 1187. Saladin was famed for his courage in the Crusades, but an earlier Roman who defeated the Carthaginians was also called Brutus. Brutus (not the Brutus involved with assassinating Julius Caesar) but an earlier Roman who defeated the Carthaginians was also called Brutus. The four women mentioned here were the daughters of Brutus, who founded the Roman Republic and was its first consul. The four women mentioned here were models of Roman virtue.

When I raised my eyes a little higher,
I saw the master²⁶ of those who know,
sitting among his philosophic kindred.

Eyes trained on him, all show him honor.
In front of all the rest and nearest him
I saw Socrates and Plato.

I saw Democritus, who ascribes the world
to chance, Diogenes, Anaxagoras, and Thales,
Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Zeno.²⁸

I saw the skilled collector of the qualities
of things—I mean Dioscorides—and I saw²⁷
Orpheus, Cicero, Linus, and moral Seneca,

Euclid the geometer, and Ptolemy,
Hippocrates, Avicenna, Galen,
and Averroes,²⁸ who wrote the weighty glosses.

I cannot give account of all of them,
for the length of my theme so drives me on
that often the telling comes short of the fact.

The company of six falls off to two
and my wise leader brings me by another way
out of the still, into the trembling air.
And I come to a place where nothing shines.

CANTO V

Thus I descended from the first circle
down into the second, which guards a smaller space
but greater agony to goad lament.

²⁶ Democritus . . . Zeno: Famous Greek philosophers from the seventh to fourth century B.C.E.

²⁷ Dioscorides . . . Seneca: Seneca was a Roman playwright and philosopher (d. 65 C.E.); Dioscorides (first century C.E.) was a Greek physician; Orpheus and Linus were mythical poets; Cicero (d. 43 B.C.E.) was a Roman orator.

²⁸ Euclid . . . Averroes: Averroes (d. 1208) was an Islamic scholar from north Africa and Spain whose commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* was a standard text in the medieval university. Euclid (fourth century B.C.E.) was a Greek mathematician; Ptolemy (second century C.E.) was an Alexandrian astronomer who devised the "Ptolemaic universe" in which the earth is a fixed center around which the heavenly bodies circle—a concept believed in by Dante. Hippocrates and Galen were Greek physicians (fourth and second centuries B.C.E.), and Avicenna (d. 1037) was an Arab physician whose writings on medicine influenced Europeans for several hundred years.

Avicenna

There stands Minos,²⁹ snarling, terrible,
He examines each offender at the entrance,
judges and dispatches as he encoils himself.

I mean that when the ill-begotten soul
stands there before him it confesses all,
and that accomplished judge of sins

decides what place in Hell is fit for it,
then coils his tail around himself to count
how many circles down the soul must go.

Always before him stands a crowd of them,
going to judgment each in turn.
They tell, they hear, and then are hurled down.

'O you who come to this abode of pain,'
said Minos when he saw me, pausing
in the exercise of his high office,

'beware how you come in and whom you trust.
Don't let the easy entrance fool you.'
And my leader to him: 'Why all this shouting?

'Hinder not his destined journey.
It is so willed where will and power are one,
and ask no more.'

Now I can hear the screams
of agony. Now I have come
where a great wailing beats upon me.

I reached a place mute of all light,
which bellows as the sea in tempest
tossed by conflicting winds.

The hellish squall, which never rests,
sweeps spirits in its headlong rush,
tormenting, whirls and strikes them.

Caught in that path of violence,
they shriek, weep, and lament.
Then how they curse the power of God!

²⁹ Minos: In classical mythology, the judge of the underworld.

I understood that to such torment
the carnal sinners are condemned,
39 they who make reason subject to desire.

As, in cold weather, the wings of starlings
bear them up in wide, dense flocks,
42 so does that blast propel the wicked spirits.

Here and there, down and up, it drives them.
Never are they comforted by hope
45 of rest or even lesser punishment.

Just as cranes chant their mournful songs,
making a long line in the air,
48 thus I saw approach, heaving plaintive sighs,

shades lifted on that turbulence,
so that I said: 'Master, who are these
51 whom the black air lashes?'

'The first of them about whom
you would hear,' he then replied,
54 'was empress over many tongues.

'She was so given to the vice of lechery
she made lust licit in her law
57 to take away the blame she had incurred.

'She is Semiramis, of whom we read
that she, once Ninus' wife, succeeded him.
60 She held sway in the land the Sultan rules.⁴⁰

'Here is she who broke faith with the ashes
of Sichaens and slew herself for love.
63 The next is wanton Cleopatra.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Semiramis . . . the Sultan rules: Semiramis was the legendary queen of Assyria; her capital, Babylon, is here confused with Babylon, Egypt, which was ruled by the sultan.

⁴¹ Cleopatra: Queen of Egypt, mistress of Julius Caesar and of Marc Antony; Cleopatra committed suicide after Antony's death, in 30 B.C.E. Dido broke faith with the memory of her husband Sichaens by having an affair with Aeneas.

'See Helen, for whose sake so many years
of ill rolled past. And see the great Achilles,
66 who battled, at the last, with love.⁴²

'See Paris, Tristan,⁴³ and he showed me more
than a thousand shades, naming as he pointed,
69 whom love had parted from our life.

When I heard my teacher name the ladies
and the knights of old, pity overcame me
72 and I almost lost my senses.

I began: 'Poet, gladly would I speak
with these two⁴⁴ that move together
75 and seem to be so light upon the wind.'

And he: 'Once they are nearer, you will see:
if you entreat them by the love
78 that leads them, they will come.'

As soon as the wind had bent them to us,
I raised my voice: 'O wearied souls,
81 if it is not forbidden, come speak with us.'

As doves, summoned by desire, their wings
oustretched and motionless, move on the air,
84 borne by their will to the sweet nest,

so did these leave the troop where Dido is,
coming to us through the malignant air,
87 such force had my affectionate call.

'O living creature, gracious and kind,
that come through somber air to visit us
90 who stained the world with blood,

'if the King of the universe were our friend
we would pray that He might give you peace,
93 since you show pity for our grievous plight.

⁴² Helen . . . with love: In the medieval version of the Trojan War, Achilles is killed by Paris because of his love for the Trojan Polyxena. Helen's love affair with Paris was supposedly the cause of the Trojan War.

⁴³ Tristan: The lover of Iseult who was killed by King Mark.

⁴⁴ these two: Paolo and Francesca of Rimini.

'We long to hear and speak of that
which you desire to speak and know,
here, while the wind has calmed.

'On that shore where the river Po
with all its tributaries slows
to peaceful flow, there I was born.⁴⁵

'Love, quick to kindle in the gentle heart,
seized this man with the fair form taken from me,
the way of it afflicts me still.

'Love, which absolves no one beloved from loving,
seized me so strongly with his charm that,
as you see, it has not left me yet.

'Love brought us to one death.
Caina waits for him⁴⁶ who quenched our lives;
These words were borne from them to us.

And when I'd heard those two afflicted souls
I bowed my head and held it low until at last
the poet said: 'What are your thoughts?'

In answer I replied: 'Oh,
how many sweet thoughts, what great desire,
have brought them to this woeful pass!'

Then I turned to them again to speak
and I began: 'Francesca, your torments
make me weep for grief and pity,

'but tell me, in that season of sweet sighs,
how and by what signs did Love
acquaint you with your hesitant desires?'

And she to me: 'There is no greater sorrow
than to recall our time of joy
in wretchedness — and this your teacher knows.

⁴⁵ there . . . born: Ravenna, in northern Italy.

⁴⁶ Caina waits for him: Francesca's husband and Paolo's brother, Gianciotto Malatesta. Caina is the circle of Cain, the deepest circle of Hell (Canto XXXII).

but if you feel such longing
to know the first root of our love,
I shall tell as one who weeps in telling.

'One day, to pass the time in pleasure,
we read of Lancelot;⁴⁷ how love enthralled him.
We were alone, without the least misgiving.

More than once that reading made our eyes meet
and drained the color from our faces.
Still, it was a single instant overcame us:

'When we read how the longed-for smile
was kissed by so renowned a lover, this man,
who never shall be parted from me,

'all trembling, kissed me on my mouth.
A Galeotto was the book and he⁴⁸ that wrote it.
That day we read in it no further.'

While the one spirit said this
the other wept, so that for pity
I swooned as if in death.

And down I fell as a dead body falls.

CANTO VI

With my returning senses that had failed
at the piteous state of those two kindred,
which had confounded me with grief,

new torments and new souls in torment
I see about me, wherever I may move,
or turn, or set my gaze.

I am in the third circle, of eternal,
hateful rain, cold and leaden,
changeless in its monotony.

⁴⁷ Lancelot: The lover of King Arthur's wife, Guinevere.

⁴⁸ he: Galeotto, the intermediary between Guinevere and Lancelot.

Heavy hailstones, filthy water, and snow
pour down through gloomy air.
The ground it falls on reeks.

Cerberus,⁴⁹ fierce and monstrous beast,
barks from three gullets like a dog
over the people underneath that muck.

His eyes are red, his beard a greasy black,
his belly swollen. With his taloned hands
he claws the spirits, flays and quarters them.

The rain makes them howl like dogs.
The unholy wretches often turn their bodies,
making of one side a shield for the other.

When Cerberus—that huge worm—noticed us,
he opened up his jaws and showed his fangs.
There was no part of him he held in check.

But then my leader opened up his hands,
picked up some earth, and with full fists
tossed soil into the ravenous gullets.

As the dog that yelps with craving
grows quiet while it chews its food,
absorbed in trying to devour it,

the foul heads of that demon Cerberus were stilled,
who otherwise so thunders on the souls
they would as soon be deaf.

We were passing over shades sprawled
under heavy rain, setting our feet
upon their emptiness, which seems real bodies.

All of them were lying on the ground,
except for one who sat bolt upright
when he saw us pass before him.

'O you who come escorted through this Hell,'
he said, 'if you can, bring me back to mind.
You were made before I was undone.'

⁴⁹ Cerberus: Guardian of Hades in Greek mythology.

And I to him: 'The punishment you suffer
may be blotting you from memory:
it doesn't seem to me I've ever seen you.

But tell me who you are to have been put
into this misery with such a penalty
that none, though harsher, is more loathsome.'

And he to me: 'Your city, so full of envy
that now the sack spills over,
held me in its confines in the sunlit life.

You and my townsmen called me Ciaccio.⁵⁰
For the pernicious fault of gluttony,
as you can see, I'm prostrate in this rain.

'And in my misery I am not alone.
All those here share a single penalty
for the same fault.' He said no more.

I answered him: 'Ciaccio, your distress so weighs
on me it bids me weep. But tell me,
if you can, what shall be the fate

'of the citizens within the riven city.
Are any in it just? And tell me why
such discord has assailed it.'

And he to me: 'After long feuding
they shall come to blood. The rustic faction,⁵¹
having done great harm, will drive the others out.

But it in turn shall fall to them,
within three years, by power of him
who now just plays for time.

'These in their arrogance will long subject
the other faction to their heavy yoke,
despite its weeping and its shame.

⁵⁰ Ciaccio: A Florentine whose name means "dog."

⁵¹ Rustic faction: The Whites will drive the "others," or the Blacks, out, but the Blacks aided by Pope Boniface will ultimately triumph.

'Two men are just⁵² and are not heeded there.
Pride, envy, and avarice are the sparks
that have set the hearts of all on fire.'

With that he ended his distressing words,
And I to him: 'I wish you would instruct me more,
granting me the gift of further speech.'

'Farinata and Tegghiaio, who were so worthy,
Jacopo Rusticucci, Arrigo, and Mosca,⁵³
and the rest whose minds were bent on doing good,

tell me where they are and how they fare.
For great desire presses me to learn
whether Heaven sweetens or Hell embitters them.'

And he: 'They are among the blacker souls,
Different vices weigh them toward the bottom,
as you shall see if you descend that far.'

'But when you have returned to the sweet world
I pray you bring me to men's memory.
I say no more nor answer you again.'

With that his clear eyes lost their focus.
He gazed at me until his head drooped down.
Then he fell back among his blind companions.

And my leader said to me: 'He wakes no more
until angelic trumpets sound
the advent of the hostile Power.'

'Then each shall find again his miserable tomb,
shall take again his flesh and form,
and hear the judgment⁵⁴ that eternally resounds.'

So we passed on through the foul mix
of shades and rain with lagging steps,
touching a little on the life to come.

⁵² Two men . . . just: The identity of the "two men" is unknown.

⁵³ Farinata . . . Mosca: Recent Florentines. Except for Arrigo, who does not appear again, the others are mentioned in Canto X, XVI, and XXVIII.

⁵⁴ the judgment: The Last Judgment by Christ when the dead will be joined again to their bodies.

'Master, I asked, after the great Judgment
will these torments be greater, less,
or will they stay as harsh as they are now?'

And he replied: 'Return to your science,⁵⁵
which has it that, in measure of a thing's perfection,
it feels both more of pleasure and of pain.'

'Although these accursed people
will never come to true perfection,
they will be nearer it than they are now.'

We went along that curving road,
with much more talk than I repeat,
and reached the point of our descent.
And there we came on Plutus,⁵⁶ our great foe.

CANTO VII

'Pope Satan, Pope Satan, aleppe!⁵⁷
burst out Plutus in his raucous voice.
And the courteous, all-discerning sage,

to comfort me, said: 'Do not be overcome
by fear. However powerful he may be,
he'll not prevent our climbing down this cliff.'

Then he turned to that bloated face
and said: 'Silence, accursed wolf!
Let your fury feed itself inside you.'

'Not without sanction is this journey down the pit.
It is willed on high, where Michael
did avenge the proud rebellion.'⁵⁸

As sails, swollen by the wind,
fall in a tangle when the mainmast snaps,
so fell that cruel beast to the ground.

⁵⁵ your science: Aristotle's teaching.

⁵⁶ Plutus: The classical god of wealth, possibly combined here with Pluto, the king of Hades.

⁵⁷ Pope Satan . . . aleppe: Apparently, a threat to Satan; its meaning is unknown. In their notes, the Hollanders provide a possible rendering: "O Pope Satan, my god."

⁵⁸ the proud rebellion: The rebel angels in Heaven, who were cast out by Michael and his angels.

'O Jacopo da Sant' Andrea,' it said,
'what use was it to make a screen of me?
135 Why must I suffer for your guilty life?'

When the master stopped beside it, he said:
'Who were you, that through so many wounds
136 pour out with blood your doleful words?'

And he to us: 'O souls who have arrived
to see the shameless carnage
141 that has torn from me my leaves,

gather them here at the foot of this wretched bush.
I was of the city that traded patrons—
144 Mars for John the Baptist.¹¹⁷ On that account

Mars with his craft will make her grieve forever:
And were it not that at the crossing of the Arno
147 some vestige of him still remains,

'those citizens who afterwards rebuilt it
upon the ashes that Artia left behind'¹¹⁸
would have done their work in vain.
151 I made my house into my gallows.'

CANTO XIV

Urged by the love I bore my place of birth,
I gathered up the scattered leaves and gave them back
3 to him, who had by this time spent his breath.

Then we came to the boundary that divides
the second circling from the third.
6 And here the dreadful work of justice is revealed.

To tell how strange the new place was,
I say we reached a barren plain
9 that lets no plant set root into its soil.

¹¹⁷ Mars for John the Baptist: according to legend, Mars plagued Florence with wars when he was replaced as city patron by John the Baptist and was only partially appeased when his statue was preserved on a bridge—the Ponte Vecchio—over the Arno.

¹¹⁸ the ashes . . . : Artia left behind: A mistaken notion that Florence was destroyed by Artia.

The gloomy forest rings it like a garland
and is in turn encircled by the moat.
12 Here, at the very edge, we stayed our steps

at an expanse of deep and arid sand,
much like the sand pressed long ago
15 beneath the feet of Cato.¹¹⁹

O vengeance of God, how much
should you be feared by all who read
18 what now I saw revealed before my eyes!

I saw many a herd of naked souls,
all crying out in equal misery,
21 though each seemed subject to a different law:

some lay face up upon the ground,
some sat, their bodies hunched,
24 and others roamed about in constant motion.

Most numerous were those who roamed about,
those lying there in torment fewer,
27 though theirs the tongues crying out the most.

Above the stretching sand, in slow descent,
broad flakes of fire showered down
30 as snow falls in the hills on windless days.

If Alexander, on India's torrid plains,
seeing undiminished flakes of fire fall
33 upon the ground and on his troops,

ordered his men to trample down the soil
so that the flaming shower was put out
36 before the fire caught and spread,¹²⁰

here untrammelled the eternal flames
came down, and the sand took fire
39 like tinder under flint, doubling the torment.

¹¹⁹ Cato: Roman general (third century B.C.E.) in north Africa who fought against Caesar in the civil war.

¹²⁰ put out . . . spread: A medieval legend concerning Alexander the Great's conquest of India.

Ever without repose was the rude dance
of wretched hands, now here, now there,
slapping at each new scorching cinder.

I began: 'Master, you who overcome all things—
all but the obstinate fiends who sallied forth
against us at the threshold of the gate,

'who is that hero'¹²¹ who seems to scorn the fire
and lies there grim and scowling
so that the rain seems not to torture him?'

And he himself, who had discerned
that I had asked my guide about him,
cried: 'What I was alive, I am in death.

'Let Jove wear out his blacksmith'¹²²
from whom in rage he seized the shining bolt
he struck me with on that my final day.

'And though he weary all the others, one by one,
at their black forge in Mongibello,'¹²³
shouting 'Help, good Vulcan, help!'

'as once he did on the battlefield of Phlegra,'¹²⁴
and though he hurl his shafts at me with all his might,
he still would have no joy in his revenge.'

Then my leader spoke with a vehemence
I had not heard him use before: 'O Capaneus,
because your pride remains unquenched

'you suffer greater punishment.
In your own anger lies your agony,
a fitting torment for your rage.

Then, with a calmer look, he said to me:
'He was among the seven kings who once laid siege
to Thebes and held—and he still seems to hold—

¹²¹ that hero: In Greek legend, Capaneus is one of the seven kings who besieged Thebes; he boasted that he would burn the city even if Zeus opposed it, and he was killed by a thunderbolt for his presumption.

¹²² his blacksmith: Vulcan, the Greek Hephaestus.

¹²³ Mongibello: A name for Mt. Etna, the interior of which served as Vulcan's forge.

¹²⁴ battlefield of Phlegra: At Phlegra, Jove defeated the Giants (Titans).

'God in disdain and to esteem Him lightly,
But his own spiteful ranting, as I made clear,
most fittingly adorns his breast.

'Now come along behind me, and be sure
you do not set your feet upon the burning sand
but keep your steps close to the forest's edge.'

In silence we went on until we came
to where a little stream spurts from the wood.
The redness of it makes me shudder still.

As from the Bulicame¹²⁵ flows out a rivulet
the sinful women then divide among them,
so this ran down across the sand.

Its bed and both its banks were made of stone,
as was the boundary on either side:
I saw our passage lay that way.

'In all else I have shown you
since we entered through the gate
whose threshold is denied to none,

'your eyes have yet seen nothing of such note
as is this stream before us:
its vapor quenches every flame above it.'

These were my leader's words. Hearing them,
I asked him to supply the food
for which he had provoked the appetite.

'In the middle of the sea there lies a land,'
he said, 'a wasteland known as Crete.¹²⁶
Under its king the world was innocent.

'A mountain rises there, once glad
with leaves and streams, called Ida.
Now it is barren like a thing outworn.

¹²⁵ the Bulicame: A sulphurous spring near Viterbo, whose water fed the houses of prostitution.

¹²⁶ Under its king . . . innocent: The mythical reign of Saturn on Crete was the world's Golden Age.

101 'Once Rhea chose it as the trusted cradle
for her child, and there, the better to conceal him,
102 when he cried, she had her people raise an uproar.'

103 'Within the mountain stands a huge old man.
He keeps his back turned on Damietta,¹²⁷
105 gazing on Rome as in his mirror.

106 'His head is fashioned of fine gold,
his breast and arms of purest silver,
108 then to the fork he's made of brass,

109 'and from there down he is all iron,
but for his right foot of baked clay,
111 and he rests more on this than on the other.

112 'Every part except the gold is rent
by a crack that drips with tears, which, running down,
114 collect to force a passage through that cavern,

115 'taking their course from rock to rock into this depth,
where they form Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon,¹²⁸
117 then, going down this narrow channel,

118 'down to where there is no more descent,
they form Cocytus:¹²⁹ what kind of pond that is
120 you shall see in time—here I say no more.'

121 Then I asked: 'If that stream flows
down from our world, why do we see it
123 only at this boundary?'

124 And he answered: 'You know this place is round,
and though you have come far,
126 descending toward the bottom on the left,

¹²⁷ *Rhea*: . . . an uproar. Saturn swallowed his own children to prevent one of his sons from overthrowing him. Rhea preserved Jupiter, however, by substituting a stone for him that Saturn swallowed, and hid the baby Jupiter in a cave on Mt. Ida. Mountain spirits hid his crying by clashing their swords and shields.

¹²⁸ *Damietta*: A city in Egypt. Made of different metals, the old man seems to represent the ages of humanity, which have degenerated from gold to iron to clay.

¹²⁹ *Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon*: Rivers of the classical underworld.

¹³⁰ *Cocytus*: The lowest part of Hell.

127 'you have not come full circle.
Should some new thing confront us,
129 it need not bring such wonder to your face.'

130 And I again: 'Master, where are Phlegethon and Lethe?'¹³¹
About the one you're silent, and you say the other
132 is made into a river by this rain.'

133 'In all your questions you do please me,
he replied, but the red and seething water
135 might well have answered one of those you ask.

136 'Lethe you shall see: not in this abyss
but where the spirits go to cleanse themselves
138 once their repented guilt has been removed.'

139 And then: 'Now it is time to leave this forest.
See you stay close behind me.
The borders, which are not on fire, form a path
142 and over both of them all flames are quenched.'

CANTO XV

Now one of the stony borders bears us on
and vapor from the stream arose as mist
3 protecting banks and water from the flames.

4 As the Flemings between Wissant and Bruges,¹³²
fearing the tide that rushes in upon them,
6 erect a bulwark to repel the sea,

7 and as the Paduans build dikes along the Brenta,¹³³
to protect their towns and castles
9 before the heat brings floods to Careniana—

10 in just that way these banks were formed,
except the architect, whoever he was,
12 had made them not as lofty nor as thick.

¹³¹ *Lethe*: The river of forgetfulness. Dante places it on the summit of Purgatory, as a passage into Paradise.

¹³² *Wissant and Bruges*: Two cities that mark the ends of the dike for Dante.

¹³³ *the Brenta*: A river flowing through Padua fed by the melting snows from the mountains of Careniana in Austria.

By now we were so distant from the wood
that I could not have made it out,
even had I turned in its direction.

Here we met a troop of souls
coming up along the bank, and each
gazed at us as men at dusk will sometimes do,

eyeing one another under the new moon.
They peered at us with knitted brows
like an old tailor at his needle's eye.

Thus scrutinized by such a company,
I was known to one of them who caught me
by the hem and then cried out, 'What a wonder!'

And while he held his arm outstretched to me,
I fixed my eyes on his scorched face
until beneath the charred disfigurement

I could discern the features that I knew
and, lowering my hand toward his face,
asked: 'Are You here, Ser Brunetto?'

And he: 'O my son, let it not displease you
if Brunetto Latini for a while turns back
with you and lets the troop go on.'

I said to him: 'With all my heart, I pray You,
and if You would have me sit with You, I will,
if he who leads me through allows.'

'O son,' he said, 'whoever of this flock stops
even for an instant has to lie a hundred years,
unable to fend off the fire when it strikes.'

'Therefore, go on. I shall follow at your hem
and later will rejoin my band,
who go lamenting their eternal pain.'

¹¹⁴ *Ser Brunetto*: Brunetto Latini (c. 1210–1294), active in Guelph politics, was the author of *Treasure*, a work about civil duty, and *Little Treasure*, a verse poem about an allegorical journey. Dante addresses Brunetto with the polite form *voi* ('you'), showing respect. *Voi* is used in the *Inferno* only twice—for Brunetto Latini and for Farinata (Canto X). Moreover, *Ser*, short for *messere*, is an honorific title used for a notary.

I did not dare to leave the higher path
to walk the lower with him, but I kept
my head bowed, like one who walks in reverence.

He began: 'What chance or fate is it
that brings you here before your final hour,
and who is this that shows the way?'

'In the sunlit life above,' I answered,
'in a valley there, I lost my way
before I reached the zenith of my days.'

'Only yesterday morning did I leave it,
but had turned back when he appeared,
and now along this road he leads me home.'

And he to me: 'By following your star
you cannot fail to reach a glorious port,
if I saw clearly in the happy life.'

'Had I not died too soon,
seeing that Heaven so favors you,
I would have lent you comfort in your work.'

'But that malignant, thankless rabble
that came down from Fiesole¹¹⁵ long ago
and still snacks of the mountain and the rock,

'rightly shall become, because of your good deeds,
your enemy: among the bitter sorbs
it is not fit the sweet fig¹¹⁶ come to fruit.'

'The world has long believed them to be blind,
a people greedy, envious and proud.
Be sure you stay untainted by their habits.'

'Your destiny reserves for you such honor
both parties shall be hungry to devour you,
but the grass shall be far from the goat.'

¹¹⁵ *Fiesole*: According to tradition, Florence was founded by a mixture of Romans and Fiesolans after Caesar destroyed the hill town of Fiesole, where stone was quarried for Florence.

¹¹⁶ *bitter sorbs* . . . *sweet figs*: The fig refers to Dante. The sorb is a kind of sour apple.

Let the Fiesolan beasts make forage
of themselves but spare the plant,
if on their dung-heap any still springs up,

the plant in which lives on the holy seed
of those few Romans who remained
when it became the home of so much malice;

If all my prayers were answered,
I said to him, 'You would not yet
be banished from mankind.

For I remember well and now lament
the cherished, kind, paternal image of You
when, there in the world, from time to time,

You taught me how man makes himself immortal.
And how much gratitude I owe for that
my tongue, while I still live, must give report.

What You tell of my future I record
and keep for glossing, along with other texts,
by a lady of discernment,⁹ should I reach her.

This much I would have You know:
as long as conscience does not chide,
I am prepared for Fortune as she wills.

Such prophecy is not unknown to me.
Let Fortune spin her wheel just as she pleases,
and let the loutish peasant ply his hoe;

At that I saw the right side of my master's face
turned back in my direction. And he said:
'He listens well who takes in what he hears.'

Nonetheless, I go on speaking
with ser Brunetto, asking who, of his companions,
are most eminent, most worthy to be known.

And he: 'Some of them it is good to know.
Others it is better not to mention,
for the time would be too short for so much talk.

In sum, note that all of them were clerics
or great and famous scholars, befouled
in the world above by a single sin.⁹

Priscian goes with that wretched crowd,
and Francesco d'Accorso¹⁰ too. And, had you had
a hankering for such filth, you might have seen

the one transferred¹¹ by the Servant of Servants
from the Arno to the Bacchiglione,
where he left his sin-stretched sinews.

I would say more, but I cannot stay,
cannot continue talking, for over there I see
new smoke rising from the sand.

'People are coming with whom I must not be.
Let my *Treasure*, in which I still live on,
be in your mind—I ask for nothing more.'

After he turned back he seemed like one
who races for the green cloth on the plain
beyond Verona.¹² And he looked more the winner
than the one who trails the field.

CANTO XVI

I had arrived where I could hear the distant roar
of water falling to the lower circle,
like the rumbling hum of bees around a hive,

when three shades at a run
broke from a passing crowd
under that rain of bitter torment.

⁹ Priscian . . . d'Accorso: d'Accorso was a thirteenth-century law professor. Priscian a sixth-century grammarian.

¹⁰ the one transferred: Andrea de' Mozzi, bishop of Florence (1287–95), was transferred because of his scandalous life to Vicenza on the Bacchiglione by Pope Boniface VIII, the 'Servant of Servants'.

¹¹ like one who races . . . beyond Verona: It was traditional to hold a footrace on the first Sunday in Lent in which the runners were naked; the winner received a piece of green cloth and the loser a rooster.

Together they came toward us, each calling:
 'Stop, you, who by your garb appear to be
 a man from our degenerate city!'

Oh, what sores I noticed on their limbs,
 both old and new ones, branded by the flames!
 It pains me still, when I remember them.

My teacher was attentive to their cries,
 then turned his face to me and said:
 'Now wait: to these one must show courtesy.'

And were it not for the fire that the nature
 of this place draws down, I would say
 haste befits you more than it does them.

When we stopped, they took up again
 their old refrain, but once they reached us
 all three¹⁴⁹ had joined into a single wheel.

As combatants, oiled and naked, are wont to do,
 watching for their hold and their advantage,
 before the exchange of thrusts and blows,

wheeling, each fixed his eyes on me,
 so that their feet moved forward
 while their necks were straining back.

One began: 'If the squalor of this shifting sand
 and our blackened, hairless faces
 put us and our petitions in contempt,

'let our fame prevail on you
 to tell us who you are, who fearless
 move on living feet through Hell.

'He in whose steps you see me tread,
 though he go naked, pecked hairless by the fire,
 was of a higher rank than you imagine.

¹⁴⁹ all three: The three Guelph leaders from Florence form a circle and are compared to wrestlers.

He was grandson of the good Gualdrada,
 Guido Guerra¹⁵⁰ was his name. In his life
 he did much with good sense, much with the sword.

'This other, squinching sand behind me,
 is Tegghiaio Aldobrandi,¹⁵¹ whose voice
 deserved a better welcome in the world.

And I, who am put to torment with them,
 was Jacopo Rusticucci.¹⁵² It was my bestial wife,
 more than all else, who brought me to this pass.'

Had I been sheltered from the fire
 I would have thrown myself among them,
 and I believe my teacher would have let me.

But because I would have burned and baked,
 fright overcame the good intentions
 that made me hunger to embrace them.

Then I began: 'Not contempt, but sadness,
 fixed your condition in my heart so deep—
 it will be long before it leaves me—'

'the moment that my master's words
 made me consider that such worthy men
 as you were coming near.

'I am of your city. How many times
 I've heard your deeds, your honored names resound!
 And I, too, named you with affection.

'I leave bitterness behind for the sweet fruits
 promised by my truthful leader.
 But first I must go down into the very core.'

'That your spirit may long quicken
 your limbs, he replied once more,
 and your renown shine after you,

¹⁵⁰ He was . . . Guerra: Guido Guerra was a political leader in Florence. Gualdrada, his grandmother, was famous for her beauty.

¹⁵¹ Aldobrandi: Like Guido Guerra, Aldobrandi advised Florence not to invade Siena in 1260 when the Florentines were defeated at Montaperti.

¹⁵² Rusticucci: A political activist who blames his wife for his sodomy.

'tell us if valor and courtesy still live
there in our city, as once they used to do,
or have they utterly forsaken her?

Guglielmo Borsiere,¹⁴⁴ grieving with us here
so short a time, goes yonder with our company
and makes us worry with his words.

'The new crowd with their sudden profits
have begot in you, Florence, such excess
and arrogance that you already weep.'

This, my face uplifted, I cried out. And the three,
taking it for answer, looked at one another
as men do when they face the truth.

'If at other times it costs so little
for you to give clear answers,' they replied in turn,
'happy are you to speak so free.

'Therefore, so may you escape from these dark regions
to see again the beauty of the stars,
when you shall rejoice in saying "I was there,"

'see that you speak of us to others,'
Then they broke their circle and as they fled
their nimble legs seemed wings.

'Amen' could not have been said as quickly
as they vanished. And then my master
thought it time to leave.

I followed him, and we had not gone far
before the roar of water was so close
we hardly could have heard each other speak.

As the river¹⁴⁵ that is the first to hold
its course from Monte Viso eastward
on the left slope of the Apennines,

¹⁴⁴ Borsiere: A Florentine pursemaker (*borsiere* is Italian for pursemaker) and a man of peace.

¹⁴⁵ the river: Montone River.

and up there is called the Acquacheta,
before it pours into its lower bed
and, having lost that name at Forlì,

reverberates above San Benedetto
dell'Alpe, falling in one cataract
where there might well have been a thousand.

so, down from a precipitous bank, the flood
of that dark water coming down resounded
in our ears and almost stunned us.

I had a cord¹⁴⁶ around my waist
with which I once had meant to take
the leopard with the painted pelt.

After I had undone it,
as my leader had commanded,
I gave it to him coiled and knotted.

Then, swinging round on his right side,
he flung it out some distance from the edge,
down into the depth of that abyss.

'Surely,' I said to myself, 'something new
and strange will answer this strange signal
the master follows with his eye.'

Al, how cautious we should be with those
who do not see our actions only,
but with their wisdom peer into our thoughts!

He said to me: 'Soon what I expect
and your mind only dreams of will appear.
Soon it shall appear before your eyes.'

To a truth that bears the face of falsehood
a man should seal his lips if he is able,
for it might shame him, through no fault of his,

¹⁴⁶ a cord: The meaning of this cord is uncertain; some suggest it is the cord worn by Franciscans and that Dante may have been connected to them thereby. The leopard represents fraud (Canto I).

but here I can't be silent. And by the strains
of this Comedy—so may they soon succeed
in finding favor—I swear to you, reader,

that I saw come swimming up
through that dense and murky air a shape
to cause amazement in the stoutest heart,

a shape most like a man's who, having plunged
to loose the anchor caught fast in a reef
or something other hidden in the sea, now rises,
reaching upward and drawing in his feet.

CANTO XVII

'Behold the beast with pointed tail, that leaps
past mountains, shatters walls and weapons!
Behold the one whose stretch afflicts the world!'

was how my guide began.
Then he signaled to the beast to come ashore
close to the border of our stony pathway.

And that foul effigy of fraud came forward,
beached its head and chest
but did not draw its tail up on the bank.

It had the features of a righteous man,
benevolent in countenance,
but all the rest of it was serpent.

It had forepaws, hairy to the armpits,
and back and chest and both its flanks
were painted and inscribed with rings and curlicues.

So many vivid colors Turk or Tartar never wove
in warp and woof or in embroidery on top,
nor were such colors patterned on Arachne's loom.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Arachne's loom: Arachne challenged Minerva (Athena) to a weaving contest; she lost and was changed into a spider.

As sometimes barges lie ashore,
partly in water, partly on the land,
and as among the guzzling Germans

the beaver sets itself to catch its prey,¹⁴⁸
so lay this worst of brutes upon the stony rim
that makes a boundary for the sandy soil.

Its length of tail lashed in the void;
twisting up its forked, envenomed tip,
armed like a scorpion's tail.

My leader said: 'Now we must change
direction for a moment till we reach
that evil beast stretched out down there.'

We descended, therefore, to our right,
and took ten steps along the edge to keep
our distance from the sand and flames.

And, when we reached the beast,
I see some people sitting on the sand
a short way off, near where it falls away.

Then the master said to me: 'So that nothing
in this circle escape your understanding,
go over and examine their condition.'

'Let your talk be brief.
While you are gone, I'll ask the beast
to lend us its strong shoulders.'

Thus, on the seventh circle's edge,
still farther out, I went alone
to where the downcast souls were seated.

Their grief came bursting from their eyes.
With restless hands they sought relief,
now from the flame and now from burning sand.

Not otherwise do dogs in summer gnaw and scratch,
now with muzzle, now with paw,
when flies or fleas or horseflies bite them.

¹⁴⁸ the beaver . . . prey: Beavers were thought to catch fish by dangling their tails in the water.

Although I searched some of the faces
of those on whom the painful fire descends,
54 I knew not one, but I could see

the pouches hanging from their necks
were different colors, each with its coat of arms.
57 On these they seemed to feast their eyes.

And when I came among them and looked closer,
on a yellow purse I could make out
60 a lion's countenance and form in blue.

Then, farther on, my wandering gaze
made out another crest, blood-red
63 marked by a goose more white than butter.

And one, who had a pregnant sow, in azure,
embossed on his white wallet,¹⁵⁸ said to me:
66 'What are you doing in this ditch?

'Get out of here. Wait, since you're still alive,
know that my neighbor Vitaliano¹⁵⁹
69 shall soon be seated to my left.

Among these Florentines, I come from Padua.
Many a time they deafen me with shouting:
72 'May the sovereign knight come soon,

¹⁵⁸ who brings the pouch with three goats on it!¹⁶⁰
Then he twisted his mouth and stuck out his tongue
75 like an ox that licks its nose.

And I, fearing my delay might anger him
who had warned me to keep my stay brief,
78 turned back and left those weary souls.

I found my leader mounted
on the shoulders of the savage beast.
81 He said to me: Now be strong and resolute.

¹⁵⁸ the pouches hanging . . . white wallet: Various coats of arms on the purses of Italian usurers.
¹⁵⁹ Vitaliano: From Padua, but otherwise unknown.
¹⁶⁰ who brings . . . goats on it: Biamonte, a prominent Florentine moneylender.

'From here on we descend such stairs as these.
You mount in front and I will take the middle
84 so that the tail may do no harm.'

As a man in a shivering-fit of quartan fever,
so ill his nails have lost all color,
87 trembles all over at the sight of shade,

so was I stricken at his words.
Rebuked by shame, which, in the presence
90 of a worthy master, makes a servant bold,

I mounted on those huge and ugly shoulders.
I wanted to say—though my voice did not come out
93 as I intended—'Make sure you hold me fast!

But he who had helped me many times before,
in other perils, clasped me in his arms
96 and steadied me as soon as I was mounted,

then said: 'Geryon,¹⁶¹ move on now. Let your circles
be wide and your descending slow.
99 Keep in mind your unaccustomed burden.'

As a bark backs slowly from its mooring,
so the beast backed off the ledge,
102 and when it felt itself adrift,

turned its tail to where its chest had been and,
extending it, made it wriggle like an eel's,
105 while with its paws it gathered in the air.

Phaeton,¹⁶² I think, felt no greater fear
when he released the reins and the whole sky
108 was scorched, as we still see,

nor wretched Icarus¹⁶³ when he felt the melting wax
unfeathering the wings along his back
111 and heard his father shout: 'Not that way!

¹⁶¹ Geryon: A winged, three-headed monster killed by Hercules.
¹⁶² Phaeton: Borrowed the chariot of the sun from his father, Apollo, and lost control of it. He scorched the earth and the heavens, creating the Milky Way.
¹⁶³ Icarus: The son of Daedalus, who attached wings to his son with wax; when Icarus flew too near the sun, the wax melted and Icarus fell into the sea.

than was my terror when I saw
 air everywhere around
 and all things gone from sight except the beast.

On it goes, swimming slowly, slowly
 wheeling, descending, but I feel only
 the wind in my face and blowing from below.

Now on our right I heard the torrent's hideous roar
 below us, so that I thrust my head forward
 and dared to look down the abyss.

Then I was even more afraid of being dropped,
 for I saw fire and heard wailing,
 and so, trembling, I hold on tighter with my legs.

And for the first time I became aware
 of our descent and wheeling when I saw
 the torments drawing closer all around me.

As the falcon that has long been on the wing—
 and, without sight of lure or bird
 makes the falconer cry out: 'Oh, you're coming down!'—

descends, weary, with many a wheeling,
 to where it set out swiftly, and alights,
 angry and sullen, far from its master,

so Geryon set us down at the bottom,
 at the very foot of the jagged cliff,
 and, disburdened of our persons,
 vanished like an arrow from the string.

CANTO XVIII

There is a place in Hell called Malebolge,¹⁵⁵
 fashioned entirely of iron-colored rock,
 as is the escarpment that encircles it.

At the very center of this malignant space
 there yawns a pit, extremely wide and deep.¹⁵⁶
 I will describe its plan all in due time.

¹⁵⁵ Malebolge: Italian for "evil pouches."

¹⁵⁶ a pit . . . deep: The ninth and last circle of Hell, seen in Cantos XXI through XXXIV.

A path that circles like a belt around the base
 of that high rock runs round the pit,
 its sides descending in ten ditches.

As where concentric moats surround a castle
 to guard its walls, their patterns clear
 and governed by a meaningful design,

in such a pattern were these ditches shaped.
 And, just as narrow bridges issue from the gates
 of fortresses to reach the farthest bank,

so ridges stretched from the escarpment
 down across the banks and ditches
 into the pit at which they end and join.

Dropped from Geryon's back, this was the place
 in which we found ourselves. The poet kept
 to the left and I came on behind him.

To our right I saw a suffering new to me,
 new torments, and new scourges,
 with whom the first ditch was replete.

The sinners in its depth were naked,
 those on our side of the center coming toward us,
 the others moving with us, but with longer strides,

just as, because the throngs were vast the year
 of Jubilee, the Romans had to find a way
 to let the people pass across the bridge,

so that all those on one side face the castle,
 heading over to Saint Peter's,¹⁵⁷
 these, on the other, heading toward the mount.

Here and there on the dark rock above them
 I watched horned demons armed with heavy scourges
 lashing them cruelly from behind.

¹⁵⁷ so that all those . . . toward the mount: The Jubilee of the church was instituted by Boniface VIII in 1300; one end of the bridge from the city to St. Peter's pointed toward the Castle of St. Angelo, the other end pointed to Mount Giordano.

Ah, how they made them pick their heels up
at the first stroke! You may be certain
no one waited for a second or a third.

While I went on my eye was caught
by one of them, and quickly I brought out:
'It seems to me I've seen that man before.'

And so I paused to make him out.
My gentle leader stopped with me,
and then allowed me to retrace my steps.

The scourged soul thought that he could hide
by lowering his face — to no avail.
I said: 'You there, with your eyes cast down,

'if I'm not mistaken in your features,
you're Venedico Caccianemico.¹⁵⁸
'What has brought you to such stinging torture?'

And he replied: 'Unwillingly I tell it,
moved only by the truth of what you've said,
which brings to mind the world that once I knew.

'It was I who urged Ghislabella
to do the will of that marquis,
no matter how the foul tale goes around.

'I'm not the only Bolognese here lamenting.
This place is so crammed with them
that not so many tongues have learned to say

"sipa" between the Savena and the Reno.¹⁵⁹
And if you'd like some confirmation,
bring our greedy dispositions back to mind.'

While he was speaking a demon struck him
with his lash and said: 'Away, pimpi!
there are no women here to trick.'

¹⁵⁸ Caccianemico: From a leading family of Bologna; he betrayed his sister Ghislabella to the marquis of Este.
¹⁵⁹ Savena . . . Reno: Two rivers bordering Bologna. Sipa is Bolognese for "yes."

Then I rejoined my escort. A few steps farther
and we came upon a place
where a ridge jutted from the bank.

This we ascended easily and,
turning to the right upon its jagged ledge,
we left behind their endless circling.

When we came to the point above the hollow
that makes a passage for the scourged,
my leader said: 'Stop, let them look at you,

'those other ill-born souls whose faces
you have not yet seen, since we have all
been moving in the same direction.

From the ancient bridge we eyed the band
advancing toward us on the other side,
driven with whips just like the first.

And the good master, without my asking, said:
'See that imposing figure drawing near.
He seems to shed no tears despite his pain.

'What regal aspect he still bears!
He is Jason, who by courage and by craft
deprived the men of Colchis of the ram.¹⁶⁰

'Then he ventured to the isle of Lemnos,
after those pitiless, bold women
put all the males among them to their death.

'There with signs of love and polished words
he deceived the young Hypsipyle,
who had herself deceived the other women.

'There he left her, pregnant and forlorn.
Such guilt condemns him to this torment,
and Medea too is thus avenged.

¹⁶⁰ Jason . . . the ram: Leader of the Argonauts' campaign to steal the Golden Fleece; he seduced and abandoned Hypsipyle, princess of Lemnos, after saving her father from Lemnos's women. He also seduced Medea, princess of Colchis, and then abandoned her.

100 'With him go all who practice such deceit.
101 Let that be all we know of this first ditch
102 and of the ones it clenches in its jaws.'

103 Now we had come to where the narrow causeway
104 intersects the second ridge to form
105 a buttress for another arch.

106 From here we heard the whimpering of people
107 one ditch away, snuffling with their snouts
108 and beating on themselves with their own palms.

109 The banks, made slimy by a sticky vapor
110 from below, were coated with a mould
111 offending eyes and nose.

112 The bottom is so deep we could see nothing
113 unless we climbed to the crown of the arch,
114 just where the ridge is highest.

115 We went up, and from there I could see,
116 in a ditch below, people plunged in excrement
117 that could have come from human privies.

118 Searching the bottom with my eyes I saw
119 a man, his head so smeared with shit
120 one could not tell if he were priest or layman.

121 He railed: 'What whets your appetite to stare at me
122 more than all the others in their filth?
123 And I answered: 'The fact, if I remember right,

124 'that once I saw you when your hair was dry—
125 and you are Alessio Interminei of Lucca,¹⁶¹
126 'That's why I eye you more than all the rest.'

127 Then he, beating on his pate:
128 'I am immersed down here for the flattery
129 with which my tongue was never cloyed.'

130 And then my leader said to me: 'Try to thrust
131 your face a little farther forward,
132 to get a better picture of the features

¹⁶¹ Alessio . . . of Lucca: His story is not known.

133 'of that foul, disheveled wench down there,
134 scratching herself with her filthy nails.
135 Now she squats and now she's standing up.

136 She is 'Thais, the whore who, when her lover asked:
137 "Have I found favor with you?"
138 answered, "Oh, beyond all measure!"¹⁶²
139 And let our eyes be satisfied with that.'

CANTO XIX

1 O Simon Magus!¹⁶³ O wretches of his kind,
2 greedy for gold and silver,
3 who prostitute the things of God

4 that should be brides of goodness!
5 Now must the trumpet sound for you,
6 because your place is there in that third ditch.

7 We had come to where the next tomb lay,
8 having climbed to the point upon the ridge
9 that overlooks the middle of the trench.

10 O Supreme Wisdom, what great art you show
11 in Heaven, on earth, and in the evil world,
12 and what true justice does your power dispense!

13 Along the sides and bottom I could see
14 the livid stone was pierced with holes,
15 all round and of a single size.

16 They seemed to me as wide and deep
17 as those in my beautiful Saint John¹⁶⁴
18 made for the priests to baptize in.

19 one of which, not many years ago,
20 I broke to save one nearly drowned in it—
21 and let this be my seal, to undecieve all men.

¹⁶² when her lover asked . . . all measure: An incident in a play by the Roman playwright Terence (190?-160? B.C.E.).

¹⁶³ Simon Magus: In the Bible, Simon Magus offered to buy spiritual powers from the Apostles (Acts 8:9-24).

¹⁶⁴ The ceiling of any spiritual good, like a church position, is known as a saint.

¹⁶⁵ Saint John: The baptistry of Florence had several fonts; Dante was apparently baptized in one of them, although the drowning incident has not been explained.

From the mouth of each stuck out
a sinner's feet and legs up to the thighs
24 while all the rest stayed in the hole.

They all had both their soles on fire.
It made their knee-joints writhe so hard
27 they would have severed twisted vines or ropes.

As flames move only on the surface
of oily matter caught on fire,
30 so these flames flickered heel to toe.

'Who is that, master, who in his torment
wriggles more than any of his fellows
33 and is licked by redder flames?'

And he: 'If you like, I'll take you down
along the lower bank¹⁶⁵ and you will learn,
36 from him, his life and his misdeeds.'

And I: 'Whatever pleases you is my desire.
You are my lord and know I do your will.
39 You know, too, what I leave unsaid.'

Then we came to the fourth embankment,
turned and descended on our left
42 into a narrow bottom pierced with holes.

The good master clasped me to his side
and did not set me down until we came
45 to the pit of one lamenting with his shanks.

'Whoever you are, with your upper parts below,¹⁶⁶
planted like a post, you wretched soul,
48 said I, come out with something, if you can.'

I stood there like a friar who confesses
a treacherous assassin. Once done,
51 he calls the friar back to stay his death.

¹⁶⁵ the lower bank: The Malebolge slants toward the center, so that the inner edge of the ditch has an easier slope than the outer edge.

¹⁶⁶ with your upper parts below: Assassins were buried alive with their heads downward.

And he cried out: 'Is that you already,
are you here already, Boniface?
54 By several years the writing lied to me.

'Are you so swiftly sated with those profits
for which you did not fear to take by guile
57 the beautiful Lady and to do her outrage?'¹⁶⁷

I became like those who stand there mocked,
not comprehending what is said to them,
60 and thus not knowing what to say in turn.

Then Virgil said: 'Tell him right away,
'I'm not the one, I'm not the one you think.'
63 I gave the answer I was told to give.

At that the spirits feet began to writhe.
Then, sighing, with a plaintive voice, he said:
66 'What is it then you want from me?

'If you are so keen to learn my name
that you descended from the bank for it,
69 know that I was cloaked in the great mantle.

'But in truth I was a son of the she-bear¹⁶⁸
and so avid was I to advance my cubs
72 I filled my purse as now I fill this hole.

'Beneath my head are crushed the others
who practiced simony before me,
75 now flattened into fissures in the rock.

'In turn I, too, shall be thrust lower down
as soon as he arrives whom I mistook you for
78 when I called out my hasty question.

'But the time I have already roasted my feet,
standing here upside down, is already longer
81 than he'll be planted with his feet on fire.

¹⁶⁷ the beautiful Lady . . . her outrage: The speaker, Pope Nicholas III (r. 1277-80), in 1300 had been in Hell for twenty years, with his forknowledge, he mistakes Dante for Boniface VIII, who did not die until 1303. The Lady is the church.

¹⁶⁸ son of the she-bear: Nicholas was an Orsini, whose crest was a she-bear.

'For after him shall come a lawless shepherd¹⁶⁹
from the west, one even fouler in his deeds,
fit to be the cover over him and me.

A new Jason shall he be, the one of whom
we read in Maccabees,¹⁷⁰ and even as the king indulged
Jason, so the king of France shall deal with him.

I do not know if then I was too bold
when I answered him in just this strain:
'Please tell me, how much treasure

'did our Lord insist on from Saint Peter
before He gave the keys into his keeping?
Surely He asked no more than "Follow me,"

'nor did Peter, or the others, take gold or silver
from Marthias when he was picked by lot
to fill the place lost by the guilty soul.¹⁷¹

'Stay there then, for you are justly punished,
guarding well those gains, ill-gotten,
that made you boldly take your stand against King Charles.¹⁷²

'And were it not that I am still restrained
by the reverence I owe the keys supreme,
which once you held in the happy life above,

'I would resort to even harsher words
because your avarice afflicts the world,
trampling down the good and raising up the wicked.

'Shepherds like you the Evangelist had in mind
when he saw the one that sits upon the waters
committing fornication with the kings,

¹⁶⁹ a lawless shepherd: Pope Clement V (1305-14), he received support from King Philip of France because he agreed to move the Papacy from Rome to Avignon, France.

¹⁷⁰ A new Jason . . . Maccabees: Jason became the High Priest of the Jews by bribing the king with silver (2 Maccabees 4:7).

¹⁷¹ Marthias . . . soul: Marthias was picked to replace Judas among the Apostles (Acts 1:15-26).

¹⁷² your stand . . . King Charles: Nicholas was supposed to have been bribed to join a conspiracy against Charles of Anjou (1226-1285), king of Sicily.

'she that was born with seven heads
and from ten horns derived her strength
so long as virtue pleased her bridegroom.¹⁷³

'You have wrought yourselves a god of gold and silver.
How then do you differ from those who worship idols
except they worship one and you a hundred?

'Ah, Constantine, to what evil you gave birth,
not by your conversion, but by the dowry
that the first rich Father had from you!¹⁷⁴

And while I sang such notes to him,
whether gnawed by anger or by conscience,
he kicked out hard with both his feet.

Truly I believe this pleased my leader,
he listened with a look of such contentment
to the sound of the truthful words I spoke.

Therefore, he caught me in his arms
and, when he had me all upon his breast,
remounted by the path he had descended.

nor did he tire of holding me so close
but bore me to the summit of the arch
that crosses from the fourth dike to the fifth.

Here gently he set down his burden,
gently on account of the steep, rough ridge
that would have made hard going for a goat.
And there, before me, another valley opened.

CANTO XX

Of strange new pain I now must make my verse,
giving matter to the canto numbered twenty
of this first *canzone*, which tells of those submerged.

¹⁷³ bridegroom: Here, imagery from the Book of Revelation (17:1-3) is applied to the Papacy. The bridegroom is the pope; the seven heads are the sacraments, and the ten horns are the commandments.

¹⁷⁴ the dowry . . . from you: Based on a forgery called the Donation of Constantine, it was believed in Dante's time that the Roman emperor Constantine, when he removed his government to Byzantium (fourth century), endowed the Roman Church under Pope Sylvester I ("the first rich Father") with temporal power in the West, and therefore the mandate for acquiring wealth.

By now I was all eagerness to see
what sighs the chasm, bathed in tears
of anguish, would disclose.

I saw people come along that curving canyon
in silence, weeping; their pace the pace of slow
processions chanting litanies in the world.

As my gaze moved down along their shapes,
I saw into what strange contortions
their chins and chests were twisted.

Their faces were reversed upon their shoulders
so that they came on walking backward,
since seeing forward was denied them.

Perhaps some time by stroke of palsy
a person could be twisted in that way,
but I've not seen it nor do I think it likely.

Reader, so may God let you gather fruit
from reading this, imagine, if you can,
how I could have kept from weeping

when I saw, up close, our human likeness
so contorted that tears from their eyes
ran down their buttocks, down into the cleft.

Yes, I wept, leaning against a spur
of the rough crag, so that my escort said:
Are you still witless as the rest?

Here piety lives when pity is quite dead.¹⁷⁵
Who is more impious than one who thinks
that God brings passion to His judgment?

Raise your head! Raise it and look on him
under whose feet the earth gaped open
in sight of all the shouting Thebans.

¹⁷⁵ Here piety . . . quite dead: This complex line suggests that there should be no sympathy or pity for the damned; the next two lines state that God's judgment is to be trusted. The irony here is that the damned are Dante's creation.

"Where are you rushing, Amphiaras?¹⁷⁶ Why
do you leave the war? Nor did he stop his plunge
until he fell to Minos, who lays hold on all.

See how his shoulder-blades are now his chest.
Because he aspired to see too far ahead
he looks behind and treads a backward path.

See Tiresias,¹⁷⁷ who changed his likeness
when he was turned from male to female,
transformed in every member.

Later on he had to touch once more
the two twined serpents with his rod
before he could regain his manly plumes.

He who puts his back to that one's belly is Aruns.¹⁷⁸
In the hills of Luni—where the Carrarese,
who shelter in the valley, work the earth—

he lived inside a cave in that white marble,
from which he could observe the sea and stars
in a wide and boundless prospect.

And that female whose backward-flowing tresses
fall upon her breasts so they are hidden,
and has her hairy parts on that same side,

was Manto,¹⁷⁹ who searched through many lands
before she settled in the place where I was born—
for just a moment hear me out on this.

After her father had parted from this life
and the city of Bacchus¹⁸⁰ was enslaved,
she wandered for a time about the world.

Thebes

¹⁷⁶ Amphiaras: A Greek priest who hid himself in the battle of the Seven against Thebes and was swallowed up by the earth.

¹⁷⁷ Tiresias: The famous oracle from Thebes. Once he was transformed into a woman when he saw two snakes coupling; seven years later he was changed into a man again when he saw the same scene. Because he had experienced both sexes, he was asked to settle an argument between Zeus and Hera about whether males or females have more sexual pleasure. He was blinded by Hera when he said women, but was rewarded with prophetic powers by Zeus.

¹⁷⁸ Aruns: An Etruscan soothsayer who predicted Caesar's victory in the civil war.

¹⁷⁹ Manto: Daughter of Tiresias, a Theban soothsayer.

High in fair Italy, at the foot of the alps
that form a border with Germany near Tyrol,
lies a lake they call Benaco.¹⁵⁰

'By a thousand springs and more, I think,
the region between Garda, Val Camonica, and Pennino'¹⁵¹
is bathed by waters settling in that lake.

'There is an island in its middle
that the pastors of Trent, Brescia, and Verona,
should they pass that way, would bless.¹⁵²

'Peschiera, a strong and splendid fortress
against the Brescians and the Bergamese,
sits on the lowest point of land around.

'There all the water Benaco's bosom cannot hold
flows over and descends into a river
running through green pastures.

'This river, as it leaves the lake
and all the way to Governolo, is called
the Mincio until it falls into the Po.

'Before that, after but the briefest run,
it levels off and spreads to make a swamp
sometimes scarce of water in the summer.

'When she passed that way, the cruel virgin
saw dry land in the middle of the marsh
where no one lived and no one tilled the soil.

'There, to avoid all company, she stopped,
with only servants, to ply her magic arts.
There she lived and left her empty body.

'Later on, the people scattered round about
collected there because it was protected
by the marsh on every side.

¹⁵⁰ Benaco: The present Lake Garda.

¹⁵¹ Garda . . . Pennino: Two towns and a valley (Val Camonica) below the lake.

¹⁵² an island . . . would bless: A chapel on the island was under the jurisdiction of three bishops.

'They built the city over those dead bones
and, after her who first had claimed the spot,
named it Mantua, with no spells or incantations.

'Once, its population was more plentiful,
before the foolishness of Casaliot
bore the brunt of Pinamonte's guile.¹⁵³

'I charge you, therefore, should you ever hear
my city's origin described another way,
allow no lie to falsify the truth.'

And I: 'Master, to me your explanation
is so convincing and so takes my trust
that any other tale would seem spent embers.

'But tell me, among these people who are passing,
if you see any worthy of my notice,
for my thoughts keep going back to them alone.'

'Then he replied: 'The one whose beard
falls from his jowls onto his swarthy shoulders
was—when Greece was so deprived of males

'that scarcely one was left, even in the cradle—
a soothsayer, Ataulis, along with Calchas,
he told the favoring time for setting sail.¹⁵⁴

'Eurypylus was his name, and thus he is sung
in certain verses of my lofty tragedy,¹⁵⁵
as you know very well, who know it all.

'That other, with the skinny shanks,
was Michael Scot,¹⁵⁶ who truly understood
the way to play the game of magic tricks.

¹⁵³ Pinamonte's guile: Pinamonte, a Ghibelline, persuaded Count Casaliot, a Guelph, to exile the nobles of Mantua; Pinamonte then seized Casaliot's power in 1272.

¹⁵⁴ told . . . setting sail: The Greeks used two oracles, Calchas and Eurypylus, to determine when they should set sail for Troy and the Trojan War.

¹⁵⁵ my lofty tragedy: Here Virgil calls his *Aeneid* a tragedy, an epic told in a refined style.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Scot: A thirteenth-century Scottish scholar who spent time in Frederick II's court in Italy.

'See Guido Bonatti. See *Asdente*,¹⁸⁷ who now regrets
not having worked his leather and his thread —
120 but he repents too late.

'See the wretched women who gave up needle,
spool, and spindle to take up fortune-telling,
123 casting spells with images¹⁸⁸ and herbs.

'But come now, for Cain, with his thorns,
already stands above the border of both hemispheres
126 and touches the waves below Seville,¹⁸⁹

'and last night was the moon already round.
Surely you recall it did not harm you
the other night in the deep wood.'¹⁹⁰

130 These were his words while we were moving on.

CANTO XXI

Thus from one bridge to the next we came
until we reached its highest point, speaking
3 of things my Comedy does not care to sing.

We stopped to look into the next crevasse
of Malebolge and heard more useless weeping.
6 All I could see was an astounding darkness.

As in the arsenal of the Venetians,¹⁹¹
in wintertime they boil the viscous pitch
9 to caulk their unsound ships

because they cannot sail — one rebuilds
his ship, while still another plugs
12 the seams of his, weathered by many a voyage.

¹⁸⁷ Bonatti . . . *Asdente*: A shoemaker from Parma, *Asdente* was noted for his soothsaying. Bonatti was the private astrologer to Guido of Montefeltro (Canto XXVII).

¹⁸⁸ casting spells with images: The piercing of dolls, for example.

¹⁸⁹ Cain . . . below Seville: In Christian folklore, Cain was placed in the moon after murdering his brother, Abel. Cain with his thorns is like the man in the moon, which is setting on the western horizon beyond Spain. It is early Saturday morning in Jerusalem.

¹⁹⁰ arsenal of the Venetians: The Venetian arsenal, one of the largest in Europe, was also a shipyard where weapons were made and stored.

one hammers at the stern, another at the stern,
this one makes the oars, that one twists the ropes
15 for rigging, another patches jib and mainsail —

so, not with fire, but by the art of God,
a thick pitch boiled there,
18 sticking to the banks on either side.

I saw the pitch but still saw nothing in it
except the bubbles raised up by the boiling,
21 the whole mass swelling and then settling back.

While I stared fixedly upon the seething pitch,
my leader cried: 'Look out, look out!'
24 and drew me to him, away from where I stood.

Then I turned like a man, intent
on making out what he must run from,
27 undone by sudden fear,

who does not slow his flight for all his looking back:
just so I caught a glimpse of some dark devil
30 running toward us up the ledge.

Ah, how ferocious were his looks
and fierce his gesturing,
33 with wings spread wide and nimble feet!

One of his shoulders, which were high and pointed,
was laden with the haunches of a sinner
36 he held hooked by the tendons of his heels.

From our bridge he said: 'O Malebranche,¹⁹²
here is one of Santa Zita's Elders,¹⁹³
39 Thrust him under, while I head back for more

to that city, where there's such a fine supply.
Every man there — except Bonturo¹⁹⁴ — is a swindler.
42 There money turns a No into an Ay.'

¹⁹² Malebranche: Italian for 'evil-class,' the name for devils.

¹⁹³ Elders: Elders from Lucca, here named after Lucca's patron saint, who died in 1225.

¹⁹⁴ Bonturo: A notorious swindler in Lucca, still living in 1300.

He flung him down and turned back up
the stony ridge. Never did a masiiff
set loose to chase a thief make greater haste.

The sinner sank, then rose again, his face all pitch.
Then demons, under cover of the bridge, cried out:
48 'This is no place for the Holy Visage!'¹⁹⁴

'Here you swim a different stroke than in the Serchio!'¹⁹⁵
Unless you'd like to feel our hooks,
51 don't let yourself stick out above the pitch.'

Then, with a hundred hooks and more,
they ripped him, crying: 'Here you must do your dance
54 in secret and pilfer — can you? — in the dark.'

In just the same way cooks command their scullions
to take their skewers and prod the meat down
57 in the cauldron, lest it float back up.

Then my good master said: 'Squat down
behind that rock and find some cover
60 so that they do not see that you are here.

'As for any outrage they may do me,
have no fear. I know this place and had
63 exactly such a scuffle here before.'¹⁹⁶

After he had crossed the bridge
and reached the other bank,
66 he had to show how resolute he was:

With all the rage and uproar
of dogs that rush upon a beggar —
69 who quickly starts to beg where he has stopped —

they swarmed on him from underneath the bridge
with threatening hooks. But he cried out:
72 'Wait! Let none of you do harm!

¹⁹⁴ the Holy Visage: Refers to an ancient Byzantine crucifix in the Cathedral of Lucca.

¹⁹⁵ Serchio: A river near Lucca.

¹⁹⁶ such a scuffle . . . before: In Canto VIII, Virgil and Dante had trouble with fallen angels when trying to enter Dis.

'Before you grapple at me with your hooks
let one of you come forth to hear me out.
75 Then take counsel, whether to use your claws.'

All cried: 'Let Malacoda'¹⁹⁷ go. One moved —
the rest stood still — and he came forward,
78 grumbling: 'This won't do him any good.'

'Consider, Malacoda,' said my master,
'whether you would see me come this far
81 unstopped by all your hindering

'without the will of God and favoring fate?
Let us proceed, for it is willed in Heaven
84 that I guide another down this savage way.'

Then his pride was so abashed that he let drop
the billhook to his feet, saying to the others:
87 'Enough, let no one touch him.'

And my leader said to me: 'You there, cowering
among the broken boulders of the bridge,
90 now you may come back to me in safety.'

At that I stirred and hastened to him.
Then the devils all came surging forward
93 so that I feared they might not keep the truce.

Just so do I recall the troops
afraid to leave Caprona'¹⁹⁸ with safe-conduct,
96 finding themselves among so many enemies.

I drew my body up against my leader
but kept my eyes fixed on their faces,
99 which were far from friendly.

They aimed their hooks, and one said to another:
'How about I nick him on the rump?'
102 And the other answered: 'Sure, let him have one.'

¹⁹⁷ Malacoda: Italian for "evil-tail"

¹⁹⁸ Caprona: A castle near Pisa that was seized by Florentine and Luccan troops in 1298.

But the demon who was speaking with my leader
turned round at once and said:
105 'Easy does it, Scarniglione!'

And then to us: 'You can't continue farther
down this ridge, for the sixth arch
108 lies broken into pieces at the bottom.

'If you desire to continue on,
then make your way along this rocky ledge.
111 Nearby's another crag that yields a passage.

'Yesterday, at a time five hours from now,
it was a thousand two hundred sixty-six years
114 since the road down here was broken.¹⁹⁹

'I'm sending some men of mine along that way
to see if anyone is out to take the air.
117 Go with them—they won't hurt you.'

'Step forward, Alichino, Calabritto,²⁰⁰
he continued, 'and you Cagnazzo,
120 and let Barbariccia lead the squad.

'Let Libicocco come too, and Draghignazzo,
Ciriatto with his tusks, and Graffiacane,
123 Farfarello, and madcap Rubicante.²⁰¹

'Have a good look around the boiling glue.
Keep these two safe as far as the next crag
126 that runs all of a piece above the dens.'

'Oh, master, I said, 'I don't like what I see.
Please, let us find our way without an escort,
129 if you know how. As for me, I do not want one.

'If you are as vigilant as ever,
don't you see they grind their teeth
132 while with their furrowed brows they threaten harm?'

¹⁹⁹ Yesterday . . . broken: Dante dates the earthquake accompanying the Crucifixion at noon on Good Friday, 34 C.E., 1266 years before 1300. It is now 7 A.M. on Holy Saturday.

²⁰⁰ Libicocco . . . Rubicante: Insulting names for demons. Graffiacane, for instance, means 'dog-scratcher.'

And he to me: 'Don't be afraid.
Let them grind on to their hearts' content—
135 they do it for the stewing wretches.

Off they set along the left-hand bank,
but first each pressed his tongue between his teeth
to blow a signal to their leader,
139 and he had made a trumpet of his asshole.

CANTO XXII

I have seen the cavalry break camp,
prepare for an attack, make their muster
3 and at times fall back to save themselves.

I have seen outriders in your land,
O Aretines,²⁰¹ I have seen raiding parties,
6 tournaments of teams, hand-to-hand jousts

begun with bells, trumpets, or drums,
with signals from the castle,
9 with summons of our own and those from foreign lands.

But truly never to such outlandish fanfare
have I seen horsemen move, or infantry,
12 or ship set sail at sign from land or star.

On we went, escorted by ten demons.
What savage company! But, as they say,
15 'in church with saints, with guzzlers in the tavern.'

My attention was fixed upon the pitch
to note each detail of this gulch
18 and of the people poaching in it.

Like dolphins, when they arch their backs
above the water, giving sailors warning
21 to prepare to save their ship,²⁰²

²⁰⁰ outriders . . . land, O Aretines: A reference to Aretzo's defeat by Florence in 1198.

²⁰² Like dolphins . . . ship: Dolphins were believed to warn ships about approaching storms.

so from time to time, to ease his pain,
one of the sinners would show his back
and, quick as lightning, hide it once again.

And just as in a ditch at water's edge
frogs squat with but their snouts in sight,
their bodies and their legs all hidden,

so were the sinners scattered everywhere.
But they, at the approach of Barbariccia,
withdrew back down beneath the boiling

There I saw — and my heart still shudders at it —
one who lingered, as it can happen
that one frog stays while yet another plunges,

and Graffiaccane, who was nearest him,
caught a billhook in his pitchy locks
and hauled him out, looking like an otter.

By now I knew their names,
since I had noted these when they were chosen
and when they called to one another.

'Set your claws to work, Rubicante,
see you rip his skin off;
shouted all the accursed crew together.

And I: 'Master, if you can do it,
find out the name of this poor wretch
caught in the clutches of his enemies.'

My leader got up close beside him
and asked him where he came from. He replied:
'I was born in the kingdom of Navarre,²⁰³

'My mother, who had conceived me by a wastrel —
destroyer of himself and all his goods —
put me in service with a man of rank.

²⁰³ I was born . . . Navarre: This speaker's identity is unknown; Navarre is the Basque territory in Spain.

'Then I joined the retinue of worthy Thibaut;²⁰⁴
there first I set myself to taking bribes,
for which I pay the reckoning in this heat.'

And Ciriatto, from whose jaw curved up
on either side a tusk, like the wild boar's,
made him feel how one of these could rip.

The mouse had fallen in with wicked cats.
But Barbariccia blocked them with his arms
and said: 'Stand back and let me jab him,'

then turned to face my master:
'Speak up, if you are eager to learn more,
before I let him have a mangling.'

And my leader: 'Of the other sinners in the pitch,
tell me, is anyone Italian?'
And he: 'I just now came from one

who hailed from near those parts. I wish
I still were with him in the pitch —
then I'd have no fear of hook or claw.'

Then Libicocco said: 'This is just too much;
caught him with his grapple by the arm
and, ripping, gouged out a hunk of flesh.

Draghignazzo, too, wanted to catch him up,
by the legs, at which their captain
wheeled round on them with an ugly look.

After their fury had subsided,
my leader seized this chance to ask
the one still staring at his wound:

'Who is the one you spoke of, from whom
you parted so unwisely when you came ashore?'
And he replied: 'It was Fra Gontia

²⁰⁴ Thibaut: Thibaut II of Navarre (c. 1253–1270).

of Gallura, a vessel full of fraud,³⁰⁵
 who had his master's enemies in hand
 but dealt with them so each one sings his praises.

He took their money and discreetly let them off,
 as he himself admits. And in his other actions
 he was no small-time swindler but a king.

Don Michel Zanche of Logudoro³⁰⁶
 keeps company with him and, when speaking
 of Sardegna, their tongues are never weary.

'Oh, look at that one there, gnashing his teeth! —
 I would say more, but I'm afraid that demon's
 getting set to give my mange a scratching.'

And the great marshal, turning to Farfarello,
 who was rolling his eyes, ready to strike,
 said: 'Back off, you filthy bird!'

'If you would care to see or hear,
 the frightened spirit then began again,
 'Tuscans or Lombards, I can make some come.

'But let the Malebranche stand away
 so that the sinners have no fear of vengeance,
 and, keeping to my place right here,

'for one of me, I will make seven come
 if I whistle, as is our custom
 when one of us pulls free out of the pitch.'

At this Cagnazzo lifted up his snout and said,
 shaking his head: 'Hear the cunning stunt
 he has contrived to throw himself back in!'

And he, with artifice in store, replied:
 'I must indeed be cunning if I procure
 still greater anguish for my friends.'

³⁰⁵ *Fra Gomita* . . . *fraud*: A friar who was judge of Gallura, a division of Sardinia; he was hanged for selling freedom to prisoners.
³⁰⁶ *Don Michel* . . . *Logudoro*: judge of Logudoro, a division of Sardinia.

Alichino couldn't stand this any more and said,
 in opposition to the others: 'If you dive
 back in I won't pursue you on the run —

'oh no! I'll beat my wings above the pitch.
 Let's leave the ridge and hide behind the bank.
 We'll see if you alone can take us on.'³⁰⁷

Now, reader, you shall hear strange sport.
 All turned their backs to where the sinner stood,
 he first who'd most opposed the plan.

The Navarrese chose his moment well,
 planted his feet and in a second
 leaped and escaped from their designs.

At this they all were angry at their blunder,
 but most of all the one whose fault it was,
 so that he darted up and cried: 'Now you are caught!'

It did him little good, for even wings
 could not catch up with terror: the sinner dove
 and the devil turned up his breast in flight,

just as the wild duck, when the falcon nears,
 dives for the bottom, and the bird of prey
 must fly back up, angry and outsmarted.

Calabrina, furious at this trick,
 was winging close behind him, eager for the sinner
 to break away as an excuse to scuffle,

and, since the barrator had vanished,
 he turned his claws against his fellow
 and came to grips with him above the ditch.

But the other was indeed a full-fledged hawk,
 fierce with his talons, and the pair of them
 went tumbling down into the scalding pond.

³⁰⁷ *Let's leave* . . . *us on*: Using the embankment as a screen, they are attempting to cross to the inside edge of the ditch that overlooks the next bogia.

The heat unclutched them in a moment,
but they had so beguiled their wings
there was no way to rise above the pitch.

Barbariccia, lamenting with the rest,
had four of them fly to the other bank,
each with his hook in hand, and in no time

on this side and on that they clambered down
to their posts, reaching out their grapples
to the pitch-trapped pair, already cooked to a crust.
And that is how we left them in that broil.

CANTO XXIII

Silent, alone, and unescorted
we went on, one in front, the other following,
as Friars Minor walk along the roads.

The brawl played out before our eyes
put me in mind of Aesop's fable
in which he told the tale of frog and mouse,²⁰⁶

for 'issa' and 'mo' are not more like in meaning
than one case and the other, if we compare
with circumspection their beginnings and their ends.

Just as one thought issues from another,
so, from the first, another now was born
that made me twice as fearful as before.

I thought, 'It's our fault they have been cheated,
and with such hurt and shame
I'm sure it must enrage them.

'If rage is added to their malice,
they will pursue us still more cruelly
than the hound that sets his fangs into a hare.'

²⁰⁶ the tale of frog and mouse: A fable wrongly ascribed to Aesop (sixth century? B.C.E.) about a frog who gives a ride across a stream to a mouse, tries to drown the mouse, but is seized by a kite (a hawk-like bird) while the mouse goes free.

²⁰⁷ 'issa' and 'mo': In Italian dialects, both words mean "now."

I could feel my scalp go taut with fear
and kept my thoughts fixed just behind me
as I spoke: 'Master, can't you quickly

'hide yourself and me? I am in terror
of the Malebranche; I sense them there behind us,
imagine them so clear I almost hear them.'

And he: 'If I were made of leaded glass^a
I could not reflect your outward likeness
in less time than I grasp the one inside you.

'Just now your thought commingled with my own,
alike in attitude and aspect,
so that of both I've formed a single plan.

'If the slope there to the right allows us
to make our way into the other ditch,
we shall escape the chase we both envision.'

Before he finished telling me his plan
I saw them coming, wings outspread,
closing in to catch us.

My leader in a moment snatched me up,
like a mother who, awakened by the hubbub
before she sees the flames that burn right near her,

snatches up her child and flees,
and, more concerned for him than for herself,
does not delay to put a shift on.

Down from the rim of that stony bank,
supine, he slid along the sloping rock
that forms one border of the next crevasse.

Never did water, as it nears the paddles,
rush down along the sluices
cut through earth to turn a millwheel

more swiftly than my master down that bank,
bearing me along clasped to his breast
as if I were his child, not his companion.

No sooner had he touched the bottom with his feet
than the devils were above us on the ridge.
54 Yet now we had no cause for feeling fear,

for high Providence, which made them
wardens of the fifth crevasse,
57 deprives them of the power to leave it.

Down there we came upon a lacquered people
who made their round, in tears, with listless steps.
60 They seemed both weary and defeated.

The cloaks they wore had cowls that fell
over their eyes, cut like the capes
63 made for the monks at Cluny.²¹⁰

Gilded and dazzling on the outside,
within they are of lead, so ponderous
66 that those imposed by Frederick would seem but straw.²¹¹

Oh what a toilsome cloak to wear forever!
Once more we turned to the left, then went along
69 beside them, intent upon their wretched wailing.

Their burden made that weary people
move so slowly we had new companions
72 each time we put one foot before the other.

And I said to my leader: 'Cast your eyes
this way and that as we walk on.
75 See if you know the names or deeds of any.'

And one of them, hearing my Tuscan speech,
cried out behind us: 'Stay your feet,
78 you who race through this sullen air.'

'I perhaps can answer what you asked.'
At that my leader turned around to say:
81 'Wait a moment,' then continue at his pace.

²¹⁰ monks at Cluny: A large monastery in France whose monks were known for their luxurious wear.
²¹¹ those imposed . . . straw: A story attributed to Frederick II (Canto X) that he had traitors wrapped in lead coats that were then melted on them.

I stopped and noticed two whose looks
showed haste of mind to reach me,
84 but their load and the narrow way detained them.

When they came near they looked at me askance
for a while, without a word,
87 until they turned to one another, saying:

'The way his throat moves, this one must be alive.
And if they are dead, what gives them the right
90 to go uncovered by the heavy stole?'

and then to me: 'O Tuscan, who have come
to this assembly of sad hypocrites,
93 do not disdain to tell us who you are.'

'In the great city, by the fair river Arno,
I said to them, 'I was born and raised,
96 and I am here in the body that was always mine.

'But who are you in whom I see distilled
the misery running down your cheeks in tears?
99 And what is the grief you bear that glitters so?'

And one of them answered: 'Our golden cloaks
are made of lead, and they're so dense,
102 like scales we creak beneath their weight.'

'We were Jovial Friars,²¹² born in Bologna.
My name was Catalano, his, Loderingo.²¹³
105 Your city made the two of us a pair,

'where usually a single man was chosen.
to keep the peace within, and we were such
108 that all around Gardingo the ruins can be seen.'

I began: 'O Friars, your evil deeds . . .
but said no more, for one there caught my eye,
111 fixed cross-wise to the ground by three short stakes.

²¹² Jovial Friars: Knights of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a military order founded in 1261 to protect the weak; it was known for its easy life.

²¹³ Catalano . . . Loderingo: Two men who helped found the friars and who were appointed joint governors in Florence in 1266; they were later charged with corruption. The quarter of Florence called the Gardingo was destroyed by a civil war caused by the friars.

Seeing me, he withied all over,
blowing sighs into his beard,
and Fra Catalano, observing this, said:

114 'That man you see nailed down'²¹⁴
advised the Pharisees it was the better course
117 that one man should be martyred for the people.

'He is stretched out naked, as you see,
across the path and he must feel
120 the weight of each who passes.

121 'Just so his father-in-law is racked with us
down here and with the others of the council'²¹⁵
123 that was a seed of evil for the Jews.'

I saw that Virgil marveled at the sight
of this shape stretched as on a cross,
126 so ignoble in his eternal exile.

Then he addressed the friar with these words:
'May it please you, if it is permitted,
129 to say if on our right there is a passage

130 by which we two might leave this place
without requiring help from some black angels
132 to pluck us from these depths.'

And he replied: 'Nearer than you hope there lies
a rocky ridge that crosses all the savage valleys
135 from the farthest circle inward.

'It has fallen only here and fails to reach across.
You can clamber up the sloping rubble
138 that lies upon the bottom and piles up along the side.'

My leader stood a while, his head bent down, then said:
'He who rips the sinners in the other ditch
141 misled us in his picture of this place.'

²¹⁴ 'That man . . . nailed down' Caiaphas, the high priest under Pontius Pilate; he advised that Jesus be crucified (John 18:49-50).

²¹⁵ 'his father-in-law . . . others of the council' Annas, 'father-in-law' to Caiaphas, along with the Jewish Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews in Palestine.

And the friar: 'At one time in Bologna I heard tell
of the Devil's many vices, and I heard
144 he is a liar and the father of all lies.'

At that my leader stalked off with long strides,
a moment's look of anger on his face.
And so I left those overburdened souls
148 to follow in the imprints of his cherished feet.

CANTO XXIV

In that season of the youthful year²¹⁶
when the sun cools his locks beneath Aquarius
3 and the dark already nears but half the day,

and when the hoarfrost copies out upon the fields
the very image of her snowy sister —
6 although her pen-point is not sharp for long —

the peasant, short of fodder, rises,
looks out, and sees the countryside
9 turned white, at which he slaps his thigh.

goes back indoors, grumbling here and there
like a wretch who knows not what to do,
12 then goes outside again and is restored to hope,

and, seeing that the world has changed its face
in that brief time, he now picks up his crook
15 and drives his sheep to pasture.

Thus the master caused me to lose heart
when I saw how troubled was his brow
18 and just as quickly came the poultice to the wound.

for no sooner had we reached the broken bridge
than he turned to me with that gentle glance
21 I first saw at the mountain's foot.

He looked with care upon the ruin,
took thought, chose a plan of action,
24 then opened out his arms and took me in them.

²¹⁶ In that season of the youthful year: About January 20.

And like one who reckons as he works,
always planning beforehand what comes next,
27 thus, while raising me to a boulder's top,

he searched for yet another crag
and said: 'Take hold of that one next
30 but test to see if it will bear your weight.'

This was no climb for people wearing leaden cloaks.
Though he was weightless and I was being pushed,
33 how hard a climb it was from one crag to the other!

Were it not that on this side of the dike
the slope was shorter — I cannot speak for him —
36 I would have given up.

But since all Malebolge inclines
down to the mouth of the lowest pit,
39 it follows that each valley is constructed

with one side higher than the other.
At last we made it to the point
42 where the outermost stone had broken off.

And there I felt my lungs so sucked of breath
that I could go no farther,
45 but sat down as quickly as I could.

'Now must you cast off sloth,' my master said.
'Sitting on leather cushions or stretched out
48 under comforters, no one comes to fame.

Without fame, he who spends his time on earth
leaves only such a mark upon the world
51 as smoke does on the air or foam on water.

'Get to your feet! Conquer this laboring breath
with strength of mind, which wins the battle
54 if not dragged down by body's weight.

'There is a longer stair that must be climbed.²¹⁷
It's not enough to leave these souls behind.
57 If you take my meaning, let it be of use.'

²¹⁷ a longer stair . . . climbed: The distance from the earth's center to the summit of Purgatory.

At that I rose, pretending to more breath
than I had in me, and said:

60 'Go on then, for I am strong and resolute.'

We labored up a ridge,
rugged, narrow, difficult,
63 and steeper far than was the last.

Not to seem so spent, I talked as I climbed up.
Then, from the next ditch, came a voice
66 that seemed unfit for forming words.

I could not make out what it said,
though I was at the crown that arches over,
69 but he who spoke seemed to be moving.

Hard as I strained to see, it was too dark
for living eyes to plumb the depths.
72 And so I said: 'Master, take your way

'to the next encircling bank where we can leave
this bridge. From here I make out nothing
75 with my ears nor see a thing down there.'

'I give no other answer than to take you,'
he said, 'for a just request
78 should be followed by the act, in silence.'

We left the bridge at the abutment
where it comes to rest on that eighth bank.
81 From there the contents of the ditch came into view.

In it I saw a dreadful swarm of serpents,
of so strange a kind that even now
84 when I remember them it chills my blood.

Let Libya with all her sands no longer boast,
for though she fosters cheydrî, jaculî,¹¹⁶
87 phareae, cenches, and amphibaena.

she never reared so many venomous pests,
nor so appalling — not with all of Ethiopia
90 and the lands that lie along the Red Sea coast.

¹¹⁶ cheydrî . . . amphibaena: Venomous snakes mentioned by the Roman poet Lucan (39–65 C.E.).

Amid this fearsome and most awful plenty,
people, naked and in terror, were running
without hope of refuge or of heliotrope.²¹⁹

Their hands were tied behind their backs with snakes
that thrust their heads and tails between the legs
and joined, knotting themselves in front.

And behold, one of these souls was near our ridge
when a serpent launched and pierced him through
right where the neck and shoulders join.

Never has 'o' nor even 'i' been writ so quick²²⁰
as he caught fire and burned, turned,
in the very act of falling, into ashes.

And as he lay unmade upon the ground,
the dust gathered itself of its own accord
and suddenly he was himself again.

Just, as is attested by great sages,²²¹
the phoenix perishes and is reborn
when it approaches its five-hundredth year —

lifelong it feeds on neither grain nor grasses,
but thrives on drops of frankincense and cardamom,
while hard and myrrh make up its winding sheet —

and just as one who faints, and knows not why —
whether possessed by devils that pull him down
or seized by the sickness that causes men to fall —

rises to his feet, and gazes round,
wholly bewildered by the breathless anguish
he has undergone, and as he looks, he sighs,

such did that sinner seem when he had risen.
O how stern it is, the power of God,
hurting such blows as it takes vengeance!

²¹⁹ *heliotrope*: A kind of stone thought to make its wearer invisible.

²²⁰ *o'* . . . writ so quick: Letters that can be made with a single stroke.

²²¹ *attested by . . . sages*: The story about a phoenix that dies and is reborn out of its own ashes is told by Ovid and Lucan, among others; medieval writers linked the phoenix to Jesus.

When my leader asked him who he was:
"From Tuscany I rained down," was his answer,
"not long ago, into this savage gorge."

"I loved the life of beasts and not of men,
just like the mule I was. I am Vanni Fucci,²²²
animal. Pistoia was my fitting den."

And I to my leader: "Tell him not to slip away,
then ask what sin has thrust him to this depth,
for I knew him as a man of blood and rages."

And the sinner, listening, did not dissemble,
but set his mind and eyes on me,
then colored with a wrathful shame

and said: "For you to catch me
in this misery pains me more
than when I was taken from the other life."

"I can't refuse to answer what you ask.
I am thrust so far below because I stole
its lovely ornaments from the sacristy

and the blame was wrongly laid upon another.²²³
But, so you take no joy in seeing me this low,
if ever you escape from these dark regions,

open your ears to my prophecy and hear:
First, Pistoia strips herself of Blacks,²²⁴
then Florence changes families and fashions."

"Next Mars draws up a bolt from Val di Magra,
engulfed by torn and threatening clouds,
and, with violent and stinging storms,

²²² Vanni Fucci: Fucci was the illegitimate son ("mule") of a noble from Pistoia, north of Florence, and violent leader of the Blacks, a division of the Guelphs.

²²³ Blame . . . upon another: The sacristy in the Pistoia Cathedral contained treasures, some of which were stolen in 1353. An innocent man was hung for the theft.

²²⁴ Florence changes . . . fashions: The division of the Guelphs into Blacks and Whites spread from Pistoia to Florence; in Pistoia the Blacks were expelled by the Whites, but in Florence the dominance of the Blacks in 1302 led to Dante's exile. The "headlong bolt" (l. 149) was the leader of the Blacks from the Malaspina family.

'on Campo Piceno the battle shall be joined.
The headlong bolt shall rend the clouds,
striking and wounding every White.
And this I have told that it may make you grieve.'

CANTO XXV

Then, making the figs with both his thumbs,²²⁵
the thief raised up his fists and cried:
3 'Take that, God! It's aimed at you!'

From that time on the serpents were my friends,
for one of them coiled itself around his neck
6 as if to say, 'Now you shall speak no more.'

while another enmeshed his arms and held him fast,
knitting itself so tight around his front
9 he could not even twitch his arms.

Ah, Pistoia, why won't you resolve
to burn yourself to ashes, cease to be,
12 since you exceed your ancestors in evil?²²⁶

Through all the gloomy rounds of Hell
I saw no soul so prideful against God,
15 not even him who toppled from the walls at Thebes,²²⁷

He ran away without another word.
And then I saw a centaur full of rage
18 come shouting: 'Where, where is that unripe soul?'

Maremma does not have as many snakes,
I think, as he had on his back.
21 from where the human part begins down to the rump.

On his shoulders, just at the nape of the neck,
crouched a dragon with its wings spread wide
24 that sets on fire whatever it encounters.

²²⁵ making the figs . . . thumbs: An obscene gesture.

²²⁶ Pistoia . . . evil: Pistoia was founded by Calisto, a conspirator against the Roman Republic in the first century B.C.E.

²²⁷ him who toppled . . . Thebes: Capaneus (Canto XIV).

My master said: 'That is Cacus,²²⁸
who in the cave beneath the Aventine
27 many times over has made a lake of blood.

'His road is different from his brothers'
because he stole, with wicked cunning,
30 the herd of cattle he found near at hand.

'For that his wily ways were ended
beneath the club of Hercules, who struck perhaps
33 a hundred blows, though he felt not the tenth.'

While my master spoke the centaur had run past.
Below where we were standing, three new souls
36 had neared, although we did not see them

until we heard their shouts: 'You,
who are you? At that he stopped his tale
39 and we gave heed to them alone.

I knew none of them, and yet it happened —
as often happens by some chance —
42 that one had cause to speak another's name,

asking: 'What's become of Cianfa?'²²⁹
And then, to catch my guide's attention,
45 I held my finger up from chin to nose.

If, reader, you are slow to credit
what I'm about to tell you, it's no wonder:
48 I saw it, and I myself can scarce believe it.

While I stood staring, with raised brows,
a reptile with six legs propelled itself
51 at one of them, and fastened itself to him.

It grabbed his belly with its middle claws,
then with its forepaws held his arms
54 and bit him on both cheeks.

²²⁸ Cacus: A monster who stole cattle from Hercules and dragged them backwards into his cave. His brothers are the Centaurs (Canto XII).

²²⁹ Cianfa: A thief from a noble Florentine family.

It stretched its hind feet down the other's thighs,
thrusting its tail between them
and curled it up behind, above the buttocks.

Never did clinging ivy fix itself
so tight upon a tree as did that fearsome beast
entwine itself around the other's limbs.

Then they fused together, as if made
of molten wax, mixing their colors
so that neither seemed what it had been before,

as over the surface of a scrap of parchment,
before the flame, a brownish color comes
that is not black, yet makes the white die out.

The other two were looking on and each
was shouting: "Oh my, Agnello,²²⁹ how you change!
Look, now you are neither two nor one!"

Already the two heads had been united,
two sets of features blending,
72 both lost in a single face.

Four separate limbs combined to form two arms.
The thighs and calves, the stomach and the chest
turned into members never seen before.

All trace of their first aspect was erased
and the unnatural figure seemed both two
78 and none; and off it went, at its slow pace.

As the green lizard beneath the scorching lash
of dog-day heat, between one hedge and the next,
81 seems lightning as it streaks across the road,

just so appeared — darting toward the bellies
of the other two — a little fiery reptile,
84 black and livid as a peppercorn.

That part where first we are nourished^o
it transfixed in one of them
87 and then fell prone before him.

²²⁹ Agnello: Another thief.

The one transfixed just stared, said nothing.
Indeed, with his feet stock-still, he yawned,
90 as if deep sleep or fever had assailed him.

He and the reptile stared at one another.
Both gave out dense smoke, one from its wound,
93 the other from its mouth. Then their smoke merged.

Let Lucan now fall silent where he tells
of poor Sabelius and Nasidius,²³¹
96 and let him wait to hear what comes forth now!

Let Ovid not speak of Cadmus or Arethusa,²³²
for if his poem turns him into a serpent
99 and her into a fountain, I grudge it not,

for never did he change two natures, face to face,
in such a way that both their forms
102 were quite so quick exchanging substance.

Their corresponding changes went like this:
the reptile split its tail into a fork
105 and he that was wounded drew his feet together.

First his calves and then his thighs began
to knit so that in but a moment
108 no sign of a division could be seen.

The cloven tail assumed the shapes
the other one was losing, and his skin
111 was turning soft while the other's hardened.

I saw the man's arms shrinking toward the armpits
and the brute's forepaws, which had been short,
114 lengthen, precisely as the other's dwindled.

Then the hind-paws, twisting together,
became the member that a man conceals,
117 and from his own the wretch had grown two paws.

²³¹ Sabelius and Nasidius: Two soldiers in Cato's army (in Lucan's *Pharsalia*) bitten by serpents.

²³² Cadmus or Arethusa: Pursued by a river god, the nymph Arethusa asked Artemis to change her into a fountain; Cadmus, founder of Thebes, was changed into a serpent after killing a sacred dragon.

While the smoke veils one and now the other
with new color and grows hair here
and elsewhere strips it off.

one of them rose to his feet, the other fell,
but neither turned aside his baleful glare
under which each muzzle changed its shape.

In the one erect it shrank in to the temples,
and, from the excess flesh absorbed,
two ears extruded from smooth cheeks.

Whatever did not recede, left over
from that excess, made a nose for the face
and gave the lips a proper thickness.

The one prone on the ground shoves out his snout
and draws his ears into his head
as a snail draws in its horns.

and his tongue, till now a single thing
and fit for speech, divides, and the other's
forked tongue joins, and the smoke stops.

The soul just now become a brute takes flight,
hissing through the hollow, and the other,
by way of speaking, spits after him.²³³

Then he turned his new-made shoulders and he said
to the third: 'I want Buoso²³⁴ to run, as I have done,
down on all fours along this road.'

Thus I saw the seventh rabble²³⁵ change
and change again, and let the newness of it
be my excuse if my pen has gone astray.

And though my eyes were dazed
and my mind somewhat bewildered,
these sinners could not flee so stealthily

²³³ spits after him: It was thought that human spit was poisonous to snakes.

²³⁴ Buoso: The identity of this Buoso is not known.

²³⁵ rabble: The sinners in this ditch.

but I with ease discerned that Puccio Lameshanks,²³⁶
and he alone, of the three companions
in that group, remained unchanged.
The other,²³⁷ Gaville, was the one whom you lament.

CANTO XXVI

Take joy, oh Florence, for you are so great
your wings beat over land and sea,
your fame resounds through Hell!

Among the thieves, I found five citizens of yours
who make me feel ashamed, and you
are raised by them to no great praise.

But if as morning nears we dream the truth,
it won't be long before you feel the pain
that Prato,²³⁸ to name but one, desires for you.

Were it already come, it would not be too soon.
But let it come, since come indeed it must,
and it will weigh the more on me the more I age.

We left that place and, on those stairs
that turned us pale when we came down,
my leader now climbed back and drew me up.

As we took our solitary way
among the juts and crags of the escarpment,
our feet could not advance without our hands.

I grieved then and now I grieve again
as my thoughts turn to what I saw,
and more than is my way, I curb my powers

lest they run on where virtue fails to guide them,
so that, if friendly star or something better still
has granted me its boon, I don't refuse the gift.

²³⁶ Puccio Lameshanks: A third thief from a Florentine family.

²³⁷ The other: Francesco Cavalcanti, a Florentine living in Gaville, was killed for his oppressions by the townspeople; his family avenged him.

²³⁸ Prato: Perhaps a reference to the rebellion of Prato, north of Florence, against Florence.

As when a peasant, resting on a hillside—
in the season when he who lights the world
least hides his face from us,

at the hour when the fly gives way to the mosquito²³⁹—
sees fireflies that glimmer in the valley
where he perhaps ploughs fields and harvests grapes,

with just so many flames the eighth crevasse
was everywhere aglow, as I became aware
once I arrived where I could see the bottom.

And as the one who was avenged by bears
could see Elijah's chariot taking flight,²⁴⁰
when the horses reared and rose to Heaven,

but made out nothing with his eyes
except the flame alone
ascending like a cloud into the sky,

so each flame moves along the gullet
of the trench and—though none reveals the theft—
each flame conceals a sinner.

Rising to my feet to look, I stood up
on the bridge. Had I not grasped a jutting crag,
I would have fallen in without a shove.

My leader, when he saw me so intent, said:
"These spirits stand within the flames.
Each one is wrapped in that in which he burns."

"Master," I replied, "I am the more convinced
to hear you say it. That is what I thought,
and had it in my mind to ask you this:

"Who is in the flame so riven at the tip
it could be rising from the pyre
on which Eteocles was laid out with his brother?"²⁴¹

²³⁹ in the season . . . mosquito: A midsummer evening.

²⁴⁰ the one who . . . Heaven: Elisha saw Elijah's ascension in a chariot (2 Kings 11:23–24).

²⁴¹ laid out . . . brother: Eteocles and his brother, Polyneices, sons of Oedipus, killed each other.

He replied: "Within this flame find torment
Ulysses and Diomed.²⁴² They are paired
in God's revenge as once they earned his wrath.

"In their flame they mourn the stratagem
of the horse that made a gateway
through which the noble seed of Rome came forth.

"There they lament the wives for which, in death,
Deidamia mourns Achilles still,²⁴³
and there they make amends for the Palladium."

"If they can speak within those flames,"
I said, "I pray you, master, and I pray again—
and may my prayer be a thousand strong—

"do not forbid my lingering awhile
until the twin-forked flame arrives,
You see how eagerly I lean in its direction."

And he to me: "Your prayer deserves
much praise. Therefore, I grant it,
but on condition that you hold your tongue.

"Leave speech to me, for I have understood
just what you want. And, since they were Greeks,
they might disdain your words."

Once the flame had neared, when he thought
the time and moment right,
I heard my leader speaking in this way:

"O you who are twinned within a single fire,
if I have earned your favor while I lived
if I have earned your favor—in whatever measure—

"when, in the world, I wrote my lofty verses,
then do not move away. Let one of you relate
just where, having lost his way, he went to die."

²⁴² Ulysses and Diomed: Two Greek leaders in the Trojan War; they stole the sacred image of Pallas Athena, the "Palladium," which protected Troy, and they devised the trick of the wooden horse that led to Troy's downfall.

²⁴³ mourns Achilles still: Ulysses and Diomed persuaded Achilles to leave his lover Deidamia and go to Troy, where Achilles died.

And the larger horn of that ancient flame
began to murmur and to tremble,
87 like a flame that is worried by the wind.

Then, brandishing its tip this way and that,
as if it were the tongue of fire that spoke,
90 it brought forth a voice and said: "When I

'took leave of Circe,²⁴⁴ who for a year and more
beguiled me there, not far from Gaëta,
93 before Aeneas gave that name to it,

'not tenderness for a son, nor filial duty
toward my aged father, nor the love I owed
96 Penelope²⁴⁵ that would have made her glad,

'could overcome the fervor that was mine
to gain experience of the world
99 and learn about man's vices, and his worth.

And so I set forth on the open deep
with but a single ship, with that handful
102 of shipmates who had not deserted me.

'One shore and the other I saw as far as Spain,
Morocco—the island of Sardegna,
105 and other islands set into that sea.

'I and my shipmates had grown old and slow
by the time we reached the narrow strait
108 where Hercules marked off the limits,

'warning all men to go no farther.²⁴⁶
On the right-hand side I left Seville behind,
111 on the other I had left Ceuta.

"O brothers," I said, "who, in the course
of a hundred thousand perils, at last
114 have reached the west, to such brief wakefulness

²⁴⁴ Circe: A goddess and enchantress who turned men into beasts. ²⁴⁵ Penelope: The wife of Ulysses.
²⁴⁶ the narrow strait . . . no farther: The Pillars of Hercules, thought to be the edge of the habitable world.

"of our senses as remains to us,
do not deny yourselves the chance to know—
117 following the sun—the world where no one lives.

"Consider how your souls were sown:
you were not made to live like brutes or beasts,
120 but to pursue virtue and knowledge."

With this brief speech I had my companions
so ardent for the journey
123 I could scarce have held them back.

And, having set our stern to sunrise,
in our mad flight we turned our oars to wings,
126 always gaining on the left.

'Now night was gazing on the stars that light
the other pole, the stars of our own so low
129 they did not rise above the ocean floor.

'Five times the light beneath the moon
had been rekindled and as often been put out
132 since we began our voyage on the deep,

'when we could see a mountain, distant,
dark and dim. In my sight it seemed
135 higher than any I had ever seen.

'We rejoiced, but joy soon turned to grief:
for from that unknown land there came
138 a whirlwind that struck the ship head-on.

'Three times it turned her and all the waters
with her. At the fourth our stern reared up,
the prow went down—as pleased Another²⁴⁷—
142 until the sea closed over us.'

CANTO XXVII

The flame now stood erect and still,
meaning to speak no more, and was departing
3 with the gentle poet's leave.

when another flame, coming close behind,
caused our eyes to fix upon its tip,
drawn by the gibberish that came from it.

As the Sicilian bull that bellowed first
with the cries of him whose instrument²⁴⁷
had fashioned it—and that was only just—

used to bellow with the victim's voice
so that, although the bull was made of brass,
it seemed transfixed by pain.

thus, having first no course or outlet
through the flame, the mournful words
were changed into a language all their own.

But once the words had made their way
up to the tip, making it flicker
as the voice had done when it had formed them,

we heard it say: 'O you at whom I aim my voice
and who, just now, said in the Lombard tongue:²⁴⁸
'Now go your way, I ask you nothing more,'

though I've arrived, perhaps, a little late,
let it not trouble you to stay and speak with me.
Though I am in the flame, as you can see, it irks me not.

'If you are only a short while fallen
into this blind world from that sweet land
of Italy, from which I bring down all my sins,

tell me if Romagna lives in peace or war.
I came from where the mountains stand between
Urbino and the ridge from which the Tiber springs.²⁴⁹

I still stood bending down to hear,
when my leader nudged my side and said:
'It's up to you to speak—this one is Italian.'

²⁴⁷ him whose instrument: Petrus fashioned for Phalaris, tyrant of Sicily, a brass bull for roasting victims and was himself the first victim.

²⁴⁸ in the Lombard tongue: Virgil spoke the Lombard dialect.

²⁴⁹ I came from . . . Tiber springs: Guido, count of Montefeltro, head of the Ghibellines in Romagna and a soldier, died in 1298.

And I, who had my answer ready,
without delay began to speak:
'O soul that is hidden from my sight down there,

'your Romagna is not, and never was,
free of warfare in her rulers' hearts.
Still, no open warfare have I left behind.

'Ravenna²⁵⁰ remains as it has been for years.
The eagle of Polenta broods over it
so that he covers Cervia with his wings.

'The town that once withstood the lengthy siege,
making of the French a bloody heap,
is now again beneath the green claws of the lion.²⁵¹

'The elder masliff of Verrucchio and the younger,
who between them had harsh dealing with Montagna,
sharpen their teeth to augers in the customary place.

'The young lion on a field of white,
who rules Lamone's and Santeno's cities,
changes sides between the summer and the snows.

'And the city whose flank the Savio bathes;
as she lives between tyranny and freedom,²⁵²
so she lies between the mountain and the plain.

'But now, I beg you, tell us who you are.
Be no more grudging than another's been to you,
so may your name continue in the world.'

When the fire had done its roaring for a while,
after its fashion, the point began to quiver
this way and that, and then gave breath to this:

'If I but thought that my response were made
to one perhaps returning to the world,
this tongue of flame would cease to flicker.

²⁵⁰ Ravenna: The major city in Romagna ruled then, along with Cervia, by the Polenta family.

²⁵¹ The town . . . of the lion: Forlì defeated the French but later was seized by the Ordelaffi family, whose coat of arms had green claws.

²⁵² The elder masliff . . . and the plain: This list includes cities of Romagna, their rulers, and descriptions of their coats of arms.

But since, up from these depths, no one has yet
returned alive, if what I hear is true,
I answer without fear of being shamed.

A warrior was I, and then a corded friar,²⁵³
thinking, cinctured so, to make amends,
And surely would my hopes have come to pass

but for the Great Priest²⁵⁴ — the devil take him! —
who drew me back to my old ways.
And I would like to tell you how and why,

While I still kept the form in flesh and bones
my mother gave me, my deeds were not
a lion's but the actions of a fox.

Cunning stratagems and covert schemes,
I knew them all, and was so skilled in them
my fame rang out to the far confines of the earth.

When I saw I had reached that stage of life
when all men ought to think
of lowering sail and coiling up the ropes,

I grew displeased with what had pleased before.
Repentant and shriven, I became a friar.
And woe is me! it would have served.

But he, Prince of the latter-day Pharisees,
engaged in battle near the Lateran
and not with either Saracen or Jew,

for all his enemies were Christian²⁵⁵ —
not one of them had gone to conquer Acre
or traffic in the Sultan's lands²⁵⁶ —

²⁵³ a corded friar: A Franciscan.

²⁵⁴ the Great Priest: Pope Boniface VIII.

²⁵⁵ enemies were Christian: On Guido's advice, Boniface broke faith with the Colonna, who had surrendered to the papal forces, and destroyed Palestrina, the Colonna's stronghold.

²⁵⁶ to conquer Acre . . . : Sultan's lands: Acre, the last stronghold of the Christians in Palestine, surrendered to the Muslims in 1291. An earlier pope forbade commerce with Muslims.

paid no heed, for his part, to the highest office
or his holy orders, nor, for mine,
to the cord that used to keep its wearers lean.

As Constantine once had Sylvester summoned
from Soracte to cure his leprous sores,²⁵⁷
so this man called on me to be his doctor

and cure him of the fever of his pride.
He asked me for advice, but I kept silent
because his words were like a drunkard's words.

And then he spoke again: "Let not your heart mistrust:
I absolve you here and now if you will teach me
how I can bring Praeneste to the ground.

"I have the power, as well you know, to lock
and unlock Heaven, because the keys are two
for which the pope before me had no care."²⁵⁸

His threatening tactics brought me to the point
at which the worse course seemed the one of silence.
And so I said: "Father, since you cleanse me

"of the sin that I must even now commit:
Promising much with scant observance
will seal your triumph on the lofty throne."

The moment I was dead, Francis came for me.
But one of the dark Cherubim cried out:
"No, wrong me not by bearing that one off.

"He must come down to serve among my minions
because he gave that fraudulent advice.
From then till now I've dogged his footsteps.

"One may not be absolved without repentance,
nor repent and wish to sin concurrently —
a simple contradiction not allowed."

²⁵⁷ to cure . . . : sores: Prior to his conversion, Emperor Constantine contracted leprosy while persecuting Christians. Instructed to do so in a dream, he summoned Pope Sylvester from Mount Soracte, was converted, and was healed.

²⁵⁸ the keys . . . : no care: Pope Celestine V, who resigned the Papacy after five months, had given up the keys of damnation and absolution.

'Oh, wretch that I am, how I shuddered
when he seized me and said: "Perhaps
123 you didn't reckon I'd be versed in logic."

'He carried me to Minos, who coiled his tail
eight times around his scaly back
126 and, having gnawed it in his awful rage,

'said: "Here comes a sinner for the thieving fire."
And so, just as you see me, I am damned,
129 cloaked as I am. And as I go, I grieve.'

Once he had brought his words to this conclusion,
the weeping flame departed,
132 twisting and tossing its pointed horn.

We continued on our way, my guide and I,
over the ridge and up the arch that spans
the ditch where those are paid their due
136 who, for disjoining, gather up their load.

CANTO XXVIII

Who, even in words not bound by meter,
and having told the tale many times over,
3 could tell the blood and wounds that I saw now?

Surely every tongue would fail,
for neither thought nor speech
6 has the capacity to hold so much.

Could all the wounded troops again assemble:
first from Apulia, land laid low by war,
9 who grieved for their lost blood

shed by the Trojans,²⁵⁹ then all those
of the long war,²⁶⁰ whose corpses were despoiled
12 of piles of rings—as Livy²⁶¹ writes, who does not err—

²⁵⁹ **blood shed . . . Trojans:** Losses by the Trojans under Aeneas when they fought battles in south Italy.

²⁶⁰ **the long war:** The Second Punic War between Rome and Carthage (218–201 B.C.E.), in which Hannibal gathered three bushels of rings from dead Romans.

²⁶¹ **Livy:** First-century C.E. Roman historian.