

Canto II

The Descent

It is evening of the first day (Friday). Dante is following Virgil and finds himself tired and despairing. How can he be worthy of such a vision as Virgil has described? He hesitates and seems about to abandon his first purpose.

To comfort him Virgil explains how Beatrice descended to him in Limbo and told him of her concern for Dante. It is she, the symbol of Divine Love, who sends Virgil to lead Dante from error. She has come into Hell itself on this errand, for Dante cannot come to Divine Love unaided; Reason must lead him. Moreover Beatrice has been sent with the prayers of the Virgin Mary (COMPASSION), and of Saint Lucia (DIVINE LIGHT). Rachel (THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE) also figures in the heavenly scene which Virgil recounts.

Virgil explains all this and reproaches Dante: how can he hesitate longer when such heavenly powers are concerned for him, and Virgil himself has promised to lead him safely?

Dante understands at once that such forces cannot fail him, and his spirits rise in joyous anticipation.

The light was departing. The brown air drew down all the earth's creatures, calling them to rest from their day-roving, as I, one man alone,

prepared myself to face the double war of the journey and the pity, which memory shall here set down, nor hesitate, nor err.

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Canto II

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O Muses! O High Genius! Be my aid!
O Memory, recorder of the vision,
here shall your true nobility be displayed!

Thus I began: "Poet, you who must guide me,
before you trust me to that arduous passage,
look to me and look through me—can I be worthy?"

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You sang how the father of Sylvius, while still
in corruptible flesh won to that other world,
crossing with mortal sense the immortal sill.

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But if the Adversary of all Evil
weighing his consequence and who and what
should issue from him, treated him so well—

that cannot seem unfitting to thinking men,
since he was chosen father of Mother Rome
and of her Empire by God's will and token.

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Both, to speak strictly, were founded and foreknown
as the established Seat of Holiness
for the successors of Great Peter's throne.

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In that quest, which your verses celebrate,
he learned those mysteries from which arose
his victory and Rome's apostolate.

There later came the chosen vessel, Paul,
bearing the confirmation of that Faith
which is the one true door to life eternal.

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But I—how should I dare? By whose permission?
I am not Aeneas. I am not Paul.
Who could believe me worthy of the vision?

How, then, may I presume to this high quest
and not fear my own brashness? You are wise
and will grasp what my poor words can but suggest."

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As one who unwill's what he wills, will stay
strong purposes with feeble second thoughts
until he spells all his first zeal away—

so I hung back and balked on that dim coast
till thinking had worn out my enterprise,
so stout at starting and so early lost.

"I understand from your words and the look in your eyes,"
that shadow of magnificence answered me,
"your soul is sunken in that cowardice

that bears down many men, turning their course
and resolution by imagined perils;
as his own shadow turns the frightened horse.

To free you of this dread I will tell you all
of why I came to you and what I heard
when first I pitied you. I was a soul

among the souls of Limbo, when a Lady
so blessed and so beautiful, I prayed her
to order and command my will, called to me.

Her eyes were kindled from the lamps of Heaven.
Her voice reached through me, tender, sweet, and low.
An angel's voice, a music of its own:

'O gracious Mantuan whose melodies
live in earth's memory and shall live on
till the last motion ceases in the skies,

my dearest friend, and fortune's foe, has strayed
onto a friendless shore and stands beset
by such distresses that he turns afraid

from the True Way, and news of him in Heaven
rumors my dread he is already lost.
I come, afraid that I am too-late risen.

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Fly to him and with your high counsel, pity,
and with whatever need be for his good
and soul's salvation, help him, and solace me.

It is I, Beatrice, who send you to him.
I come from the blessed height for which I yearn.
Love called me here. When amid Seraphim

I stand again before my Lord, your praises
shall sound in Heaven. She paused, and I began:
'O Lady of that only grace that raises

feeble mankind within its mortal cycle
above all other works God's will has placed
within the heaven of the smallest circle;

so welcome is your command that to my sense,
were it already fulfilled, it would yet seem tardy.
I understand, and am all obedience.

But tell me how you dare to venture thus
so far from the wide heaven of your joy
to which your thoughts yearn back from this abyss.

'Since what you ask,' she answered me, 'probes near
the root of all, I will say briefly only
how I have come through Hell's pit without fear.

Know then, O waiting and compassionate soul,
that is to fear which has the power to harm,
and nothing else is fearful even in Hell.

I am so made by God's all-seeing mercy
your anguish does not touch me, and the flame
of this great burning has no power upon me.

There is a Lady in Heaven so concerned
for him I send you to, that for her sake
the strict decree is broken. She has turned

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just so my wilted spirits rose again
and such a heat of zeal surged through my veins
that I was born anew. Thus I began:

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"Blesséd be that Lady of infinite pity,
and blesséd be thy taxed and courteous spirit
that came so promptly on the word she gave thee.

Thy words have moved my heart to its first purpose.
My Guide! My Lord! My Master! Now lead on:
one will shall serve the two of us in this,"

135

He turned when I had spoken, and at his back
I entered on that hard and perilous track.

NOTES

13-30. AENEAS AND THE FOUNDING OF ROME.
Here is a fair example of the way in which Dante absorbed pagan
themes into his Catholicism.

According to Virgil, Aeneas is the son of mortal Anchises and of
Venus. Venus, in her son's interest, secures a prophecy and a
promise from Jove to the effect that Aeneas is to found a royal line
that shall rule the world. After the burning of Troy, Aeneas is di-
rected by various signs to sail for the Latian lands (Italy) where his
destiny awaits him. After many misadventures, he is compelled
(like Dante) to descend to the underworld of the dead. There he finds
his father's shade, and there he is shown the shades of the great
kings that are to stem from him. (*Aeneid*, VI, 921 ff.) Among them
are Romulus, Julius Caesar, and Augustus Caesar. The full glory of
the Roman Empire is also foreshadowed to him.

Dante, however, continues the Virgilian theme and includes in
the predestination not only the Roman Empire but the Holy Roman
Empire and its Church. Thus what Virgil presented as an arrange-
ment of Jove, a concession to the son of Venus, becomes part of the
divine scheme of the Catholic God, and Aeneas is cast as a direct
forerunner of Peter and Paul.

13. *father of Sybilus*: Aeneas.

and called Lucia to her wish and mercy
saying: "Thy faithful one is sorely pressed;
in his distresses I commend him to thee."

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Lucia, that soul of light and foe of all
cruelty, rose and came to me at once
where I was sitting with the ancient Rachel,

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saying to me: "Beatrice, true praise of God,
why dost thou not help him who loved thee so
that for thy sake he left the vulgar crowd?"

Dost thou not hear his cries? Canst thou not see
the death he wrestles with beside that river
no ocean can surpass for rage and fury?"

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No soul of earth was ever as rapt to seek
its good or flee its injury as I was—
when I had heard my sweet Lucia speak—

to descend from Heaven and my blessed seat
to you, laying my trust in that high speech
that honors you and all who honor it.

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She spoke and turned away to hide a tear
that, shaming, urged me faster. So I came
and freed you from the beast that drove you there,

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blocking the near way to the Heavenly Height.
And now what ails you? Why do you lag? Why
this heartsick hesitation and pale fright

when three such blessed Ladies lean from Heaven
in their concern for you and my own pledge
of the great good that waits you has been given?"

125
As flowerlets drooped and puckered in the night
turn up to the returning sun and spread
their petals wide on his new warmth and light—

51-52. *I was a soul among the souls of Limbo*: See Canto IV, lines 31-45, where Virgil explains his state in Hell.

78. *the heaven of the smallest circle*: The Moon. "Heaven" here is used in its astronomical sense. All within that circle is the earth. According to the Ptolemaic system the earth was the center of creation and was surrounded by nine heavenly spheres (nine heavens) concentrically placed around it. The Moon was the first of these, and therefore the smallest. A cross section of this universe could be represented by drawing nine concentric circles (at varying distances about the earth as a center). Going outward from the center these circles would indicate, in order, the spheres of

The Moon

Mercury

Venus

The Sun

Mars

Jupiter

Saturn

The Fixed Stars

The Primum Mobile

Beyond the Primum Mobile lies the Empyrean.

97. *Lucia* (Loo-TCHEE-yah): Allegorically she represents Divine Light. Her name in Italian inevitably suggests "luce" (light), and she is the patron saint of eyesight. By a process quite common in medieval religion, the special powers attributed to Lucia seem to have been suggested by her name rather than her history. (In France, by a similar process, St. Clair is the patroness of sight.)

102. *Rachel*: Represents the Contemplative Life.

A note on "thee" and "thou": except for the quotations from the souls in Heaven, and for Dante's fervent declamation to Virgil, I have insisted on "you" as the preferable pronoun form. I have used "thee" and "thou" in these cases with the idea that they might help to indicate the extraordinary elevation of the speakers and of the persons addressed.

Canto III

THE VESTIBULE OF HELL

The Opportunists

The Poets pass the Gate of Hell and are immediately assailed by cries of anguish. Dante sees the first of the souls in torment. They are THE OPPORTUNISTS, those souls who in life were neither for good nor evil but only for themselves. Mixed with them are those outcasts who took no sides in the Rebellion of the Angels. They are neither in Hell nor out of it. Eternally unclassified, they race round and round pursuing a wavering banner that runs forever before them through the dirty air, and as they run they are pursued by swarms of wasps and hornets, who sting them and produce a constant flow of blood and putrid matter which trickles down the bodies of the sinners and is feasted upon by loathsome worms and maggots who coat the ground.

The law of Dante's Hell is the law of symbolic retribution. As they sinned so are they punished. They took no sides, therefore they are given no place. As they pursued the ever-shifting illusion of their own advantage, changing their courses with every changing wind, so they pursue eternally an elusive, ever-shifting banner. As their sin was a darkness, so they move in darkness. As their own guilty conscience pursued them, so they are pursued by swarms of wasps and hornets. And as their actions were a moral filth, so they run eternally through the filth of worms and maggots which they themselves feed.

Dante recognizes several, among them POPE CELESTINE V, but without delaying to speak to any of these souls, the Poets move on to ACHERON, the first of the rivers of Hell. Here the newly arrived souls of the damned gather and

wait for monstrous CHARON to ferry them over to punishment. Charon recognizes Dante as a living man and angrily refuses him passage. Virgil forces Charon to serve them, but Dante swoons with terror, and does not reawaken until he is on the other side.

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW.

SACRED JUSTICE MOVED MY ARCHITECT.
I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE,
PRIMORDIAL LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLECT.

ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND.
ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.

These mysteries I read cut into stone
above a gate. And turning I said: "Master,
what is the meaning of this harsh inscription?"

And he then as initiate to novice:
"Here must you put by all division of spirit
and gather your soul against all cowardice.

This is the place I told you to expect.
Here you shall pass among the fallen people,
souls who have lost the good of intellect."

So saying, he put forth his hand to me,
and with a gentle and encouraging smile
he led me through the gate of mystery.

Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled
on the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.
A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents toiled

in pain and anger. Voices hoarse and shrill
and sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised
tumult and pandemonium that still

whirls on the air forever dirty with it
as if a whirlwind sucked at sand. And I,
holding my head in horror, cried: "Sweet Spirit,

what souls are these who run through this black haze?"
And he to me: "These are the nearly soulless
whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise.

They are mixed here with that despicable corps
of angels who were neither for God nor Satan,
but only for themselves. The High Creator

scourged them from Heaven for its perfect beauty,
and Hell will not receive them since the wicked
might feel some glory over them." And I:

"Master, what gnaws at them so hideously
their lamentation stuns the very air?"
"They have no hope of death," he answered me,

"and in their blind and unattaining state
their miserable lives have sunk so low
that they must envy every other fate.

No word of them survives their living season.
Mercy and Justice deny them even a name.
Let us not speak of them: look, and pass on."

I saw a banner there upon the mist.
Circling and circling, it seemed to scorn all pause.
So it ran on, and still behind it pressed

a never-ending rout of souls in pain.
I had not thought death had undone so many
as passed before me in that mournful train.

And some I knew among them; last of all
I recognized the shadow of that soul
who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial.

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At once I understood for certain: these
were of that retrograde and faithless crew
hateful to God and to His enemies.

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These wretches never born and never dead
ran naked in a swarm of wasps and hornets
that goaded them the more the more they fled,
and made their faces stream with bloody gouts
of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet
to be swallowed there by loathsome worms and maggots.

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Then looking onward I made out a throng
assembled on the beach of a wide river,
whereupon I turned to him: "Master, I long

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to know what souls these are, and what strange usage
makes them as eager to cross as they seem to be
in this infected light." At which the Sage:

"All this shall be made known to you when we stand
on the joyless beach of Acheron." And I
cast down my eyes, sensing a reprimand

75

in what he said, and so walked at his side
in silence and ashamed until we came
through the dead cavern to that sunless tide.

There, steering toward us in an ancient ferry
came an old man with a white bush of hair,
bellowing: "Woe to you depraved souls! Bury

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here and forever all hope of Paradise:
I come to lead you to the other shore,
into eternal dark, into fire and ice.

And you who are living yet, I say begone
from these who are dead." But when he saw me stand
against his violence he began again:

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"By other windings and by other steerage
shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not here!
A lighter craft than mine must give you passage."

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And my Guide to him: "Charon, bite back your spleen:
this has been willed where what is willed must be,
and is not yours to ask what it may mean."

The steersman of that marsh of ruined souls,
who wore a wheel of flame around each eye,
stifled the rage that shook his woolly jowls.

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But those unmanned and naked spirits there
turned pale with fear and their teeth began to chatter
at sound of his crude bellow. In despair

they blasphemed God, their parents, their time on earth, 100
the race of Adam, and the day and the hour
and the place and the seed and the womb that gave them birth.

But all together they drew to that grim shore
where all must come who lose the fear of God.
Weeping and cursing they come for evermore,

105

and demon Charon with eyes like burning coals
herds them in, and with a whistling oar
flails on the stragglers to his wake of souls.

As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down
until the branch stands bare above its tatters
spread on the rustling ground, so one by one

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the evil seed of Adam in its Fall
cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore
and streamed away like birds who hear their call.

So they are gone over that shadowy water,
and always before they reach the other shore
a new noise stirs on this, and new throngs gather.

115

"My son," the courteous Master said to me,
"all who die in the shadow of God's wrath
converge to this from every clime and country.

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And all pass over eagerly, for here
Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so
their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear.

No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing;
therefore if Charon rages at your presence
you will understand the reason for his cursing."

125

When he had spoken, all the twilight country
shook so violently, the terror of it
bathes me with sweat even in memory:

the tear-soaked ground gave out a sigh of wind
that spewed itself in flame on a red sky,
and all my shattered senses left me. Blind,

130

like one whom sleep comes over in a swoon,
I stumbled into darkness and went down.

NOTES

7-8. *Only those elements time cannot wear*: The Angels, the Empyrean, and the First Matter are the elements time cannot wear, for they will last to all time. Man, however, in his mortal state, is not eternal. The Gate of Hell, therefore, was created before man. The theological point is worth attention. The doctrine of Original Sin is, of course, one familiar to many creeds. Here, however, it would seem that the preparation for damnation predates Original Sin. True, in one interpretation, Hell was created for the punishment of the rebellious Angels and not for man. Had man not sinned, he would never have known Hell. But on the other hand, Dante's God was one

who knew all, and knew therefore that man would indeed sin. The theological problem is an extremely delicate one.

It is significant, however, that having sinned, man lives out his days on the rim of Hell, and that damnation is forever below his feet. This central concept of man's sinfulness, and, opposed to it, the doctrine of Christ's ever-abounding mercy, are central to all of Dante's theology. Only as man surrenders himself to Divine Love may he hope for salvation, and salvation is open to all who will surrender themselves.

8. *and beyond time I stand*: So odious is sin to God that there can be no end to its just punishment.

9. *Abandon all hope ye who enter here*: The admonition, of course, is to the damned and not to those who come on Heaven-sent errands. The Harrowing of Hell (see Canto IV, note to l. 53) provided the only exemption from this decree, and that only through the direct intercession of Christ.

57. *who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial*: This is almost certainly intended to be Celestine V, who became Pope in 1294. He was a man of saintly life, but allowed himself to be convinced by a priest named Benedetto that his soul was in danger since no man could live in the world without being damned. In fear for his soul he withdrew from all worldly affairs and renounced the Papacy. Benedetto promptly assumed the mantle himself and became Boniface VIII, a Pope who became for Dante a symbol of all the worst corruptions of the Church. Dante also blamed Boniface and his intrigues for many of the evils that befell Florence. We shall learn in Canto XIX that the fires of Hell are waiting for Boniface in the pit of the Simoniacs, and we shall be given further evidence of his corruption in Canto XXVII. Celestine's great guilt is that his cowardice (in selfish terror for his own welfare) served as the door through which so much evil entered the Church.

80. *an old man*: Charon. He is the ferryman of dead souls across the Acheron in all classical mythology.

88-90. *By other windings*: Charon recognizes Dante not only as a living man but as a soul in grace, and knows, therefore, that the Infernal Ferry was not intended for him. He is probably referring to the fact that souls destined for Purgatory and Heaven assemble not

at his ferry point, but on the banks of the Tiber, from which they are transported by an Angel.

100. *they blasphemed God*: The souls of the damned are not permitted to repent, for repentance is a divine grace.

123. *they yearn for what they fear*: Hell (allegorically Sin) is what the souls of the damned really wish for. Hell is their actual and deliberate choice, for divine grace is denied to none who wish for it in their hearts. The damned must, in fact, deliberately harden their hearts to God in order to become damned. Christ's grace is sufficient to save all who wish for it.

133-134. DANTE'S SWOON. This device (repeated at the end of Canto V) serves a double purpose. The first is technical: Dante uses it to cover a transition. We are never told how he crossed Acheron, for that would involve certain narrative matters he can better deal with when he crosses Styx in Canto VII. The second is to provide a point of departure for a theme that is carried through the entire descent: the theme of Dante's emotional reaction to Hell. These two swoons early in the descent show him most susceptible to the grief about him. As he descends, pity leaves him, and he even goes so far as to add to the torments of one sinner. The allegory is clear: we must harden ourselves against every sympathy for sin.

Canto IV

CIRCLE ONE: LIMBO

The Virtuous Pagans

Dante wakes to find himself across Acheron. The Poets are now on the brink of Hell itself, which Dante conceives as a great funnel-shaped cave lying below the northern hemisphere with its bottom point at the earth's center. Around this great circular depression runs a series of ledges, each of which Dante calls a CIRCLE. Each circle is assigned to the punishment of one category of sin.

As soon as Dante's strength returns, the Poets begin to cross the FIRST CIRCLE. Here they find the VIRTUOUS PAGANS. They were born without the light of Christ's revelation, and, therefore, they cannot come into the light of God, but they are not tormented. Their only pain is that they have no hope.

Ahead of them Dante sighs a great dome of light, and a voice trumpets through the darkness welcoming Virgil back, for this is his eternal place in Hell. Immediately the great Poets of all time appear—HOMER, HORACE, OVID, and LUCAN. They greet Virgil, and they make Dante a sixth in their company.

With them Dante enters the Citadel of Human Reason and sees before his eyes the Master Souls of Pagan Antiquity gathered on a green, and illuminated by the radiance of Human Reason. This is the highest state man can achieve without God, and the glory of it dazzles Dante, but he knows also that it is nothing compared to the glory of God.

A monstrous clap of thunder broke apart the swoon that stuffed my head; like one awakened by violent hands, I leaped up with a start.

And having risen; rested and renewed,
I studied out the landmarks of the gloom
to find my bearings there as best I could.

And I found I stood on the very brink of the valley
called the Dolorous Abyss, the desolate chasm
where rolls the thunder of Hell's eternal cry,

so depthless-deep and nebulous and dim
that stare as I might into its frightful pit
it gave me back no feature and no bottom.

Death-pale, the Poet spoke: "Now let us go
into the blind world waiting here below us.
I will lead the way and you shall follow."

And I, sick with alarm at his new pallor,
cried out, "How can I go this way when you
who are my strength in doubt turn pale with terror?"

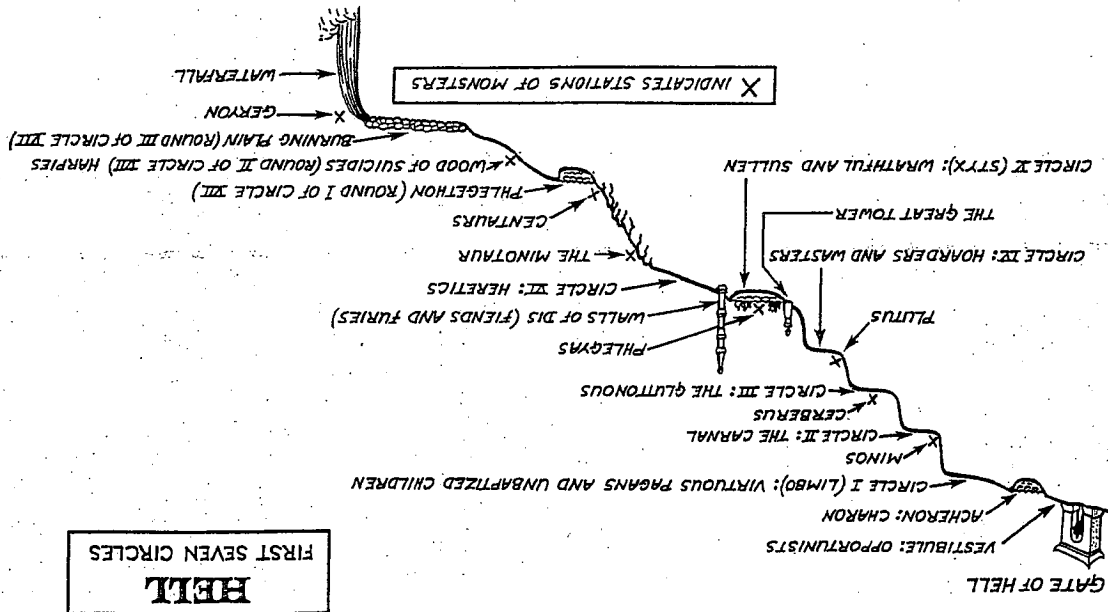
And he: "The pain of these below us here,
drains the color from my face for pity,
and leaves this pallor you mistake for fear.

Now let us go, for a long road awaits us."
So he entered and so he led me in
to the first circle and ledge of the abyss.

No tortured wailing rose to greet us here
but sounds of sighing rose from every side,
sending a tremor through the timeless air,

a grief breathed out of untormented sadness,
the passive state of those who dwelled apart,
men, women, children—a dim and endless congress.

And the Master said to me: "You do not question
what souls these are that suffer here before you?
I wish you to know before you travel on



that these were sinless. And still their merits fail,
for they lacked Baptism's grace, which is the door
of the true faith you were born to. Their birth fell

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before the age of the Christian mysteries,
and so they did not worship God's Trinity
in fullest duty. I am one of these.

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For such defects are we lost, though spared the fire
and suffering Hell in one affliction only:
that without hope we live on in desire."

I thought how many worthy souls there were
suspended in that Limbo, and a weight
closed on my heart for what the noblest suffer.

45

"Instruct me, Master and most noble Sir,
I prayed him then, "better to understand
the perfect creed that conquers every error:

has any, by his own or another's merit,
gone ever from this place to blessedness?"
He sensed my inner question and answered it:

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"I was still new to this estate of tears
when a Mighty One descended here among us,
crowned with the sign of His victorious years.

He took from us the shade of our first parent,
of Abel, his pure son, of ancient Noah,
of Moses, the bringer of law, the obedient.

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Father Abraham, David the King,
Israel with his father and his children,
Rachel, the holy vessel of His blessing,

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and many more He chose for elevation
among the elect. And before these, you must know,
no human soul had ever won salvation."

We had not paused as he spoke, but held our road
and passed meanwhile beyond a press of souls
crowded about like trees in a thick wood.

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And we had not traveled far from where I woke
when I made out a radiance before us
that struck away a hemisphere of dark.

70

We were still some distance back in the long night,
yet near enough that I half-saw, half-sensed,
what quality of souls lived in that light.

"O ornament of wisdom and of art,
what souls are these whose merit lights their way
even in Hell. What joy sets them apart?"

75

And he to me: "The signature of honor
they left on earth is recognized in Heaven
and wins them ease in Hell out of God's favor."

And as he spoke a voice rang on the air:

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"Honor the Prince of Poets; the soul and glory
that went from us returns. He is here! He is here!"

The cry ceased and the echo passed from hearing;
I saw four mighty presences come toward us
with neither joy nor sorrow in their bearing.

85

"Note well," my Master said as they came on,
"that soul that leads the rest with sword in hand
as if he were their captain and champion.

It is Homer, singing master of the earth.
Next after him is Horace, the satirist,
Ovid is third; and Lucan is the fourth.

90

Since all of these have part in the high name
the voice proclaimed, calling me Prince of Poets,
the honor that they do me honors them."

So I saw gathered at the edge of light
the masters of that highest school whose song
outsoars all others like an eagle's flight.

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And after they had talked together a while,
they turned and welcomed me most graciously,
at which I saw my approving Master smile.

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And they honored me far beyond courtesy,
for they included me in their own number,
making me sixth in that high company.

So we moved toward the light, and as we passed
we spoke of things as well omitted here
as it was sweet to touch on there. At last

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we reached the base of a great Citadel
circled by seven towering battlements
and by a sweet brook flowing round them all.

This we passed over as if it were firm ground.
Through seven gates I entered with those sages
and came to a green meadow blooming round.

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There with a solemn and majestic poise
stood many people gathered in the light,
speaking infrequently and with muted voice.

Past that enameled green we six withdrew
into a luminous and open height
from which each soul among them stood in view.

115

And there directly before me on the green
the master souls of time were shown to me.
I glory in the glory I have seen!

120

Electra stood in a great company
among whom I saw Hector and Aeneas
and Caesar in armor with his falcon's eye.

I saw Camilla, and the Queen Amazon
across the field. I saw the Lation King
seated there with his daughter by his throne.

125

And the good Brutus who overthrew the Tarquin:
Lucrezia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia;
and, by himself apart, the Saladin.

130

And raising my eyes a little I saw on high
Aristotle, the master of those who know,
ringed by the great souls of philosophy.

All wait upon him for their honor and his.
I saw Socrates and Plato at his side
before all others there. Democritus

135

who ascribes the world to chance, Diogenes,
and with him there Thales, Anaxagoras,
Zeno, Heraclitus, Empedocles.

And I saw the wise collector and analyst—
Dioscorides I mean. I saw Orpheus there,
Tully, Linus, Seneca the moralist,

140

Euclid the geometer, and Ptolemy,
Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna,
and Averroës of the Great Commentary.

145

I cannot count so much nobility;
my longer theme pursues me so that often
the word falls short of the reality.

The company of six is reduced by four.
My Master leads me by another road
out of that serenity to the roar

150

and trembling air of Hell. I pass from light
into the kingdom of eternal night.

NOTES

13 ff. *death-pale*: Virgil is most likely affected here by the return to his own place in Hell. "The pain of these below" then (line 19) would be the pain of his own group in Limbo (the Virtuous Pagans) rather than the total of Hell's suffering.

31 ff. *You do not question*: A master touch of characterization. Virgil's *amour propre* is a bit piqued at Dante's lack of curiosity about the position in Hell of Virgil's own kind. And it may possibly be, by allegorical extension, that Human Reason must urge the soul to question the place of reason. The allegorical point is conjectural, but such conjecture is certainly one of the effects inherent in the use of allegory; when well used, the central symbols of the allegory continue indefinitely to suggest new interpretations and shades of meaning.

53. *a Mighty One*: Christ. His name is never directly uttered in Hell.

53. *descended here*: The legend of the Harrowing of Hell is Apocryphal. It is based on I Peter, iii, 19: "He went and preached unto the spirits in prison." The legend is that Christ in the glory of His resurrection descended into Limbo and took with Him to Heaven the first human souls to be saved. The event would, accordingly, have occurred in A.D. 33 or 34. Virgil died in 19 B.C.

102. *making me sixth in that high company*: Merit and self-awareness of merit may well be a higher thing than modesty. An additional point Dante may well have had in mind, however, is the fact that he saw himself as one pledged to continue in his own times the classic tradition represented by these poets.

103-105. These lines amount to a stylistic note. It is good style (*'I tacere è bello* where *bello* equals "good style") to omit this discussion, since it would digress from the subject and, moreover, his point is already made. Every great narrator tends to tell his story from climax to climax. There are times on the other hand when Dante delights in digression. (See General Note to Canto XX.)

106. A GREAT CITADEL. The most likely allegory is that the Citadel represents philosophy (that is, human reason without the light of God) surrounded by seven walls which represent the seven

liberal arts, or the seven sciences, or the seven virtues. Note that Human Reason makes a light of its own, but that it is a light in darkness and forever separated from the glory of God's light. The *sweet brook flowing* round them all has been interpreted in many ways. Clearly fundamental, however, is the fact that it divides those in the Citadel (those who wish to know) from those in the outer darkness.

109. *as if it were firm ground*: Since Dante still has his body, and since all others in Hell are incorporeal shades, there is a recurring narrative problem in the *Inferno* (and through the rest of the *Commedia*): how does flesh act in contact with spirit? In the *Purgatorio* Dante attempts to embrace the spirit of Casella and his arms pass through him as if he were empty air. In the Third Circle, below (Canto VI, 34-36), Dante steps on some of the spirits lying in the slush and his foot passes right through them. (The original lines offer several possible readings of which I have preferred this one.) And at other times Virgil, also a spirit, picks Dante up and carries him bodily.

It is clear, too, that Dante means the spirits of Hell to be weightless. When Virgil steps into Phlegyas' bark (Canto VIII) it does not settle into the water, but it does when Dante's living body steps aboard. There is no narrative reason why Dante should not sink into the waters of this stream and Dante follows no fixed rule in dealing with such phenomena, often suiting the physical action to the allegorical need. Here, the moat probably symbolizes some requirement (The Will to Know) which he and the other poets meet without difficulty.

THE INHABITANTS OF THE CITADEL. They fall into three main groups:

1. *The heroes and heroines*: All of these it must be noted were associated with the Trojans and their Roman descendants. (See note on AENEAS AND THE FOUNDING OF ROME, Canto II.) The Electra Dante mentions here is not the sister of Orestes (see Euripides' *Electra*) but the daughter of Atlas and the mother of Dardanus, the founder of Troy.

2. *The philosophers*: Most of this group is made up of philosophers whose teachings were, at least in part, acceptable to Church scholarship. Democritus, however, "who ascribes the world to chance," would clearly be an exception. The group is best interpreted, there-

fore, as representing the highest achievements of Human Reason unaided by Divine Love. *Plato and Aristotle*: Through a considerable part of the Middle Ages Plato was held to be the fountainhead of all scholarship, but in Dante's time practically all learning was based on Aristotelian theory as interpreted through the many commentaries. *Linus*: the Italian is "Lino" and for it some commentators read "Livio" (Livy).

3. *The naturalists*: They are less well known today. In Dante's time their place in scholarship more or less corresponded to the role of the theoretician and historian of science in our universities. *Avicenna* (his major work was in the eleventh century) and *Averroës* (twelfth century) were Arabian philosophers and physicians especially famous in Dante's time for their commentaries on Aristotle. *Great Commentary*: has the force of a title, i.e., The Great Commentary as distinguished from many lesser commentaries.

The Saladin: This is the famous Saladin who was defeated by Richard the Lion-Heart, and whose great qualities as a ruler became a legend in medieval Europe.

Canto V

CIRCLE TWO

The Carnal

The Poets leave Limbo and enter the SECOND CIRCLE. Here begin the torments of Hell proper, and here, blocking the way, sits MINOS, the dread and semi-beastial judge of the damned who assigns to each soul its eternal torment. He orders the Poets back; but Virgil silences him as he earlier silenced Charon, and the Poets move on.

They find themselves on a dark ledge swept by a great whirlwind, which spins within it the souls of the CARNAL, those who betrayed reason to their appetites. Their sin was to abandon themselves to the tempest of their passions: so they are swept forever in the tempest of Hell, forever denied the light of reason and of God. Virgil identifies many among them. SEMIRAMIS is there, and DIDO, CLEOPATRA, HELEN, ACHILLES, PARIS, and TRISTAN. Dante sees PAOLO and FRANCESCA swept together, and in the name of love he calls to them to tell their sad story. They pause from their eternal flight to come to him, and Francesca tells their history while Paolo weeps at her side. Dante is so stricken by compassion at their tragic tale that he swoons once again.

So we went down to the second ledge alone;
a smaller circle of so much greater pain
the voice of the damned rose in a bestial moan.

There Minos sits, grinning, grotesque, and hale.
He examines each lost soul as it arrives
and delivers his verdict with his coiling tail.

That is to say, when the ill-fated soul
appears before him it confesses all,
and that grim sorter of the dark and foul

decides which place in Hell shall be its end,
then wraps his twitching tail about himself
one coil for each degree it must descend.

The soul descends and others take its place:
each crowds in its turn to judgment, each confesses,
each hears its doom and falls away through space.

"O you who come into this camp of woe,"
cried Minos when he saw me turn away
without awaiting his judgment, "watch where you go

once you have entered here, and to whom you turn!
Do not be misled by that wide and easy passage!"
And my Guide to him: "That is not your concern;

it is his fate to enter every door.

This has been willed where what is willed must be,
and is not yours to question. Say no more."

Now the choir of anguish, like a wound,
strikes through the tortured air. Now I have come
to Hell's full lamentation, sound beyond sound.

I came to a place stripped bare of every light
and roaring on the naked dark like seas
wracked by a war of winds. Their hellish flight

of storm and counterstorm through time foregone,
sweeps the souls of the damned before its charge.
Whirling and battering it drives them on,

and when they pass the ruined gap of Hell
through which we had come, their shrieks begin anew. There they blaspheme the power of God eternal.

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And this, I learned, was the never-ending flight
of those who sinned in the flesh, the carnal and lusty
who betrayed reason to their appetite.

As the wings of wintering starlings bear them on
in their great wheeling flights, just so the blast
wherries these evil souls through time foregone.

Here, there, up, down, they whirl and, whirling, strain
with never a hope of hope to comfort them,
not of release, but even of less pain.

As cranes go over sounding their harsh cry,
leaving the long streak of their flight in air,
so come these spirits, wailing as they fly.

And watching their shadows lashed by wind, I cried:
"Master, what souls are these the very air
lashes with its black whips from side to side?"

"The first of these whose history you would know,"
he answered me, "was Empress of many tongues.
Mad sensuality corrupted her so

that to hide the guilt of her debauchery
she licensed all depravity alike,
and lust and law were one in her decree.

She is Semiramis of whom the tale is told
how she married Ninus and succeeded him
to the throne of that wide land the Sultans hold.

The other is Dido; faithless to the ashes
of Sichaëus, she killed herself for love.
The next whom the eternal tempest lashes

is sense-drugged Cleopatra. See Helen there,
from whom such ill arose. And great Achilles,
who fought at last with love in the house of prayer.

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And Paris. And Tristan." As they whirled above
he pointed out more than a thousand shades
of those torn from the mortal life by love.

I stood there while my Teacher one by one
named the great knights and ladies of dim time;
and I was swept by pity and confusion. 70

At last I spoke: "Poet, I should be glad
to speak a word with those two swept together
so lightly on the wind and still so sad." 75

And he to me: "Watch them. When next they pass,
call to them in the name of love that drives
and damns them here. In that name they will pause."

Thus, as soon as the wind in its wild course
brought them around, I called: "O-wearied souls!
if none forbid it, pause and speak to us." 80

As mating doves that love calls to their nest
glide through the air with motionless raised wings,
borne by the sweet desire that fills each breast—

Just so those spirits turned on the torn sky
from the band where Dido whirls across the air;
such was the power of pity in my cry. 85

"O living creature, gracious, kind, and good,
going this pilgrimage through the sick night,
visiting us who stained the earth with blood, 90

were the King of Time our friend, we would pray His peace
on you who have pitied us. As long as the wind
will let us pause, ask of us what you please.

The town where I was born lies by the shore
where the Po descends into its ocean rest
with its attendant streams in one long murmur. 95

Love, which in gentlest hearts will soonest bloom,
seized my lover with passion for that sweet body
from which I was torn unshriven to my doom.

Love, which permits no loved one not to love,
took me so strongly with delight in him
that we are one in Hell, as we were above. 100

Love led us to one death. In the depths of Hell
Caina waits for him who took our lives."
This was the piteous tale they stopped to tell. 105

And when I had heard those world-offended lovers
I bowed my head. At last the Poet spoke:
"What painful thoughts are these your lowered brow covers?"

When at length I answered, I began: "Alas!
What sweetest thoughts, what green and young desire
led these two lovers to this sorry pass." 110

Then turning to those spirits once again,
I said: "Francesca, what you suffer here
melts me to tears of pity and of pain. 115

But tell me: in the time of your sweet sighs
by what appearances found love the way
to lure you to his perilous paradise?"

And she: "The double grief of a lost bliss
is to recall its happy hour in pain.
Your Guide and Teacher knows the truth of this. 120

But if there is indeed a soul in Hell
to ask of the beginning of our love
out of his pity, I will weep and tell:

On a day for dalliance we read the rhyme
of Lancelot; how love had mastered him.
We were alone with innocence and dim time. 125

Pause after pause that high old story drew
our eyes together while we blushed and paled;
but it was one soft passage overthrew

130

our caution and our hearts. For when we read
how her fond smile was kissed by such a lover,
he who is one with me alive and dead

breathed on my lips the tremor of his kiss.

That book, and he who wrote it, was a pander.
That day we read no further." As she said this,

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the other spirit, who stood by her, wept
so piteously, I felt my senses reel
and faint away with anguish. I was swept

by such a swoon as death is, and I fell,
as a corpse might fall, to the dead floor of Hell.

140

NOTES

2. *a smaller circle*: The pit of Hell tapers like a funnel. The circles of ledges accordingly grow smaller as they descend.

4. *Minos*: Like all the monsters Dante assigns to the various offices of Hell, Minos is drawn from classical mythology. He was the son of Europa and of Zeus who descended to her in the form of a bull. Minos became a mythological king of Crete, so famous for his wisdom and justice that after death his soul was made judge of the dead. Virgil presents him fulfilling the same office at Aeneas' descent to the underworld. Dante, however, transforms him into an irate and hideous monster with a tail. The transformation may have been suggested by the form Zeus assumed for the rape of Europa—the monster is certainly bullish enough here—but the obvious purpose of the brutalization is to present a figure symbolic of the guilty conscience of the wretches who come before it to make their confessions. Dante freely reshapes his materials to his own purposes.

8. *it confesses all*: Just as the souls appeared eager to cross Acheron, so they are eager to confess even while they dread. Dante

is once again making the point that sinners elect their Hell by an act of their own will.

27. *Hell's full lamentation*: It is with the second circle that the real tortures of Hell begin.

34. *the ruined gap of Hell*: See note to Canto IV, 53. At the time of the Harrowing of Hell a great earthquake shook the underworld, shattering rocks and cliffs. Ruins resulting from the same shock are noted in Canto XII, 34, and Canto XXI, 112 ff. At the beginning of Canto XXIV, the Poets leave the *bolgia* of the Hypocrites by climbing the ruined slabs of a bridge that was shattered by this earthquake.

THE SINNERS OF THE SECOND CIRCLE (THE CARNAL):
Here begin the punishments for the various sins of Incontinence (The sins of the She-Wolf). In the second circle are punished those who sinned by excess of sexual passion. Since this is the most natural sin and the sin most nearly associated with love, its punishment is the lightest of all to be found in Hell proper. The Carnal are whirled and buffeted endlessly through the murky air (symbolic of the beclouding of their reason by passion) by a great gale (symbolic of their lust).

53. *Empress of many tongues*: Semiramis, a legendary queen of Assyria who assumed full power at the death of her husband, Ninus.

61. *Dido*: Queen and founder of Carthage. She had vowed to remain faithful to her husband, Sichaues, but she fell in love with Aeneas. When Aeneas abandoned her she stabbed herself on a funeral pyre she had had prepared.

According to Dante's own system of punishment, she should be in the Seventh Circle (Canto XIII) with the suicides. The only clue Dante gives to the tempering of her punishment is his statement that "she killed herself for love." Dante always seems readiest to forgive in that name.

65. *Achilles*: He is placed among this company because of his passion for Polyxena, the daughter of Priam. For love of her, he agreed to desert the Greeks and to join the Trojans, but when he went to the temple for the wedding (according to the legend Dante has followed) he was killed by Paris.

The Inferno

42

74. *those two swept together*: Paolo and Francesca (PAH-oe-loe; Frahn-CHAY-ska).

Dante's treatment of these two lovers is certainly the tenderest and most sympathetic accorded any of the sinners in Hell, and legends immediately began to grow about this pair.

The facts are these. In 1275 Giovanni Malatesta (Djoe-YAH-nee Mahl-ah-TEH-stah) of Rimini, called Giovanni the Lame, a somewhat deformed but brave and powerful warrior, made a political marriage with Francesca, daughter of Guido da Polenta of Ravenna. Francesca came to Rimini and there an amour grew between her and Giovanni's younger brother Paolo. Despite the fact that Paolo had married in 1269 and had become the father of two daughters by 1275, his affair with Francesca continued for many years. It was sometime between 1283 and 1286 that Giovanni surprised them in Francesca's bedroom and killed both of them.

Around these facts the legend has grown that Paolo was sent by Giovanni as his proxy to the marriage, that Francesca thought he was her real bridegroom and accordingly gave him her heart irrevocably at first sight. The legend obviously increases the pathos, but nothing in Dante gives it support.

102. *that we are one in Hell, as we were above*: At many points of the *Inferno* Dante makes clear the principle that the souls of the damned are locked so blindly into their own guilt that none can feel sympathy for another, or find any pleasure in the presence of another. The temptation of many readers is to interpret this line romantically: *i.e.*, that the love of Paolo and Francesca survives Hell itself. The more Dantean interpretation, however, is that they add to one another's anguish (a) as mutual reminders of their sin, and (b) as insubstantial shades of the bodies for which they once felt such great passion.

104. *Caina waits for him*: Giovanni Malatesta was still alive at the writing. His fate is already decided, however, and upon his death, his soul will fall to Caina, the first ring of the last circle (Canto XXXII), where lie those who performed acts of treachery against their kin.

124-125. *the rhyme of Lancelot*: The story exists in many forms. The details Dante makes use of are from an Old French version.

126. *dim time*: The original simply reads "We were alone, suspecting nothing." "Dim time" is rhyme-forced, but not wholly outside the legitimate implications of the original, I hope. The old courtly romance may well be thought of as happening in the dim ancient days. The apology, of course, comes after the fact: one does the possible then argues for justification, and there probably is none.

134. *that book, and he who wrote it, was a pander*: "Galeotto," the Italian word for "pander," is also the Italian rendering of the name of Gallehaut, who, in the French Romance Dante refers to here, urged Lancelot and Guinevere on to love.