

# INFERNO I

## OUTLINE

- 1-9 Dante, having lost his way, in a dark wood  
10-21 hint of dawn: the sun on a mountaintop  
22-27 simile: survivor of shipwreck looking back at sea  
28-36 journey resumed; ascending the slope; a leopard  
37-43 dawn and reassurance  
44-54 a lion renews his fear; a she-wolf drives him back  
55-60 simile: merchant (or gambler?) losing everything  
61-66 apparition (of Virgil) and Dante's first words  
67-75 Virgil identifies himself  
76-78 his pointed question to Dante  
79-90 Dante's recognition, praise of Virgil; plea for aid  
91-100 Virgil's warning: power of the she-wolf  
101-111 Virgil's prophecy of the hound that will defeat her  
112-120 Virgil will guide Dante through two realms to a third  
121-129 Virgil: a second guide will take him to those in bliss,  
since he is not allowed into that realm  
130-135 Dante agrees to be led through the first two realms  
136 the two set out

# INFERNO I

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

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

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

12 Io non so ben ridir com' i' v'intrai,  
tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto  
che la verace via abbandonai.

15 Ma poi ch' i' fui al piè d'un colle giunto,  
là dove terminava quella valle  
che m'avea di paura il cor compunto,

18 guardai in alto e vidi le sue spalle  
vestite già de' raggi del pianeta  
che mena dritto altrui per ogni calle.

21 Allor fu la paura un poco queta,  
che nel lago del cor m'era durata  
la notte ch' i' passai con tanta pietà.

24 E come quei che con lena affannata,  
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,  
si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,

27 così l'animo mio, ch' ancor fuggiva,  
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo  
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.

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

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

9 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

30 Poi ch'èi posato un poco il corpo lasso,  
 ripresi via per la piaggia diserta,  
 sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso.

33 Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar de l'erta,  
 una lonza leggiera e presta molto,  
 che di pel macolato era coverta;

36 e non mi si partia dinanzi al volto,  
 anzi 'mpediva tanto il mio cammino,  
 ch'i' fui per ritornar più volte vòlto.

39 Temp' era dal principio del mattino,  
 e 'l sol montava 'n sù con quelle stelle  
 ch'eran con lui quando l'amor divino

42 mosse di prima quelle cose belle;  
 sì ch'a bene sperar m'era cagione  
 di quella fiera a la gaetta pelle

45 l'ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;  
 ma non sì che paura non mi desse  
 la vista che m'apparve d'un leone.

48 Questi pareo che contra me venisse  
 con la test' alta e con rabbiosa fame,  
 sì che pareo che l'aere ne tremesse.

51 Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame  
 sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza,  
 e molte genti fè già viver grame,

54 questa mi porse tanto di gravezza  
 con la paura ch'uscìa di sua vista,  
 ch'io perdei la speranza de l'altezza.

57 E qual è quei che volontieri acquista,  
 e giugne 'l tempo che perder lo face,  
 che 'n tutti suoi pensier piange e s'attrista;

30 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

60 tal mi fece la bestia sanza pace,  
che, venendomi 'ncontro, a poco a poco  
mi ripigneva là dove 'l sol tace.

63 Mentre ch'ì rovinava in basso loco,  
dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto  
chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco.

66 Quando vidi costui nel gran deserto,  
"Miserere di me," gridai a lui,  
"qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!"

69 Rispuosemi: "Non omo, omo già fui,  
e li parenti miei furon lombardi,  
mantoani per patria ambedui.

72 Nacqui *sub Iulio*, ancor che fosse tardi,  
e vissi a Roma sotto 'l buono Augusto  
nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi.

75 Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto  
figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia,  
poi che 'l superbo Ilión fu combusto.

78 Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?  
perché non sali il diletto monte  
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta goia?"

81 "Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte  
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?"  
rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.

84 "O de li altri poeti onore e lume,  
vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore  
che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

87 Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,  
tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi  
lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.

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

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

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

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

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

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

78 '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?'

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

84 '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.

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



90 Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi;  
aiutami da lei, famoso saggio,  
ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi."

93 "A te convien tenere altro viaggio,"  
rispuose, poi che lagrimar mi vide,  
"se vuo' campar d'esto loco selvaggio;

96 ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,  
non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,  
ma tanto lo 'mpedisce che l'uccide;

99 e ha natura sì malvagia e ria,  
che mai non empie la bramosa voglia,  
e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria.

102 Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia,  
e più saranno ancora, infin che 'l veltro  
verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.

105 Questi non ciberà terra né peltro,  
ma sapienza, amore e virtute,  
e sua nazione sarà tra feltro e feltro.

108 Di quella umile Italia fia salute  
per cui morì la vergine Camilla,  
Eurialo e Turno e Niso di ferute.

111 Questi la caccerà per ogni villa,  
fin che l'avrà rimessa ne lo 'nferno,  
là onde 'nvidia prima dipartilla.

114 Ond' io per lo tuo me' penso e discerno  
che tu mi segui, e io sarò tua guida,  
e trarrotti di qui per loco eterno;

117 ove udirai le disperate strida,  
vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti,  
ch'a la seconda morte ciascun grida;

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

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

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

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

102 '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.

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

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

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

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

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

120 e vederai color che son contenti  
nel foco, perché speran di venire  
quando che sia a le beate genti.

123 A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire,  
anima fia a ciò più di me degna:  
con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire;

126 ché quello imperador che là sù regna,  
perch' i' fu' ribellante a la sua legge,  
non vuol che 'n sua città per me si vegna.

129 In tutte parti impera e quivi regge;  
quivi è la sua città e l'alto seggio:  
oh felice colui cu' ivi elegge!"

132 E io a lui: "Poeta, io ti richeggio  
per quello Dio che tu non conoscesti,  
a ciò ch'io fugga questo male e peggio,

136 che tu mi meni là dov' or dicesti,  
sì ch'io veggia la porta di san Pietro  
e color cui tu fai cotanto mesti."  
Allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro.

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

123 '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.

126 '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.

129 '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!

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

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

1. The first of the 14,233 lines that constitute the *Comedy* immediately establishes a context for the poem that is both universal and particular. It also immediately compels a reader to realize that this is a difficult work, one that may not be read passively, but calls for the reader's active engagement.

Many commentators have pointed out that this opening verse echoes a biblical text, Isaiah's account of the words of Hezekiah, afflicted by the "sickness unto death" (Isaiah 38:10): "in dimidio dierum meorum vadam ad portas inferi" (in the midst of my days, I shall go to the gates of the nether region). Many another potential "source" has found proponents, but this one is so apposite that it has probably received more attention than any other. One other should also be mentioned here, the *Tesoretto* of Brunetto Latini (see note to *Inf.* XV.50). Another tradition holds that the reference is to the age of Dante when he made his voyage (he was thirty-five years old in 1300, half of the biblical "three score and ten"—Psalms 89:10). In addition, some commentators have noted the resonance of the epic tradition in Dante's opening phrase, since epics were seen as beginning, like this poem, *in medias res*, "in the midst of the action," not at its inception.

Related issues are also debated by the earliest commentators, in particular the date of the vision. While there has been disagreement even about the year of the journey to the otherworld, indicated at various points as being 1300 (e.g., *Inf.* X.79–80, XXI.113, *Purg.* II.98, XXXII.2), it is clear that Dante has set his work in the Jubilee Year, proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII in February of 1300. Far more uncertainty attends the question of the actual days indicated. Dante's descent into hell is begun either on Friday, 25 March or on Friday, 8 April, with the conclusion of the journey occurring almost exactly one week later. In favor of the March date, one can argue that Dante could hardly have chosen a more propitious date for a beginning: March 25 was the anniversary of the creation of Adam, of the conception and of the Crucifixion of Christ, and also marked the Florentine "New Year," since that city measured the year from the Annunciation.

2. *mi ritrovai* (I came to myself) has the sense of a sudden shocked discovery. "It is the pained amazement of one who has only now, for the first time, become aware that he is in peril" (Padoan, comm. to *Inf.* I.2).

The grammatical solecism ("Nel mezzo del cammin di *nostra* vita / *mi*

*ritrovai*" [Midway in the journey of *our* life I came to *myself* . . .]), mixing plural and singular first-persons, is another sign of the poet's desire to make his reader grasp the relation between the individual and the universal, between Dante and all humankind. His voyage is meant to be understood as ours as well.

The *selva oscura* is one of the governing images of this canto and of the poem. Many commentators point to the previous metaphorical statement found in the Dantean work that is probably nearest in time to it, the fourth treatise of his *Convivio* (*Conv.* IV.xxiv.12), where the author refers to "la selva erronea di questa vita" (the error-filled wood of this life). But here the wood is to be taken "historically" in at least a certain sense, and seems to reflect, to some readers, the condition of Eden after the Fall. In such a reading, Dante's sinful life is as though lived in the ruins of Eden, the place to which he has let himself be led, away from the light of God. In any case, the wood indicates not sin itself, but human life lived in the condition of sin.

3. See Wisdom 5:7: "Lassati sumus in via iniquitate et perditionis, et ambulavimus vias difficiles; viam autem Domini ignoravimus" (We grew weary in the way of iniquity and perdition, and we walked difficult pathways; to the way of the Lord, however, we paid no attention)—perhaps first noted in Padoan's commentary to this verse.

7. Perhaps the first serious interpretive tangle for readers of the poem. The problem is a simple one to describe: what is the antecedent of the implicit subject of the verb *è* ("It is so bitter . . .")? There are three feminine nouns that may have that role, since the predicate adjective, *amara* (bitter), is also in the feminine: *cosa dura* (hard thing, v. 4), *selva* (wood, v. 5), *paura* (fear, v. 6). Several current commentators are convinced that *selva* is the antecedent. On the other hand, it seems likely that the antecedent is the phrase *cosa dura* (as in Castelvetro's commentary). The entire passage makes good sense when read this way. To tell of his experience in the dark and savage wood is difficult (vv. 4–6) and so bitter that only dying seems more bitter; *but*, in order to treat of the better things he found in the wood, he *will* speak.

8–9. These innocent-sounding lines have been the cause of considerable puzzlement. What is "the good" that Dante found? What are the "other things"? It may be that these terms are in antithetic relation. Over five hundred years ago Filippo Villani (Bell. 1989.1, p. 93) offered this gloss: "de



bonis et malis in silva repertis" (of the good and the bad found in the forest). Following this line of interpretation yields the following general sense of the passage: "Even in the depths of my sin I found God in terrible things." And thus the *ben* is not here Virgil (as many commentators suggest despite the fact that Virgil does not appear to Dante in the forest), but God's grace in allowing Dante to learn of His goodness even in his worst experiences.

11. *pien di sonno*. The date is Thursday, 24 March (or 7 April?) 1300. As the text will later make clear (*Inf.* XXI.112–114), we are observing the 1266th anniversary of Good Friday (which fell on 8 April in 1300 [but see note to v. 1, above]). This would indicate that the poem actually begins on Thursday evening, the 1266th anniversary of Maundy Thursday, when the Apostles slept while Christ watched in the garden, and continued to sleep even as He called to them to rise. That this moment is recalled here seems likely: Dante, too, is "asleep" to Christ in his descent into sin. See *Math.* 26:40–46.

13. The *colle* (hill) is generally interpreted as signifying the good life attainable by humankind under its own powers; some, however, believe it has a higher and spiritual meaning, involving salvation. For discussion and strong support for the first reading, based in texts of Aristotle, Brunetto Latini, and Dante himself (esp. *Mon.* III.xvi.7: *beatitudo huius vitae* [the blessedness of this life]), see Mazz. 1967.1, pp. 58–60.

14. *valle* (valley): another key word in this landscape. Dante's descent into the valley where the *selva* is located marks a major moral failure and brings him close to death.

15. *paura* (fear), as many have pointed out, is perhaps the key word, in the beginning of the poem, that describes Dante's perilous inner condition. It occurs five times in the canto: at vv. 6; here; 19; 44; 53.

17. *pianeta*: the rays of the sun are meant.

18. *altrui* (others): all those who walk in the ways of the Lord.

20. For Boccaccio, this "lake" or "concavity" in the heart is the place to which our emotions flow; he goes on to mention fear as the exemplary emotion, thus giving Dante's verse a "medical" explanation.

22–27. This is the first simile in a poem filled with similes, as many as four hundred of them. Here, in response to the first of these, it is perhaps helpful to observe that "similes" in Dante are varied, and possibly fall into three rough categories: "classical" similes, like this one, perfectly balanced and grammatically correct; "improper classical" similes, which are similarly balanced but not expressed with grammatical precision; and simple comparisons, brief and unembellished. For a study in English of the Dantean simile see Lans. 1977.1; for bibliography see Sowe. 1983.1.

This simile probably takes its setting from the *Aeneid* (I.180–181), the scene of Aeneas's shipwreck on the coast of Carthage, and begins a series of linking allusions to the narrative of the first book of that poem that run through *Inferno* I and II. Dante begins his role as protagonist in this "epic" as the "new Aeneas"; his first words as speaker will later suggest that he is the "new David" as well (v. 65).

26–27. A much-disputed passage. Almost all commentators equate the *passo* with the *selva* (see note to v. 2, above). The debate centers on whether the relative pronoun *che* is objective or subjective, i.e., do we say "the pass that never let a mortal being go alive" or "the pass no mortal being ever left behind"? Mazzoni (Mazz. 1967.1, pp. 79–86) offers convincing evidence for the second reading, on the basis of Dante's elsewhere constant use of the verb *lasciare* in this way (to mean "abandon," "leave behind"). We have followed Mazzoni in our translation.

Dante's verse may reflect one of the first vernacular poems in Italian, the "Laudes creaturarum" of St. Francis, vv. 27–28: "Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra morte corporale, / de la quale nullu homo vivente pò skappare" (Blessed be thou, my Lord, for our sister mortal death, from whom no living man can escape). Whether or not this is the case (and we might consider a second possible citation of Francis's poem in v. 117—see note to that verse, below), the meaning would seem to be that Dante's extraordinary voyage into the afterworld will uniquely separate him, if only temporarily, from the world of the living while he is still alive.

30. It seems likely that the words are meant both literally and figuratively: Dante, sorely beset by his fatigue and probably by his fear as well, is inching up the slope toward the hill by planting his bottom foot firm and pushing off it to advance the higher one. As Filippo Villani was first to note, there is a Christian tradition for such a difficult progress toward one's goal, found precisely in St. Augustine, who for a long time remained a catechumen before he chose his life in Christ (Bell. 1989.1, p. 109). John Fre-



cero formed a similar opinion. According to his article "Dante's Firm Foot and the Journey without a Guide" (1959, reprinted in *Frec.* 1986.1), Dante moves forward with the right foot, representing intellect, supported by the left foot, representing will. Freccero goes on to show that the resultant figuration is one of *homo claudus*, a limping man, wounded in both his feet by Adam's sin.

32–54. The *lonza* (a hybrid born of leopard and lion) is the first of the three beasts to move against Dante as he attempts to mount the hill. Commentators frequently point to a biblical source for Dante's three beasts, the passage in Jeremiah (5:6) that describes three wild animals (lion, wolf, and "pard" [a leopard or panther]) that will fall upon Jerusalem because of their transgressions and backsliding. For an extensive review of the problem see Gaetano Ragonese, "fiera," *ED* (vol. 2, 1970, with bibliography through 1969).

The early commentators are strikingly in accord; for them the beasts signify **(1) three of the seven mortal sins: lust, pride, and avarice**. Modern interpreters mainly—but not entirely, as we shall see—reject this formulation. One of these interpretations is based on *Inferno* VI. 75, the three "sparks" that have lit evil fires in the hearts of contemporary Florentines, according to Ciaccio, who is seconded by Brunetto Latini [*Inf.* XV. 68]: **(2) envy, pride, and avarice**. Others suggest that the key is found at *Inferno* XI. 81–82, where, describing the organization of the punishment of sin, Virgil speaks of **(3) "the three dispositions Heaven opposes, incontinence, malice, and mad brutishness."** Even within this approach there are strong disagreements as to which beast represents which Aristotelian/Ciceronian category of sin: is the leopard fraud or incontinence? is the she-wolf incontinence or fraud? (the lion is seen by all those of this "school" as violence). For instance, some have asked, if the leopard is fraud, the worst of the three dispositions to sin, why is it the beast that troubles Dante the least? A possible answer is that fraud is the disposition least present in Dante.

Perhaps the single passage in the text of *Inferno* that identifies one of the three beasts in such a way as to leave little doubt about its referentiality occurs in XVI. 106–108, where Dante tells us that he was wearing a cord that he once used in his attempt to capture the beast with "the painted pelt." That this cord is used as a challenge to Geryon, the guardian of the pit of Fraud, makes it seem nearly necessary that in this passage the leopard is meant to signify Fraud. If that is true, it would seem also necessary that the lion would stand for Violence and the she-wolf for Incontinence. The

last formulation is the trickiest to support. The she-wolf is mainly associated, in the poem, not so much with Incontinence as with avarice (e.g., *Purg.* XX. 10–15). Thus Dante presents himself as most firm against Fraud, less firm against Violence, and weak when confronted by Incontinence. In his case the sin of Incontinence that afflicts him most is lust, not avarice.

There are few passages in the poem that have generated as much discussion and as little common understanding. Now see Gorni's extended discussion (*Gorn.* 1995.1, pp. 23–55).

The formulation of the early commentators (**[1] lust, pride, and avarice**) has had a resurgence in our time. It would certainly be pleasing to have reason to assent to their nearly unanimous understanding. Mazzoni (*Mazz.* 1967.1, pp. 99–102) has given, basing his argument on texts found in the Bible and in the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, good reason for returning to this view. If it were not for *Inferno* XVI. 106–108, it would be a fairly convincing argument. However, that passage seems unalterably to associate Geryon with the *lonza*.

It should also be noted that a number of still other modern interpreters have proposed various political identities for the three beasts, perhaps the most popular being **(4) the leopard as Dante's Florentine enemies, the lion as the royal house of France, the she-wolf as the forces of the papacy**. It is difficult to align such a view with the details in the text, which seem surely to be pointing to a moral rather than a political view of the situation of the protagonist as the poem begins.

For an extended discussion of the problem in English see Cassell (*Cass.* 1989.2), pp. 45–76.

33. *di pel macolato . . . coverta* (covered with a spotted pelt). For the resonance of the *Aeneid* (*Aen.* I.323), see the phrase *maculosae tegmine lynx* (the spotted hide of the lynx), first noted by Pietro Alighieri (first redaction of commentary to *Inf.* I.33).

38. Dante and others in his time believed that the sun was in the constellation of Aries at the creation, which supposedly occurred on 25 March, the date of the Annunciation and of the Crucifixion as well.

55–60. Dante's second simile in the canto turns from the semantic field of epic and perilous adventure to the more mundane but not much less perilous activity of the merchant or the gambler, his financial life hanging in the balance as he awaits news of an arriving ship or the throw of the dice—just at that moment at which his stomach sinks in the sudden

awareness that he has in fact, and unthinkably, lost. See the simile involving gambling and gamblers that opens *Purgatorio* VI.

61. For Dante's verb *rovinare* see Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1, p. 114), citing *Conv.* IV.vii.9: "La via . . . de li malvagi è oscura. Elli non sanno dove rovinano" (The path of the wicked is a dark one. They do not know where they are rushing). Mazzoni points out that Dante is translating Proverbs 4:19, substituting *ruinare* for the biblical *correre*.

62. Dante's phrasing that describes Virgil's appearance to the protagonist ("dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto") reminded Tommaseo (commentary to *Inf.* I.62) of the phrasing that describes Venus's appearance to her son, Aeneas, when the latter is intent on killing Helen in order to avenge the harm done to Troy by the Greek surprise attack within the walls of the city: "mihi se . . . ante ocul[o]s . . . obtulit" (she offered herself to my eyes).

63. Both Brugnoli (Brug.1981.1) and Hollander (Holl.1983.1, pp. 23–79) independently agree on most of the key elements in this puzzling verse: *foco* is to be taken as visual rather than aural; *silenzio* is understood as deriving from the Virgilian sense of the silence of the dead shades (e.g., *Aen.* VI.264: *umbræ silentes*). It is fair also to say that neither deals convincingly with the adjective *lungo*. How can one *see* that a "silence" is of long duration? A recent intervention by Casagrande (Casa.1997.1, pp. 246–48) makes a strong case for interpreting the adjective *lungo* as here meaning "vast, extensive," having a spatial reference. In his reading the verse would mean "who appeared indistinct in the vast silence"; our translation reflects Casagrande's view.

64. Virgil appears to Dante *nel gran deserto*. The adjective is probably meant to recall the first description of the place, *la spiaggia diserta* (the desert slope—v. 29).

65–66. Dante's first spoken word as character in his own poem is Latin (*Miserere*, "Have mercy"). This is the language of the Church, the first word of the fiftieth Psalm (50:1). Thus our hero is identified as a son of the Church—albeit a currently failing one—at the outset of the work. It has also been pointed out that, typically enough, this first utterance made by the protagonist involves a double citation, the first biblical, the second classical, Aeneas's speech to his mother, Venus (*Aen.* I.327–330).

That Dante is trying to ascertain whether Virgil is a shade or a living

soul helps interpret v. 63, i.e., he looks as though he is alive, and yet somehow not.

67–87. Alessio and Villa (Ales.1993.1) offer an important consideration of Dante's debt to the traditional classical and medieval "lives of the poets" in formulating his own brief *vita Virgilii* in this passage. Among other things, such a view undercuts the argument of those interpreters who try to make Virgil an "allegory" of reason. He is presented as a real person with a real history and is thoroughly individuated. No one could mistake the details of this life for that of another, and no one has.

70. This much-debated verse has left many in perplexity. In what sense are we to take the phrase *sub Iulio*? What is the implicit subject of the verb *fosse*? What is the precise meaning of *tardi* ("late")? Virgil was born in 70 B.C., Julius died in 44 B.C., and Virgil died in 19 B.C. Hardly any two early commentators have the same opinion about this verse. Has Dante made a mistake about the date of Julius's governance? Or does *sub Iulio* only mean "in the days of Julius"? Was Virgil's birth too late for him to be honored by Julius? Or does the clause indicate that, although he was born late in pagan times, it was still too early for him to have heard of Christianity? The most usual contemporary reading is perhaps well stated in Padoan's commentary to this verse: the Latin phrase is only meant to indicate roughly the time of Julius, and nothing more specific than that; when Julius died, Virgil was only twenty-six and had not begun his poetic career, which was thus to be identified with Augustus, rather than with Julius.

73. The word *poeta* is one of the most potent words in Dante's personal vocabulary of honor and esteem. It is used thirty times in all throughout the poem in this form, seven more times in others. In its first use, here, it constitutes Virgil's main claim as Dante's guide.

74. Anchises was the father of Aeneas.

75. The phrase *superbo Ilion* clearly mirrors *Aen.* III.2–3, "superbum / Ilium." It almost certainly has a moralizing overtone here (see also the note to v. 106, below), while in Virgil it probably only indicates the "topless towers of Troy"; in Dante it gives us some sense that Troy may have fallen because of its *superbia*, or pride.

77. *diletto* monte: in no ways different from the *colle* of verse 13.



79. At this first appearance of Virgil's name in Dante's text (it will appear thirty times more) it is probably worth noting that Dante's spelling of the name is not only his, but a widespread medieval idiosyncrasy. Translating "Vergilius" with "Virgilio" was intended to lend the Latin poet a certain dignity (by associating him with the noun *vir*, man) and/or a certain mysterious power (by associating him with the word *virga*, or "rod" with magical power).

81. Why is Dante's head "bent low in shame"? The immediate context is that of Virgil's rebuke to Dante for his failure to climb the hill and consequent ruinous flight. It is for this reason—or so one might understand—that he feels ashamed.

84. For the lofty resonance of the word *volume* in the *Comedy* (as compared with *libro*, another and lesser word for "book") see Holl.1969.1, pp. 78–79. The Bible is the only other book so referred to. Two other words that usually refer to God's divine authority are also each used once to refer to Virgil or his writing: *autore* (*Inf.* I.85) and *scrittura* (*Purg.* VI.34).

86–87. There has been much discussion of exactly what the "noble style" is and where it is to be found in Dante's work. The style is the "high style" or "tragic style" found in Virgil and other classical poets and was achieved by Dante in his odes (three of which are collected in *Convivio*), as he himself indicated in *De vulgari eloquentia* (see *Dve* II.vi.7).

Dante's formulation here goes further, making Virgil his sole source. His later interactions with other poets in hell (e.g., Pier delle Vigne [*Inf.* XIII], Brunetto Latini [*Inf.* XV]) or relatives of poets (Cavalcante [*Inf.* X]) show that not one of them is interested in the identity of Dante's guide, a fact that reflects directly on the poems left by these three practitioners, which are markedly without sign of Virgilian influence. Thus, not only is Virgil Dante's sole source for the "noble style," but Dante portrays himself as Virgil's sole follower among the recent and current poets of Italy. Perhaps more than any other claim for a literary identity, this sets him apart from them. For Dante's complicated relationship with his poetic precursors see Barolini (Baro.1984.1).

100–105. In a canto filled with passages that have called forth rivers of commentators' ink, perhaps none has resulted in so much interpretive excitement as this one. While our commentary always follows Petrocchi's text of the poem, even when we are in disagreement, we should say that

here we are in disagreement. We would capitalize the two nouns "Feltro" and "Feltro," so that they would indicate place names in northern Italy. The person in Dante's mind would then be Cangrande della Scala, the youthful general of the armies of Verona when Dante first visited that city ca. 1304. In that case, what we would deal with here is the first of three (see also *Purg.* XXXIII.37–45, *Par.* XXVII.142–148) "world-historical" prophecies of the coming of a political figure (in the last two surely an emperor) who, in his advent, also looks forward to the Second Coming of Christ. For an excellent review of the entire problem see C. T. Davis, "veltro," *ED* (vol. 5, 1976). For the notion that there is indeed a Virgilian (and imperial) source for Dante's prophecy in the prediction of Augustan rule in *Aeneid* I.286–296 see Holl.1969.1, pp. 90–91.

106. The phrase *umile Italia* surely recalls Virgil's *humilem . . . Italiam* (*Aen.* III.522–523), as has been frequently noted. Some have argued that, in Dante, the words have a moral tint, mainly contending that the reference is to Italy's current lowly political condition.

107–108. The curious intermingling of enemies (Camilla and Turnus fought *against* the Trojan invaders, Euryalus and Nisus *with* them) helps establish Dante's sense that Aeneas's Italian war was a necessary and just one, its victims as though sacrificed for the cause of establishing Rome, the "new Troy." For the centrality of Rome in Dante's thought see the volume of the late Charles Till Davis (Davi.1957.1), still the essential study of this important subject.

109–111. Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1, pp. 137–38) argues strongly for the interpretation of *prima* as an adjective modifying *invidia*, and thus for a phrase meaning "primal envy," when death entered the created world precisely because of Satan's envy (see Wisdom 2:24: "Through envy of the devil came death into the world."). He notes the resulting parallel between this line and *Inf.* III.6, where God is, in His third person, "Primo Amore" (Primal Love).

117. The possibilities for interpreting this verse are various. The "second death" may refer to what the sinners are suffering now (in which case they cry out either for a cessation in their pain—a "death" of it—or against their condition) or it may refer to the "death" they will suffer at the end of time in Christ's final Judgment (in which case they may either be crying out *for* that finality or *against* that horrifying prospect). Mazzoni



(Mazz.1967.1, p. 143) was perhaps the first to hear an echo here (now heard by several others) of v. 31 of St. Francis's "Laudes creaturarum" (for an earlier possible citation of that poem see note to v. 27): "ka la morte secunda no 'l farrà male" (the good soul, liberated by death, hopes that it will not suffer eternal damnation at the Last Judgment). Thus, while the question remains a difficult one, the best hypothesis probably remains Mazzoni's (Mazz.1967.1, pp. 139-45): the sinners are crying out in fear of the punishments to come after the Last Judgment.

122. Virgil's self-description as unworthy may reflect a similar self-description, that of John the Baptist. See John 1:27 and related discussion in Holl.1983.1, pp. 63, 71-73. In this formulation Virgil is to Beatrice as John was to Christ. For an earlier moment in Dante's writing that is based on exactly such a typological construction, one in which Guido Cavalcanti's Giovanna/John the Baptist is portrayed as the "forerunner" to Dante's Beatrice/Christ, see *VNXXIV.3-4*.

125. It is fair to say that most commentators dodge this troublesome word. How could Virgil have been a "rebel" against a God he did not know? We should remember that this formulation is Virgil's own and may simply reflect his present sense of what he should have known when he was alive. That is, Virgil may be exaggerating his culpability.

132. "This harm" is Dante's present situation in the world; "and worse" would be his damnation.

134-135. Dante has apparently understood clearly enough that Virgil will lead him through hell and purgatory, but not paradise. Having read the poem, we know that Beatrice will assume the role of guide for the first nine heavens. Virgil seems to know this (see vv. 122-123), but not Dante, who seems to be aware only that some soul will take up the role of Virgil when his first guide leaves him.

## INFERNO II

### OUTLINE

- 1-6 Dante, "alone" with Virgil, prepares for the journey invocation (Muses, "lofty genius"); his worthy memory  
 7-9  
 10-36 Dante's uncertainty as to his qualifications  
 37-42 simile: a man unwilling to do what he has resolved  
 43-48 Virgil: Dante is a coward  
 49-74 Virgil tells of his encounter with Beatrice in Limbo  
 75-84 Virgil will lead Dante; why is Beatrice not fearful?  
 85-93 Beatrice's response: the saved are proof against hell  
 94-114 a lady in heaven (Mary), Lucy, and Beatrice all help  
 115-120 tears of Beatrice induce Virgil to begin at once  
 121-126 Virgil chides Dante for his cowardice  
 127-130 simile: flowers raised and opened by sun  
 131-135 Dante's renewed vigor; debt to Beatrice and to Virgil  
 136-140 Dante has again embraced his first resolve  
 141-142 the two again set out

## INFERNO II

3 Lo giorno se n'andava, e l'aere bruno  
toglieva li animai che sono in terra  
da le fatiche loro; e io sol uno

6 m'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra  
sì del cammino e sì de la pietate,  
che ritrarrà la mente che non erra.

9 O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;  
o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,  
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.

12 Io cominciai: "Poeta che mi guidi,  
guarda la mia virtù s'ell' è possente,  
prima ch'a l'alto passo tu mi fidi.

15 Tu dici che di Silvïo il parente,  
corruttibile ancora, ad immortale  
secolo andò, e fu sensibilmente.

18 Però, se l'avversario d'ogne male  
cortese i fu, pensando l'alto effetto  
ch'uscir dovea di lui, e 'l chi e 'l quale

21 non pare indegno ad omo d'intelletto;  
ch'e' fu de l'alma Roma e di suo impero  
ne l'empireo ciel per padre eletto:

24 la quale e 'l quale, a voler dir lo vero,  
fu stabilita per lo loco santo  
u' siede il successor del maggior Piero.

27 Per quest' andata onde li dai tu vanto,  
intese cose che furon cagione  
di sua vittoria e del papale ammanto.

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

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

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

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

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

18 '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,

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

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

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

30 Andovvi poi lo Vas d'elezione,  
per recarne conforto a quella fede  
ch'è principio a la via di salvazione.

33 Ma io, perché venirvi? o chi 'l concede?  
Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono;  
me degno a ciò né io né altri 'l crede.

36 Per che, se del venire io m'abbandono,  
temo che la venuta non sia folle.  
Se' savio; intendi me' ch'i' non ragiono."

39 E qual è quei che disvuol ciò che volle  
e per novi pensier cangia proposta,  
sì che dal cominciar tutto si tolle,

42 tal mi fec' io 'n quella oscura costa,  
perché, pensando, consumai la 'mpresa  
che fu nel cominciar cotanto tosta.

45 "S'i' ho ben la parola tua intesa,"  
rispuose del magnanimo quell' ombra,  
"l'anima tua è da viltade offesa;

48 la qual molte fiate l'omo ingombra  
sì che d'onrata impresa lo rivolve,  
come falso veder bestia quand' ombra.

51 Da questa tema a ciò che tu ti solve,  
dirotti perch' io venni e quel ch'io 'ntesi  
nel primo punto che di te mi dolve.

54 Io era tra color che son sospesi,  
e donna mi chiamò beata e bella,  
tal che di comandare io la richiesi.

57 Lucevan li occhi suoi più che la stella;  
e cominciommi a dir soave e piana,  
con angelica voce, in sua favella:

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

33 '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.

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

39 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,

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

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

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

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

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

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



60 'O anima cortese mantoana,  
di cui la fama ancor nel mondo dura,  
e durerà quanto 'l mondo lontana,

63 l'amico mio, e non de la ventura,  
ne la diserta piaggia è impedito  
sì nel cammin, che vòlt' è per paura;

66 e temo che non sia già sì smarrito,  
ch'io mi sia tardi al soccorso levata,  
per quel ch'i' ho di lui nel cielo udito.

69 Or movi, e con la tua parola ornata  
e con ciò c'ha mestieri al suo campare,  
l'aiuta sì ch'i' ne sia consolata.

72 I' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare;  
vegno del loco ove tornar disio;  
amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.

75 Quando sarò dinanzi al signor mio,  
di te mi loderò sovente a lui.  
Tacette allora, e poi comincia' io:

78 'O donna di virtù sola per cui  
l'umana spezie eccede ogni contento  
di quel ciel c'ha minor li cerchi sui,

81 tanto m'aggrada il tuo comandamento,  
che l'ubidir, se già fosse, m'è tardi;  
più non t'è uo' ch'aprirmi il tuo talento.

84 Ma dimmi la cagion che non ti guardi  
de lo scender qua giù in questo centro  
de l'ampio loco ove tornar tu ardi.

87 'Da che tu vuo' saver cotanto a dentro,  
dirotti brevemente, mi rispuose,  
'perch' i' non temo di venir qua entro.

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

63 "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,

66 "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.

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

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

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

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

81 "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.

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

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

90 Temer si dee di sole quelle cose  
c'hanno potenza di fare altrui male;  
de l'altre no, ché non son paurose.

93 I' son fatta da Dio, sua mercé, tale,  
che la vostra miseria non mi tange,  
né fiamma d'esto 'ncendio non m'assale.

96 Donna è gentil nel ciel che si compiange  
di questo 'mpedimento ov'io ti mando,  
sì che duro giudicio là sù frange.

99 Questa chiese Lucia in suo dimando  
e disse: "Or ha bisogno il tuo fedele  
di te, e io a te lo raccomando."

102 Lucia, nimica di ciascun crudele,  
si mosse, e venne al loco dov' i' era,  
che mi sedea con l'antica Rachele.

105 Disse: "Beatrice, loda di Dio vera,  
ché non soccorri quei che t'amò tanto,  
ch'uscì per te de la volgare schiera?"

108 Non odi tu la pieta del suo pianto,  
non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte  
su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto?"

111 Al mondo non fur mai persone ratte  
a far lor pro o a fuggir lor danno,  
com'io, dopo cotai parole fatte,

114 venni qua giù del mio beato scanno,  
fidandomi del tuo parlare onesto,  
ch'onora te e quei ch'udito l'hanno.

117 Poscia che m'ebbe ragionato questo,  
li occhi lucenti lagrimando volse,  
per che mi fece del venir più presto.

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

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

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

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

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

105 "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?»

108 "«Do you not hear the anguish in his tears?  
Do you not see the death besetting him  
on the swollen river where the sea cannot prevail?»

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

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

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

120 E venni a te così com' ella volse:  
d'inzani a quella fiera ti levai  
che del bel monte il corto andar ti tolse.

123 Dunque: che è? perché, perché restai,  
perché tanta viltà nel core allette,  
perché ardire e franchezza non hai,

126 poscia che tai tre donne benedette  
curan di te ne la corte del cielo,  
e 'l mio parlar tanto ben ti promette?"

129 Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo  
chinati e chiusi, poi che 'l sol li 'mbianca,  
si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo,

132 tal mi fec' io di mia virtude stanca,  
e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse,  
ch' i' cominciai come persona franca:

135 "Oh pietosa colei che mi soccorse!  
e te cortese ch'ubidisti tosto  
a le vere parole che ti porse!

138 Tu m'hai con disiderio il cor disposto  
sì al venir con le parole tue,  
ch' i' son tornato nel primo proposto.

142 Or va, ch'un sol volere è d'ambedue:  
tu duca, tu signore e tu maestro."  
Così li dissi; e poi che mosso fue,  
intraì per lo cammino alto e silvestro.

120 'And so I came to you just as she wished.  
I saved you from the beast denying you  
the short way to the mountain of delight.

123 'What then? Why, why do you delay?  
Why do you let such cowardice rule your heart?  
Why are you not more spirited and sure,

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

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

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

135 'O how compassionate was she to help me,  
how courteous were you, so ready to obey  
the truthful words she spoke to you!

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

142 'Set out then, for one will prompts us both.  
You are my leader, you my lord and master,  
I said to him, and when he moved ahead  
I entered on the deep and savage way.



1-6. Against the common opinion (as it exists even today, most recently exhibited by Merc.1998.1) that the first two cantos perform separate functions (e.g., I = prologue to the poem as a whole, II = prologue to the first *cantica*), Wilkins (Wilk.1926.1) argues, on the basis of discussion of the defining characteristics of prologues found in the *Epistle to Cangrande* (*Epist.* XIII.43-48), that Cantos I and II form a unitary prologue to the entire poem as well as to its first *cantica* (or "canticle"). This reader finds his comments just and convincing. In actuality, all three *cantiche* begin with two-canto-long prologues containing an invocation, some narrated action, and presentation of details that prepare the reader for what is to follow further along in the poem.

For the structural parallels that also tend to merge the two cantos into a single entity see Holl.1990.2, p. 97:

*Inferno* I

1-27 Dante's peril  
simile (22-27)  
28-60 three beasts  
simile (55-58)  
61-136 Virgil's assurances

*Inferno* II

1-42 Dante's uncertainty  
simile (37-40)  
43-126 three blessed ladies  
simile (127-130)  
127-142 Dante's will firmed

1-3. The precise Virgilian text that lies behind Dante's generically "Virgilian" opening flourish is debated. (Major candidates include *Aen.* III.147, *Aen.* IV.522-528, *Aen.* VIII.26-27, *Aen.* IX.224-225, *Georg.* I.427-428. See discussion in Mazz.1967.1, pp. 165-66.) These three lines, as has often been noted, have a sad eloquence that establishes a mode of writing to which the poet will return when he considers the Virgilian "tears of things" in the lives of some of his characters.

3. The protagonist, about to descend into hell, is described, perhaps surprisingly, since he is in the company of Virgil, as being alone ("sol uno"). But see *Conv.* IV.xxvi.9, where Dante describes Aeneas, about to begin his descent *ad inferos*, similarly as being "alone": "... when Aeneas prepared, alone with the Sibyl [*solo con Sibilla*], to enter the underworld." In Dante's view, it would seem that the condition of a mortal soul, about to enter the underworld, is one of loneliness, even though it is accompanied by a shade. See Holl.1993.1, p. 256.

4-5. This formulation perhaps refers to the struggle of the protagonist with the difficulties of proceeding (his struggles with fearsome exterior forces ranged against him, from the previously-encountered three beasts in the first canto to Satan in the last) and with his own interior weakness, demonstrated by his occasional surrender to the emotion of pity (beginning with Francesca in the fifth canto and ending when he does not yield to Ugolino's entreaties for his pity in the thirty-third). For a possible five-part program that marks the development of the protagonist's strength, as he moves through five cycles of pity and fear in hell, see Holl.1969.1, pp. 301-7.

6. In the words of Singleton's gloss, "Memory will now faithfully retrace the real event of the journey, exactly as it took place. This most extraordinary journey through the three realms of the afterlife is represented, never as dreamed or experienced in vision, but as a real happening. . . Here, then, and in the following invocation, the poet's voice is heard for the first time as it speaks of his task as poet."

7-9. The passage including the poem's first invocation is challenging and has caused serious interpretive difficulty. Why does Dante invoke the Muses in a Christian work? What does *alto ingegno* (lofty genius) refer to? Is the invocation of two powers ("Muses" and "lofty genius") or of three (the *mente*, or "memory," of verse 8)? For a discussion of these points see Holl.1990.2, pp. 98-100, arguing that the "muses" are the devices of poetic making that the individual poet may master, that the "lofty genius" is not Dante's, but God's, and that only these two elements are invoked, while "mente" is merely put forward as having been effective in recording the facts of the journey (and is surely not "invoked," as the very language of the passage makes plain). In this formulation, here and in some of his later invocations Dante is asking for divine assistance in conceptualizing the matter of his poem so that it may resemble his Creator, its source, while also asking for the help of the "muses" in finding the most appropriate expressive techniques for that conceptualization. As for the raw content, that he has through his own experience; he requires no external aid for it. What he does need is conceptual and expressive power, *alto ingegno* and the poetic craft represented by the "muses."

It is, given Dante's fondness for the number of Beatrice, nine, difficult to believe that the fact that there are nine invocations in the poem may be accidental (see Holl.1976.2). For perhaps the first reckoning that accounts for all nine invocations see Fabb.1910.1. It is curious that few

commentators have noted the fact that there are, in fact, nine invocations (and only nine) in the poem. They are as follows: *Inf.* II.7, XXXII.10-12; *Purg.* I.7-12, XXIX.37-42; *Par.* I.13-21, XVIII.83-88, XXII.112-123, XXX.97-99, XXXIII.67-75.

10. This verse begins a series of conversations that give the canto its shape. With the exception of the eleventh Canto, 92 percent of which is devoted to dialogue (mainly Virgil's explanations of the circles of hell, joined by Dante's responses and questions), no other Infernal canto contains so much dialogue, with 118 of its 142 verses being spoken (83 percent). These conversations form a chiasmus (from the Greek *chi*, our letter 'x'), the device of shaping the parts of a text into a perfectly balanced pattern (see Holl.1990.2, p. 100):

1. Dante (10-36)
2. Virgil (43-57)
3. Beatrice (58-74)
4. Virgil (75-84)
5. Beatrice (85-114)
6. Virgil (115-126)
7. Dante (133-140)

12. The meaning of the phrase *alto passo* is debated. See Mazz.1967.1, pp. 180-84, for documentation. Mazzoni gives good reasons for accepting a literal reading, one that makes the *passo* correspond to the journey, rather than, as some have proposed, a metaphorical one, in which it signifies the poem. Mazzoni paraphrases these words with the phrase "impresa eccezionale" (extraordinary undertaking), while also stressing the difficulty of that adventure. Our translation seeks a similar solution.

13. According to Virgil, Aeneas was the father of Silvius and Ascanius.

15. In his commentary Padoan points out that the insistence on the physicality of Aeneas's descent effectively undercuts that tradition of medieval allegorized Virgil which asserts that the "descent" is to be taken as a "philosophical," rather than as a literal, journey. Aeneas's journey, like Dante's own, is to be dealt with as actually having occurred in space and time.

16-19. For the commentators, the most troubling aspect of a difficult tercet is found in the phrase "e 'l chi e 'l quale" ("considering who and

what he was," v. 18—see Mazzoni, pp. 192-96). The sense, however, may be fairly straightforward: it is not surprising that God should have chosen Aeneas to found Rome, with its profound impact on human history, both imperial and ecclesiastical, since Aeneas (the "who" of the verse) was both the founder of a royal line (ancestor of Julius Caesar through Ascanius) and "divine" (the "what," since he was the son of a goddess, Venus).

Dante uses the word "cortese" (courteous, i.e., as in the favoring generosity of a lord or lady) in v. 17 in a way that theologizes its usual courtly context. For the tradition of the concept as it comes into Dante see Crim.1993.1.

20-21. The adjective *alma* (here translated as "holy") has had various interpretations in the commentary tradition, e.g., "exalted" (*eccelsa*: Boccaccio), "lofty" (*alta*: Buti), "nurturing" (*alma*: Landino), "holy" (*sancta*: Benvenuto). Citing Paget Toynbee, Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1), p. 198, makes a strong argument for the last of these. Our translation reflects his view. And this formulation knits up these two tercets into a single meaning: Aeneas was chosen by God to be the founder of imperial and ecclesiastical Rome. Such a view disturbs those who believe that Dante, when he began the *Comedy*, was still a Guelph (i.e., a supporter of the papacy) in his political attitudes and not a Ghibelline (a supporter of the empire). A reading of the fourth book of *Convivio* (Mazzoni [Mazz.1967.1], pp. 216-20), demonstrates the close correspondence between what Dante says here and what he had said in *Convivio* IV, iv-v. There he had already made a decisive shift toward recognizing the importance of what we would call "secular Rome." Dante, as the prophecy of the *veltro* (depending on one's interpretation of it) may already have demonstrated, now believes in the divine origin and mission of the empire. See note to *Inf.* I.100-105.

22-24. See Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1), pp. 198-220, for a thorough review of this tercet, made problematic not because its words or the sense of these words is difficult, but because what it says is assumed by many commentators to be premature in its championing of the empire, a position Dante is supposed to have embraced only later. See the preceding note. For a recent attempt to describe the political aspect of the poem see Hollander (Holl.2000.1), the section, in the discussion devoted to the *Commedia*, entitled "La politica."

26. Aeneas understood things from what was revealed to him in the underworld, most notably by his father, Anchises (see Mazz.1967.1, p. 222).



27. This verse concludes the "imperial theme" of this canto, initiated in v. 13. These five tercets continually break Aeneas's identity or task into two aspects ("e 'l chi e 'l quale" [who and what he was—v. 18], "de l'alma Roma e di suo impero" [holy Rome and her dominion—v. 20], "la quale e 'l quale" [both of these established—v. 22], "di sua vittoria e del papale ammanto" [to victory and . . . the papal mantle—v. 27]). This speech is not in the mouth of Virgil, but of Dante, and for a reason. It purveys, with some heated enthusiasm, the view of Roman imperial excellence that Dante had only recently developed. He cannot allow its religious dimension authoritative utterance by Virgil, whose credentials as "Christian" are not exactly imposing. And so the otherwise not-very-mature protagonist is here given the author's voice to say what that author wants most definitely to set down before us.

28. For Paul as the *Vas d'elezione* (Chosen Vessel) see Acts 9:15. For his ascent to heaven while still alive see II Cor. 12:4.

This flat statement that Paul's journey actually occurred contrasts with the less forthright claim made for Aeneas's in verse 13: "Tu dici che" (You tell that). This and the subsequent phrasing, in which that same journey is referred to as the "andata onde li dai tu vanto" (journey for which you grant him glory) at v. 25, both imbue the speaker's acceptance of the veracity of Virgil's account of that journey with a certain sense of dubiety (see Holl.1990.2, p. 103), at least when compared with the biblical authority enjoyed by Paul's.

With regard to the question of whether or not Dante believed Paul had been to hell (as recounted in the *Visio Pauli*) see Padoan's comment, with bibliography (to which now should be added Silv.1997.1). Most commentators would seem to believe that Dante is here alluding only to Paul's heavenly journey, not to his apocryphal descent.

32. It has frequently been remarked that Dante's denial must be taken ironically. What the protagonist says is not what his author thinks: Dante is to be understood as both the "new Aeneas" and the "new Paul." Jacoff and Stephany offer an ample deliberation on this subject (Jaco.1989.1), pp. 57–72. For a recent study of Paul's presence in Dante's works see DiSc.1995.1.

33–36. Dante's apparent modesty is obviously meant to be taken rather as cowardice, as Virgil's response at v. 45 ("your spirit is assailed by cowardice") makes pellucidly clear.

37–40. A type of simile Dante enjoys deploying, one in which both elements ("tenor" and "vehicle") are eventually seen to involve the same agent: "and as a man . . . so was I." See note to *Inferno* XXX.136–141.

41. For the importance of the word *impresa* (enterprise) in the overall economy of the poem see Holl.1969.1, p. 230. It occurs twice in this canto (next at v. 47), where it refers to Dante's journey, then in *Inf.* XXXII.7, where it refers to the poem that Dante is writing, and finally in *Par.* XXXIII.95, where it surely refers to the voyage, and perhaps to the poem as well. See note to *Inferno* XXXII.1–9.

43. This is the first occurrence of the word "word" (*parola*) in the poem and in this canto. It will reappear four more times in the canto at vv. 67, 111, 135, and 137. If, as several commentators have urged (see Holl.1990.2, p. 96), the first Canto of the poem is the "canto della paura" (canto of fear—the word *paura* appears five times [see note to canto I.15], as does *parola* in this one, and neither appears so many times in any other canto), then *Inferno* II perhaps should be construed as the 'canto della parola' (canto of the word). See Holl.1990.2, *passim*.

48. For a possible source for this verse, not hitherto cited, see *Aeneid* X.592–593, where Aeneas scornfully addresses Lucagus, whom he has just mortally wounded, and tells his fallen enemy that he cannot blame his plight on the shying of his horses: "Lucagus, the cowardly flight of your horses has not betrayed your chariot, nor has the empty shadow [*vanae . . . umbrae*] of an enemy turned them away." See Holl.1993.1, p. 256.

52. The verbal adjective *sospesi* (suspended), that is, in a position between the presence of God and actual punishment, is a technical term for the virtuous heathen who dwell in Limbo. See Mazzoni's note (Mazz.1967.1), pp. 239–47.

53–54. Beatrice's anonymous first appearance and Virgil's instinctive obeisance might easily lead a reader to assume that this lady has primarily an "allegorical" meaning. For a recent study of the roots of the problematic allegorical interpretation of Beatrice see Porc.1997.2. We will in time be told who she is (*Inf.* II.70). Dante's first extended work, *Vita nuova* (ca. 1293), celebrated his lady, Beatrice, as a mortal woman unlike any other, her meaning indissolubly linked with the Trinity, and in particular with the Second Person, Christ.



56–57. Virgil describes Beatrice's speech as being *soave e piana* (gentle and clear). She will, in turn, describe his speech as *parola ornata* (polished words—at v. 67). The two adjectives, *piana* and *ornata*, may remind us of a major distinction, found in medieval categorizations of rhetorical styles, between the plain, or low, style, and the ornate, or high. Benvenuto, commenting on this passage, was the first to point this out, glossing “soave e piana” as follows: “divine speech is sweet and humble, not elevated and proud, as is that of Virgil and the poets.” Thus Virgil's description of Beatrice's words corresponds antithetically to hers of his; her speech represents the sublimely humble style valorized by the *Comedy*, while his recalls the high style that marked pagan eloquence (the observation is drawn from Holl.1990.2, p. 107, where there are references to previous discussions in Auer.1958.1, pp. 65–66; Mazz.1979.1, pp. 157–58).

58. Beatrice's first words, which Daniello (commentary to this verse) compared to Juno's attempt to win over Aeolus at *Aeneid* 1.66–67, offer a striking example of *captatio benevolentiae*, the rhetorical device of gaining favor with one's audience. They will be effective enough in gaining Virgil's goodwill. And, despite Virgil's characterization of her speech, in v. 56, as being “gentle and clear,” it is also unmistakably lofty in its rhetorical reach.

61. For a consideration of the fullest implications of this verse see Mazzoni (Mazz.1967.1), pp. 256–68. According to him, the literal sense is that Dante is not a friend to Fortune, not that Fortune has forsaken *him*. The upshot of these readings is that Beatrice makes Dante her friend in true spiritual friendship, denying that he is “friendly” to Fortune.

62–64. Words familiar from the first canto come back into play here: *diserta spiaggia* (1.29), *cammin* (1.1), *paura* (1.53), *smarrito* (1.3). This is not the last time we will look back to the protagonist's desperate condition evident at the beginning of the poem.

67. See Holl.1990.2, p. 118, for discussion of the undercutting of Virgil's “ornate speech” (*parola ornata*) when it is seen as linked to Jason's *parole ornate* (*Inf.* XVIII.91), the deceptive rhetoric by which he seduces women.

74. Beatrice's promise to speak well of Virgil to God has drawn some skeptical response, e.g., Castelvetro on this verse: “Questo che monta a

Virgilio che è dannato?” (What good is this to Virgil, who is damned?). We are probably meant to be more impressed than that.

76–78. The meaning of this much-disputed tercet would seem to be: “O lady of virtuous disposition which alone, shared by others, may bring them, too, to salvation out of the sublunar world of sin . . .” This is to rely on Mazzoni's affirmation (Mazz.1967.1, pp. 276–77) of Barbi's reading of the verse (Barb.1934.2, p. 22), which continues to find detractors.

83. *in questo centro*. Singleton, in his comment on this verse, speaks of the “strong pejorative connotation” of Dante's phrase, stemming from “the well-established view that the earth's position at the center of the universe is the most ignoble—because it is farthest from God and His angels.” Singleton goes on to cite from a sermon of Fra Giordano da Rivalto, characterizing the true center of the earth as “that point within the earth which is in its midst, as the core is in the midst of an apple. We believe that hell is located there, at the true center.”

85–93. Beatrice's insistence that she is not “touchable” by the grim powers of the pains of hell underlines the marginality of sin for the saved. Hell is simply not of concern to them. It is important to know, as one begins reading the poem, what one can only know once one has finished it: no soul in purgation or in grace in heaven has a thought for the condition of the damned (only the damned themselves do). Their concern for those who do not share their redeeming penitence or bliss is reserved for those still alive on earth, who have at least the hope of salvation. Hell, for the saved, is a sordid reality of which it is better not to speak.

94. While every modern commentator recognizes (quite rightly) Mary in this lady, none of the early interpreters do, a fact that may seem astonishing (Castelvetro, in 1570, may have been the first to do so).

97. Lucy, the martyred Syracusan virgin (fourth century), whose name itself associates her with light, obviously played a special role in Dante's devotional life. She will reappear in *Purg.* IX.52–63, where she indeed carries Dante from the valley in which he sleeps in the ante-purgatory to the gate of purgatory itself; and then she is seen seated in blessedness (*Par.* XXXII.137–138). See the discussion in Jacoff and Stephany (Jaco.1989.1), pp. 29–38.

102. Rachel, the fourth lady indicated as dwelling in heaven, presented here as Beatrice's "neighbor," is traditionally interpreted (as she is by Dante himself—see *Purg.* XXVII.94–108) as the contemplative life, as her sister Leah represents the active one. Since the fourteenth century there have been frequent (and widely varying) attempts to "allegorize" the Virgin, Lucy, and Beatrice, most often as various varieties of grace (see Padoan's commentary to v. 97 for a brief summary). There is no textual basis for such efforts, as appealing as many readers apparently find them.

105. What exactly does it mean, Lucy's insistence to Beatrice that, for her sake, Dante "left the vulgar herd" (*la volgare schiera*)? Guido da Pisa interprets the phrase to mean Dante turned from the study of the liberal arts to theology. Without debating such a judgment, one might add a poetic dimension to it, as has Francesco Mazzoni (*Mazz.* 1967.1, pp. 289–93). According to him, the most important meaning of the verse is to reflect Dante's turning from a "conventional" amorous poetic subject matter to what he will later call the "dolce stil novo" (*Purg.* XXIV.57), a poetry that presents, in a new "style," the higher meaning of Beatrice. (Some would go further, still, and suggest that this meaning is essentially Christological—see Holl. 1999.1.) Mazzoni's view is seconded by the importance of the word *volgare* to Dante. While it is surely at times limited to the negative sense of the Latin *vulgus*, pertaining to the common people, the "mob," it is also the word that he uses to describe his own vernacular speech, as in the title of his treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* ("On Eloquence in the Vernacular").

The view that Dante's sense of his own poetic vocation is central to the meaning of this verse is supported by the text at *Inf.* IV.101, where the group of classical poets, who so graciously include Dante in their number, is also described as a *schiera* (company).

107–108. As tormented a passage as may be found in this canto, and one of the most difficult in the entire work, whether for its literal sense (what "death"? what "river"? what "sea"? ) or its possibly only metaphorical meaning. See Mazzoni's summary of the centuries-long debate over the passage (*Mazz.* 1967.1), pp. 294–303, as well as Freccero's essay (*Frec.* 1986.1 [1966]), pp. 55–69. For discussion of a "typological" reading of the passage see Holl. 1990.2, pp. 110–11, associating the narrated action with a temporarily halted attempt to enter the River Jordan.

For the literal sense in which the Dead Sea is not a "sea," but a "lake"

that receives the waters of Jordan see Filippo Villani (*Bell.* 1989.1, p. 109): "And, in the literal sense, the river Jordan does not flow into a sea, but ends in a lake that is bright and clear, even pleasant."

109–114. Beatrice concludes her speech by expressing the efficacy of Lucy's words on Dante's behalf, which won her over to interceding with Virgil in order to give her beloved a second chance. (*Purgatorio* XXX and XXXI will reveal that she had grounds for being less charitable to her backsliding lover.) Her speech concludes with the same sort of *captatio benevolentiae* that marked its inception at v. 58, now couched in terms that praise Virgil's *parlare onesto*. The phrase means more than "honest speech," as is made clear by its etymological propinquity to the verb *onora* (honors) in the next line. "Noble" (found also in Sinclair's translation) seemed to the translators a reasonable way to attempt to bridge the gap between "honest" and "decorous," retaining a sense of moral and stylistic gravity for the words of the greatest poet of pagan antiquity—which Virgil was for Dante.

116. Beatrice's tears remind us of Venus's when the goddess weeps for her burdened son in *Aeneid* I.228, as was perhaps first suggested by Holl. 1969.1, pp. 91–92. See also Jaco. 1982.1, p. 3, showing that the verse probably reflects Rachel's tears for her lost children (*Jeremiah* 31:15)—who are eventually restored to her (as will Dante be to Beatrice).

118–126. Virgil offers a summation, as might a modern lawyer concluding his charge to a jury or a classical or medieval orator convincing his learned auditors as he concludes his argument. Virgil has saved Dante from the she-wolf; why has his pupil not been more ready to follow him? And now there is the further evidence of the three heavenly ladies who have also interceded on Dante's behalf, thus giving confirmation of the justness of what Virgil had sketched as a plan for Dante's journey (*Inf.* I.112–123).

133–135. For the resonance of I Kings 17:22–24, especially the phrase "the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth," see Ferr. 1995.1, p. 114. And for the *vere parole* of Beatrice, see also the "veras . . . voces" that Aeneas would like to exchange with mother Venus, *Aeneid* I.409, as noted by Jaco. 1989.1, pp. 21–22.

140. For the words *duca*, *signore*, and *maestro*, as well as others, terms used by Dante for his guide, see Gmel. 1966.1, pp. 59–60, offering the following



enumeration of these: *duca* is used 19 times in *Inferno* and 17 times in *Purgatorio*; *maestro*, 34 times in *Inferno*, 17 in *Purgatorio*; *signore*, 8 times; *poeta*, 8 times in *Inferno*, 7 times in *Purgatorio*; *savio*, 6 times; *padre*, 10 times.

142. Knitting together the two proemial cantos, the word *cammino* occupies their first and final verses.