

"The *Hollanders*' [translation] is probably the most finely accomplished and may well prove the most enduring."

—R. W. B. Lewis, *Los Angeles Times*



DANTE  
the *inferno*

A VERSE TRANSLATION BY

ROBERT HOLLANDER AND JEAN HOLLANDER

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*Dante Alighieri*  
**INFERNO**

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TRANSLATED BY ROBERT & JEAN HOLLANDER

INTRODUCTION & NOTES BY ROBERT HOLLANDER



ANCHOR BOOKS

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*for*

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*Francesco,*

*Maria Grazia,*

*Stefano,*

*Simonetta,*

*Enrico,*

*& Tommaso*

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# A Note on Using This eBook

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In this eBook edition of *The Inferno*, you will find two types of hyperlinks.

The first type is embedded in the line numbers to the left of the text: these links allow you to click back and forth between the English translation and the original Italian text while still holding your place.

The second type of link, which is indicated by an arrow (→) at the end of a line of poetry, will bring you to an explanatory note.

You can click on an arrow to navigate to the appropriate note; you can then use the links at the end of each note to return to your location in either the English translation or the original Italian text. You can also click on the note number to return to your location in the English translation.



“Reader, this is an honest book.” Montaigne says this of his *Essays*. We would like to say the same of this translation. We have tried to bring Dante into our English without being led in by the temptation of making the translation sound better than the original allows. The result may be judged by all who know him in his own idiom. This is not Dante, but an approximation of what he might authorize had he been looking over our shoulders, listening to our at times ferocious arguments. We could go on improving this effort as long as we live. We hope that as much as we have accomplished will find an understanding ear and heart among those who know the real thing. Every translation begins and ends in failure. To the degree that we have been able to preserve some of the beauty and power of the original, we have failed the less.

The accuracy of the translation from the Italian text established by Giorgio Petrocchi (1966–67) has been primarily my responsibility, its sound as English verse primarily that of the poet Jean Hollander, my wife and collaborator. As will be clear from various notes in the text, I am not always in accord with Petrocchi’s readings; however, I thought it imperative to use as the base of this entire project the current standard Italian text of the work, indicating my occasional desire to diverge from it only in its margins. My original intention was to reproduce the John D. Sinclair translation (1939) of *Inferno*, cleaning up its just barely post-Victorian “thee”s and “thou”s and other such, to a twenty-first-century ear, outdated usage. However, (a) differences between the Italian in the Società Dantesca Italiana (1921) edition from which Sinclair translated, and Petrocchi’s edition, (b) later “corrections” of Sinclair’s version by a later translator, Charles Singleton, (c) further study of Dante’s lines themselves, (d) a sense of ways in which a prose translation eventually fails to be “sayable”—all of these considerations led us to attempt a new verse translation of the first *cantica*, despite our original debt to Sinclair.

Those who come to our text familiar with the Singleton translation (1970) will perhaps think that it is *its* resonance that they occasionally hear; this is because a tremendous amount of Singleton’s translation conforms word-for-word to Sinclair’s, as anyone may see simply by opening the two volumes side by side. Thus, having decided to begin with Sinclair and to modify him, we found that Singleton had apparently done essentially the same thing. To his credit, his changes are usually for the better; to his blame is his failure to acknowledge the frequency of his exact coincidence with Sinclair. And thus, on his own advice, we have considered it “a mistake ... not to let the efforts of one’s predecessors contribute to one’s own” (page 372), and have on occasion included his divergences from Sinclair when we found them just. However, let there be no mistake: the reason our translation seems to reflect Singleton’s, to the extent that it does, is that ours, on occasion, and Singleton’s, almost always, are both deeply indebted to Sinclair.

In February 1997, when my wife and I decided to commit ourselves to this effort, we were able to consult the draft of a verse translation of *Inferno* composed by Patrick Creagh and me (begun in 1984 and abandoned in 1988, with some 80 percent of the work Englished). Some

of its phrases have found their way to our text, and we owe a considerable debt to Patricia Creagh (and to my earlier self), which we are glad to acknowledge. We also owe a debt to the prose paraphrases of difficult Italian passages found in the still helpful English commentary by the Rev. Dr. H. F. Tozer (1901); and to glosses gleaned from various Italian commentaries (most particularly, in the early cantos, those of Francesco Mazzoni [1965–85] but also to the interpretive paraphrases found in the Bosco/Reggio commentary [1979]). We decided early on that we would not consult contemporary verse translations until after we had finished our work, so as to keep other voices out of our ears.

Several friends and colleagues have helped us in our task. Lauren Scancarelli Seena, administrative coordinator of the Princeton Dante Project, was our first reader, making a number of suggestions for changes. Margherita Frankel, a veteran Dantist as well as a good friend, gave us a close reading and made many valuable criticisms to which we have attended. The poet Frederick Tibbetts lent us his exacting ear and made dozens of helpful suggestions. Lino Pertile, the Dante scholar at Harvard University, also combed through our text and made a number of helpful suggestions. The paperback edition benefitted from the eagle eye of Peter D'Epiro, who caught a number of slips that have been corrected in the printing. Our greatest debt is to Robert Fagles, who went through this translation verse by verse and made many hundreds of comments in our margins. To have had such attentive advice from the most favored translator of Homer of our day has been our extraordinary fortune and pleasure.

Our goal has been to offer a clear translation, even of unclear passages. We have also tried to be as compact as possible—not an easy task, either. It is our hope that the reader will find this translation a helpful bridge to the untranslatable magnificence of Dante's poem.

*February 1997 (Florence)–February 1998 (Tortona)*

For this reprinting of the Anchor Books edition, we have made about one hundred and fifty changes in the translation, mainly affecting phrasing and punctuation. There are also some five or six changes in the notes.

*November 2010 (Hopewell)*

# TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS & LIST OF COMMENTATORS

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## 1. Dante's works:

<i>Conv.</i>	<i>Convivio</i>
<i>Dve</i>	<i>De vulgari eloquentia</i>
<i>Egl.</i>	<i>Egloghe</i>
<i>Epist.</i>	<i>Epistole</i>
<i>Inf.</i>	<i>Inferno</i>
<i>Mon.</i>	<i>Monarchia</i>
<i>Par.</i>	<i>Paradiso</i>
<i>Purg.</i>	<i>Purgatorio</i>
<i>Quest.</i>	<i>Questio de aqua et terra</i>
<i>Rime</i>	<i>Rime</i>
<i>Rime dub.</i>	<i>Rime dubbie</i>
<i>VN</i>	<i>Vita nuova</i>

*Detto*      *Il Detto d'Amore ("attributable to Dante")*

*Fiore*      *Il Fiore ("attributable to Dante")*

2. Commentators on the *Commedia* (these texts are all either currently available or, in the case of Landino, Benessuti, and Provenzal, should one day be available, in the database known as the Dartmouth Dante Project; dates, particularly of the early commentators, are often approximate):

Jacopo Alighieri (1322) (*Inferno* only)

L'anonimo lombardo (1322) (Latin) (*Purgatorio* only)

Graziolo de' Bambaglioli (1324) (Latin) (*Inferno* only)

Jacopo della Lana (1324)

Guido da Pisa (1327) (Latin) (*Inferno* only)

L'Ottimo (1333)

L'anonimo selmiano (1337) (*Inferno* only)

Pietro di Dante (1340) (Latin) [also *Inferno* of 2nd & 3rd redactions]

Il codice cassinese (1350?) (Latin)  
Giovanni Boccaccio (1373) (*Inferno* I–XVII only)  
Benvenuto da Imola (1380) (Latin)  
Francesco da Buti (1385)  
L'anonimo fiorentino (1400)  
Giovanni da Serravalle (1416) (Latin)  
Guiniforto Barzizza (1440) (*Inferno* only)  
\*Cristoforo Landino (1481)  
Alessandro Vellutello (1544)  
Bernardino Daniello (1568)  
Lodovico Castelvetro (1570) (*Inferno* I–XXIX only)  
Pompeo Venturi (1732)  
Baldassare Lombardi (1791)  
Luigi Portirelli (1804)  
Paolo Costa (1819)  
Gabriele Rossetti (1826–40) (*Inferno* & *Purgatorio* only)  
Niccolò Tommaseo (1837)  
Raffaello Andreoli (1856)  
\*Luigi Bennassuti (1864)  
Henry W. Longfellow (1867) (English)  
Gregorio Di Siena (1867) (*Inferno* only)  
Brunone Bianchi (1868)  
G. A. Scartazzini (1874; but the 2nd ed. of 1900 is used)  
Giuseppe Campi (1888)  
Gioachino Berthier (1892)  
Giacomo Poletto (1894)  
H. Oelsner (1899) (English)  
H. F. Tozer (1901) (English)  
John Ruskin (1903) (English; not in fact a “commentary”)  
John S. Carroll (1904) (English)  
Francesco Torraca (1905)  
C. H. Grandgent (1909) (English)  
Enrico Mestica (1921)  
Casini-Barbi (1921)  
Carlo Steiner (1921)  
Isidoro Del Lungo (1926)  
Scartazzini-Vandelli (1929)  
Carlo Grabher (1934)  
Ernesto Trucchi (1936)  
\*Dino Provenzal (1938)  
Luigi Pietrobono (1946)  
Attilio Momigliano (1946)  
Manfredi Porena (1946)  
Natalino Sapegno (1955)

Daniele Mattalia (1960)

Siro A. Chimenz (1962)

Giovanni Fallani (1965)

Giorgio Padoan (1967) (*Inferno* I–VIII only)

Giuseppe Giacalone (1968)

Charles Singleton (1970) (English)

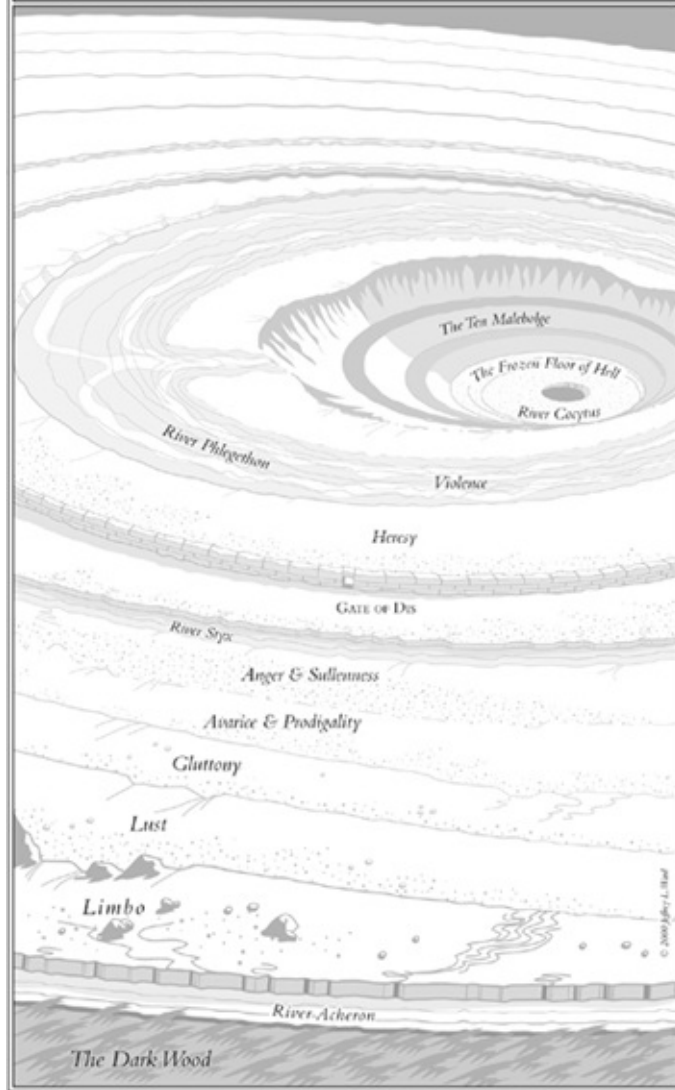
Bosco-Reggio (1979)

Pasquini-Quaglio (1982)

\*Not yet available

NB: All references to other works (e.g., Mazz.1967.1) are keyed to the List of Works Cited at the back of this volume, with the exception of references to commentaries contained in the Dartmouth Dante Project database, accessible online (telnet [library.dartmouth.edu](http://library.dartmouth.edu); at the prompt type: connect dante). Informational notes derived from Paget Toynbee's *Concise Dante Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1914) are followed by the siglum (T). References to the *Enciclopedia dantesca*, 6 vols. (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970–78) are indicated by the abbreviation *ED*. Commentaries by Robert Hollander are (at times) shorter versions of materials found in the Princeton Dante Project, a multimedia edition of the *Commedia* currently including most materials relevant to *Inferno* (the last two *cantiche* are under development). Subscription (without charge to the user) is possible at [www.princeton.edu/dante](http://www.princeton.edu/dante).

## MAP OF DANTE'S HELL



*[Click here for a larger version of this image](#)*

SIN	CANTO	RIVERS	Monsters
	I-II	Prologue: somewhere in Italy (?)	
	III	ACHERON (marks the confine of the netherworld)	
	III	<b>Circle 0: THE NEUTRALS</b>	<i>Charon</i>
	IV	<b>Circle 1: LIMBO</b>	
		(virtuous heathens & unbaptized babes)	
I N C O N T I N E N C E	V	<b>Circle 2: LUST</b>	<i>Minos</i>
	VI	<b>Circle 3: GLUTTONY</b>	<i>Cerberus</i>
	VII	<b>Circle 4: AVARICE &amp; PRODIGALITY</b>	<i>Plutus</i>
	VIII	STYX (muddy river of fleshly sins)	
	VIII	<b>Circle 5: ANGER &amp; SULLENNESS</b>	<i>Phlegyas</i>
	IX	Gate of Dis (lower Hell)	<i>Furies, Medusa</i>
	X-XI	<b>Circle 6: HERESY</b>	
Y		<b>Circle 7: VIOLENCE</b>	
	XII	PHLEGETHON (river of blood)	
I O L E N C E	XII	[i] against others	<i>Minotaur</i>
	XIII	[ii] against self	<i>Harpies</i>
	XIV	[iii] against God: 1. blasphemy	
	XV-XVI	2. homosexuality	
	XVII	3. usury	
	XVII	Descent to Malebolge	<i>Geryon</i>
		<b>Circle 8: THE TEN MALEBOLGE</b>	
	XVIII	[i] panders and seducers	<i>horned demons</i>
	XVIII	[ii] flatterers	
	XIX	[iii] simoniacs	
	XX	[iv] diviners	
	XXI-XXII	[v] barrators	<i>winged demons</i>
	XXIII	[vi] hypocrites	
	XXIV-XXV	[vii] thieves	<i>serpents &amp; Cacus</i>
	XXVI-XXVII	[viii] false counsellors	
	XXVIII	[ix] schismatics	<i>devil with a sword</i>
	XXIX-XXX	[x] counterfeiters	
		<b>Circle 9: THE FROZEN FLOOR OF HELL</b>	
	XXXI	COCYTUS (river of ice)	
	XXXI	Descent to Cocytus	<i>giants</i>
	XXXII	[i] Caïna (against relatives)	
	XXXII	[ii] Antenora (against party or homeland)	
	XXXIII	[iii] Ptolomea (against guests)	
	XXXIV	[iv] Judecca (against rightful lords)	
R Y	XXXIV		<i>Satan</i>

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What is a “great book”? It is probably impossible to define the concept analytically in terms of anyone’s satisfaction, but it may be described pragmatically: a work that is loved, over time, by millions of more-or-less ordinary readers *and* by thousands of scholars. Dante, by the time he was writing the fourth canto of *Inferno*, had already decided he was writing such a book. He sets his name down as one of the six all-time great writers: only Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and Lucan have preceded him (he will later add Statius). Unspeakably self-assured as this poet may seem, many today would now shorten that list, perhaps even to two: Homer and Dante. His self-confidence may seem overweening, but he was even more of a prophet than he realized.

In about 1306, having entered his forties, he set about work on his *Comedy*. By 1295 he had written a “little book” (the nomenclature is his own), *The New Life*, thirty-one of his lyrical poems surrounded by a governing prose commentary that almost explains the eventual meaning of his love for a young woman of Florence named Beatrice, who had died in 1290 at the age of twenty-five. We know nothing absolutely certain about her, whether she was an actual woman (if so, probably a member of the Portinari family, and then almost certainly married) or whether she is a fictitious lady of the sort that love-poets invented in order to have a subject to write about. The text, on the other hand, makes it clear that we are to treat her as historical, and also suggests that we are to understand that she means more than she seems, for she is ineluctably joined with the Trinity, and in particular with the life of Christ. Dante seems completely aware of the radical newness of a lady loaded with such lofty theological meaning in the tradition of vernacular poetry of love. That is, he knows that what he is proposing is out of bounds. And this is why he is usually so very diffident in his remarks, forcing us to draw some rather disquieting conclusions about the nature of the very special kind of love that eventually informs his praise of Beatrice.

Before he began work on his “theological epic,” the *Comedy*, he had also written major parts of two other works, one a presentation of his ideas about eloquence in the vernacular, *De vulgari eloquentia*, the second, *Convivio*, a lengthy study of moral philosophy (in the form of commentary to his own odes), of which he had completed four of the projected fifteen “treatises.” He had been actively involved in the often bitterly contested political life of Florence, at that time one of the most important European cities, swollen with new wealth and consequent political power. At a time when that city had only six of them, he served the customary two-month term as one of its priors, the highest political office in the city. By 1302, having inherited the wrong political identity, he lost practically everything when his party, the White Guelph faction, was outfoxed by the Black Guelphs, supported by the allied forces of Pope Boniface VIII and the French king. He was exiled in 1302 and never returned home again. He then lived a mainly itinerant life in northern Italy, with two longish stays in Verona and a final one in Ravenna, where he died of malarial fever in September 1321 at the age of fifty-six.

The political situation of northern Italy during his lifetime was distinguished by



factionalism and chaos. The emperors who were supposed to govern all of Europe had, for centuries, mainly avoided their Italian responsibilities. The last of them to rule in Italy was Frederick II (we hear of him in *Inferno* X and XIII), and he, while one of the greatest figures in Europe, was not a leader to Dante's liking. Dead in 1250, Frederick was the last emperor to govern from Italy. Dante hoped for an imperial restoration of the proper kind, and, to everyone's amazement, including his own, had his hopes rewarded when the newly crowned Henry VII, a compromise candidate from Luxembourg, allowed to become emperor primarily because of the machinations of Pope Clement V, descended into the peninsula to rule Europe from Italy in 1310. When his military expedition eventually failed because of his death in 1313, Dante's imperial hopes were dealt a terrible blow, but not finally dashed. To the end of his days (and in the text of *Paradiso* XXVII and XXX) he insisted on believing that a new "Augustus" would fulfill God's design for Italy and Europe.

On the local level, late-thirteenth-century northern Italy (Milano, to the north, and Rome to the south, are barely on Dante's personal political map; rather we hear, in addition to Florence, of such cities as Genoa, Pisa, Pistoia, Siena, etc.) was in constant turmoil. The two main "parties" were the Guelphs (those essentially allied with the papacy) and the Ghibellines (aligned with the emperor—when there was one to be aligned with—or at least with imperial hopes). But most politics, as they are in our own time, were local. And these labels did not count so much as family. In Florence the Ghibellines had been defeated and banished in 1266, a year after Dante's birth, leaving the city entirely Guelph. But that did not betoken an era of unity. The Guelphs themselves were already divided (as they were in many northern cities) in two factions, the "Blacks," led by the Donati family (into a less powerful branch of which Dante married), and the "Whites," led by the Cerchi. (It is probably correct to say that the Whites were more devoted to a republican notion of governance, while the Blacks were more authoritarian.) The first impetus toward political division had occurred early in the century, when a young man, member of a Ghibelline family, broke off his engagement and married a Guelph Donati (in Pistoia, not entirely dissimilarly, the roots of the division supposedly began in a snowball fight). A member of a White Guelph family, and having married into the most important Black family, Dante was therefore tied to Guelph interests. How then, do we explain his patent allegiance, in the *Comedy*, to the imperial cause? In 1306 or so he seems to have, rereading the Latin classics, reformulated his own political vision (as is first evident in the fourth and fifth chapters of the last treatise of the *Convivio*, before which there is not a clear imperialist sentiment to be found in his writing). And so, nominally a Guelph, Dante was far more in accord with Ghibelline ideas, except that in practice, he found Ghibellines lacking in the religious vision that he personally saw as the foundation of any imperialist program. Politics are everywhere in the poem, which is far from being the purely religious text that some of its readers take it for.

In his exile, the *Commedia* (first called the *Divina Commedia* only in 1555 by a Venetian publisher) became his obsession. For about fifteen years, with few exceptions (a notable one being his treatise, *Monarchia*, concerning the divine prerogatives of the empire, perhaps composed in 1317), the poem absorbed almost all of his time and energy. Its "motivating idea" is a simple one, outrageously so. In the Easter period of 1300 a thirty-five-year-old Florentine, struggling with failure and apparently spiritual death, is rescued by the shade of the Roman poet Virgil. He, won to the project by the living soul of Beatrice, who descends

hell from her seat in heaven in order to enlist his aid, agrees to lead Dante on a journey through hell and purgatory. Beatrice herself will again descend from heaven to take Dante the rest of the way, through the nine heavenly spheres and into paradise, where angels and souls in bliss gaze, in endless rapture, on God. The entire journey takes nearly precisely one week, from Thursday evening to Thursday evening. It begins in fear and trembling on this earth and ends with a joyous vision of the trinitarian God. It is perhaps difficult to imagine how even Dante could have managed to build so magnificent an edifice out of so improbable a literary idea. The result was a book that began to be talked about, known from parts that seem to have circulated before the whole, even before it was finished (first citations begin to be noted around 1315). By the time he had completed it, shortly before his death, people were eagerly awaiting the publication of *Paradiso*. And within months of his death (or even before) commentaries upon it began to be produced. It was, in short, an instant “great book,” probably the first of its kind since the last century of the pagan era, when Romans (no less than Augustus himself) awaited eagerly the finished text of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

One of the most striking things about the *Comedy* is the enormous apparatus that has attached itself to it. No secular work in the western tradition has so developed a heritage of line-by-line commentary, one that began in Latin and Italian and that has now entered a number of languages, European, Slavic, and Asian. It is clear that Dante’s work convinced the scholars of his time that this was a poem worthy of the most serious attention, both as purveyor of the most important ideas of Christianity (e.g., sin, grace, redemption, transcendence) and as a response to the greatest of the Latin poets (Virgil foremost, but also Ovid, Statius, Lucan, and others) and philosophers (Aristotle [in his Arabic/Latin form] and Cicero, primarily). Knowledge of Greek had essentially disappeared from the time of the establishment of Latin Christianity as the dominant religion and culture of the West in the fifth and sixth centuries. The study of the language would only gradually begin again some fifty years after Dante’s death. And thus while Dante knows about Greek philosophy, all he has experienced of it comes from the works (most of Aristotle) and bits and pieces (only one work of Plato’s, the *Timaeus*, and excerpts of some of the pre-Socratics) that had been translated into Latin. Strangely, for a modern reader, his first commentators pay little or no attention to his close and fairly extensive dealings with the poems of his vernacular predecessors and co-practitioners (Guido Guinizelli, Arnaut Daniel, Brunetto Latini, Guido Cavalcanti, Cino da Pistoia, and others). Perhaps the most impressive aspect of these commentaries (and we are speaking of line-by-line analyses, on the model of commentary on the Bible or to a handful of especially respected classical authors, a form essentially denied to modern writers before 1300) is the vast number of them. From the first twenty years after Dante’s death at least ten have survived; by our own time there are hundreds.

Along with conquering the allegiance of scholars, Dante won the hearts of less-erudite Italians (or, at first, Tuscans) who found in his vast poem the first use of Italian as a literary language in an indisputably major work. Italian poetry, beginning at the time of St. Francis in the early twelfth century, had performed wonders, but it had rarely found a subject that seemed serious enough. Here was a poem that tackled everything: theology, religion, philosophy, politics, the sciences of heaven (astronomy/astrology) and of earth (biology/geology), and, perhaps most of all, the study of human behavior. And it did all these things in a language that everyone could understand, or at least thought he could. It is probably no

true to suggest that Dante “invented modern Italian.” What he did do was to deploy Italian as a literary language on a major scale, incorporating the “serious” subjects that had hitherto been reserved to Latin. If the Italian language had been waiting for a voice, Dante gave it the voice. Before him it did not exist in a global form, a complete language fit for all subjects; after him it did. It is probably not because of him that Italian has changed no more between his time and today than English has since Shakespeare’s day. It is, nonetheless, a continuing surprise and reward for contemporary Italians to have so ancient and yet so approachable a father, speaking, at least most of the time, words that they themselves use (and sometimes that he had invented).

Is Dante an “easy” poet? That depends on what passages we happen to be reading. He can be as simple and straightforward as one’s country neighbor, or as convoluted as the most arcane professor. (Boccaccio, one of his greatest advocates, also shows both proclivities in the prose of the *Decameron*.) Yet he has always found a welcome from the least schooled of readers, and even from those who could not read at all, but learned the poem by rote. A living Tuscan farmer/poet, Mauro Punzecchi, years ago memorized the poem while he worked his fields and is today able to recite all of it. Who does not envy him his gift?

Each of us reads his own *Commedia*, which makes perfect sense, most of the time. It is only when we try to explain “our” poem to someone else that the trouble starts.

The commentary that accompanies this new translation is, like every one that has preceded it, except the first few, indebted to earlier discussions of this text. And what of that text, what did Dante leave behind? No one has ever seen his autograph version. As a result, the manuscript tradition of the poem is vast and complicated. Nonetheless, and despite all the difficulties presented by particular textual problems, the result of variant readings in various manuscripts, it must be acknowledged that in the *Comedy* we have a remarkably stable text given the facts that we do not possess an autograph and that the condition of the manuscript is so unyieldingly problematic. However, we do know that Dante left us precisely 14,233 verses arranged in one hundred cantos, all of which contained precisely the number of verses we find in them today in every modern edition. And that is no small thing.

And so each reader comes to a text that offers some problems of the textual variety; these pale beside problems of interpretation. What we can all agree on is that the work is a wonder to behold. Reading Dante is like listening to Bach. It is unimaginable to think that a human being, so many years ago (or indeed ever), could make such superhuman magic. Yet there it is, beckoning, but also refusing to yield some of its secrets.

When I considered how I might present this poem in a brief introduction, after years of thinking about it and teaching it and writing about it, I thought of what I myself missed when I started reading Dante. The first was a sense of Dante’s intellectual biography; the second was a set of answers to a series of questions: how does allegory work (i.e., how does the poem “mean”)? What does Virgil represent and why is he the first guide in the poem? How am I supposed to react to the sinners of *Inferno*, especially those that seem so sympathetic to me? The first subject is too vast for treatment here. My own attempt at an intellectual biography of the poet is available in Italian (*Dante Alighieri*, Rome, Editalia, 2000; an English version was published by Yale University Press in 2001). The three questions I have tried to answer, both in the “Lectures” found currently in the Princeton Dante Project, and, in shorter form, in an essay I wrote a year ago (“Dante: A Party of One,” *First Things* 92 [April 1999]

30–35; the essay on Virgil also has some points in common with my article, “Virgil,” in the *Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing, New York, Garland, 2000). What follows is another attempt to deal with three important matters facing any first-time reader of the poem, or any reader at all.

### (1) *Allegory*.

When I was young I was taught that Dante’s poem was the very essence of allegorical writing. What exactly is allegory? Simply put, it is the interpretive strategy of understanding one thing as meaning not itself but something other. A lady, blindfolded, holding a pair of scales in one hand, is not to be understood as a being with a particular history, but as a timeless entity, an abstraction: justice. If we understand just this much, we are prepared to comprehend how we might read—and how many of his first readers did understand—Dante’s poem as an “allegory.” Virgil is not the Roman poet so much as he is human reason unenlightened by faith; when he acts or speaks in the poem he does so without the historical context supplied by his life or works. And what of the second guide in the poem, Beatrice? She, too, is removed from her historical role in Dante’s life, and is treated as an abstraction. In her case the truths discovered through faith, or perhaps revelation, or theology. And what of the protagonist, Dante himself? That he has a very personal history, of which we hear a good deal, matters not. He is a sort of “Everyman,” and represents the ordinarily appetitive human soul. Please let me explain that I myself think very little of such formulations, but they are found in almost all the early commentators. In a term derived from Cicero, the interpreters thought of allegory as a “continuous metaphor.” The most significant actions performed in the poem, they thought, could best be understood as part of this single developing metaphor, in which the flawed human soul called “Dante” is gradually educated first by reason (referred to as “Virgil”), and then by theological certainty (code named “Beatrice”).

Since something like this does seem to occur in the course of the poem, we can sense why the formulation has its appeal. The problem is that it shortchanges the entire historical referentiality of the poem. Dante’s life disappears as a subject worthy of attention; Virgil’s texts need not be read or understood as ways to find out what the poem means when it refers to them; Beatrice’s earthly existence as a young woman becomes utterly superfluous, as does her “relationship” (a curiously and precisely wrong word, given its contemporary usage) with Dante. Fourteen centuries ago Isidore of Seville defined allegory as “otherspeech,” in which the speaker or writer said one thing but meant something else by it. Without exploring the limitations that he himself imposed upon that formula, we can merely note that it is frequently used in modern days to explain allegory simply and quickly. If I say “Beatrice” do not mean her, but what she means. We are back to the lady holding the scales. To use a medieval example, St. Thomas explains (*Summa* I.i.9) that when the Bible refers to the arm of God (Isaiah 51:9) it does not mean that God has an arm, but that He has operative power. That is, we can discard the literal for its significance, or, in more modern terms, the signifier for the signified. Does this way of reading Dante utterly denature the text we have before us? Perhaps not utterly, but enough so that we should avoid it as much as we can.

The matter gets more interesting and more complicated because Dante himself wrote about the question of allegory. In his *Convivio* he distinguishes between allegory as it is understood and practiced by poets (along the lines we have been discussing) and as it is used by

theologians in order to understand certain passages in the Bible (a very different procedure that we will examine in a moment). And in *Convivio* (II.i) he says the “correct” thing: it is his intention, in the explication of his odes, to follow the allegorical procedures of the poets (“since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets”). There are those who put this remark to the service of the claim that the “allegory of the theologians” thus has nothing to do with Dante’s procedures in the *Comedy*, either. However, that is exactly what he claims in the letter he wrote to his patron, Cangrande della Scala of Verona. The authenticity of his *Epistle to Cangrande*, written sometime after Dante had begun writing the *Paradiso*, and thus probably no earlier than 1316, is one of the most debated of Dantean questions. It is difficult for the writer to be fair to the negative argument, which is so obviously based in a desire to cancel what the epistle says. Whether or not Dante wrote it (and current scholarly opinion is, once again, decidedly in favor), this remarkable document puts forward the disturbing (to use a mild word) idea that Dante’s poem was written with the same keys to meaning as was the Bible. No one had ever said as much about his own work before, and it must be made clear that it is anathema to any sensible person of Dante’s (or any) time. If this were the only occasion on which this most venturesome of writers had said something outrageous, one might want to pay more heed to those who try to remove the text from his canon on the ground that he had no business making such a claim.

The principal tenet of theological allegory is that it holds certain (but not all) historical events in the Bible as a privileged and limited class of texts. Some historical passages in the Bible possessed four senses. The four senses of the Bible are generally put forth, and especially in the wake of Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* I.i.10), as follows: (1) historical/literal, (2) allegorical, (3) moral or tropological, (4) anagogical. It is helpful to understand that these senses unfurl in a historical continuum. For instance, the *historical* Moses, leading the Israelites out of captivity, gains his *allegorical* meaning in Christ, leading humankind out of bondage to the freedom of salvation. His *moral* (or *tropological*—these words are used synonymously) sense is present now—whenever “now” occurs—in the soul of the believer who chooses to make his or her “exodus” from sin; while the *anagogical* sense is found only after the end of time, when those who are saved are understood as having arrived in the New Jerusalem, eternal joy in heaven. To offer a second example, one favored by Dante’s early commentators: Jerusalem was the *historical* city of Old Testament time; it points to the *allegorical* Jerusalem in which Jesus was crucified; it is the *moral* or *tropological* “city” (whether within a single believer or as the entity formed by the Church Militant now) at the present moment; it is, *anagogically*, the New Jerusalem, which will exist only at the end of time. As opposed to the literal sense of poet’s allegory, the literal sense of theological allegory is historically true, found only in events narrated in the Bible (e.g., the fall of Adam and Eve, Moses leading the Israelites in the Exodus, the birth of Jesus, the Crucifixion). According to the *Epistle to Cangrande* and, more importantly, as found in the treatment of subjects in his poem itself (most of which was written before he wrote the epistle, it is important to remember), Dante has adapted the techniques of theological allegory to the making of his poem. Characters and events in it are portrayed in a historical mode and as part of a historical continuum. Adam, Moses, Icarus, Aeneas, Paul, Augustus, Virgil, and Dante are all portrayed as having said things or accomplished deeds that are seen in

historical and meaningful pattern that gives shape to this poem. Their actual historical status does not matter. Dante surely did not believe that Icarus had enjoyed a life on earth beyond that conferred by poets and mythographers. But he treats him, in *Inferno* XVII, as a possible precursor to himself, should Dante, a latter-day flyer through space, have had a bad end and fallen from the back of Geryon.

If we have been able to rid ourselves of the interpretive problems engendered by the “allegory of the poets,” here we have a still larger problem. How can Dante have written the *Comedy* in the same way that God wrote the Bible through his inspired human agents? Obviously he could not have. Then why does he make so outrageous a claim? Because what he is most concerned with is establishing the “right” of poetry to truth. This is a complex argument, and needs to be undertaken with a sense of the standing of poetry in a theological age. Let us say that it was not propitious. St. Thomas Aquinas had been clear about the issue. Poetry was the least of the human sciences, was basically devoid of cognitive value, and its practitioners were liars. In an intellectual climate of that kind, Dante was forced into making a choice. Either he did what all others who defended poetry had done (and as he himself had done in *Convivio*), admit that poets are literally liars who nonetheless tell moral and philosophical truths through (poets’) allegory, or he had to find a new answer to the attack on poetry by friars like Thomas. Typically, he went his own way. If religious detractors of poetry say it lacks truth, he will give them truth. The *Comedy* is presented, from end to end (no reader can possibly miss this fact), as a record of an actual experience. Let us be honest with one another. You do not believe, and I do not believe, that Dante took a seven-day trip to the otherworld. But we can agree that his claims for total veracity are in the poem. Why? Because Dante took Thomas seriously. It is a wonderful game that he plays, daring and sometimes very funny, and surely he enjoyed playing it. Let me offer a single example, drawn from a pretty “serious” setting, the Earthly Paradise. Describing the six wings adorning each of the four biblical beasts that represent the authors of the Gospels in *Purgatorio* XXIX, Dante assures us that their wings were six in number (Ezechiel’s cherubic creatures had only four—that is, as many as are found in John’s description of the same cherubs (Revelation 4:8)). The text puts this in an arresting way: “John sides with me, departing from him [Ezechiel].” No one but Dante would have said this in this way. “Here I follow John” would have been the proper way for a poet to guarantee the truthfulness of his narrative. Not for Dante. Since the pretext of the poem is that he indeed saw all that he recounts as having seen, his own experience, in completely Thomistic spirit, comes first—he knows this by his senses. And so John is *his* witness, and not he John’s.

The whole question of exactly how and how much the “allegory of the theologian” permeates the *Comedy* is not to be rehashed here. It is the subject of a number of books, including two by this writer. It is important to grasp that, by breaking out of the lockstep of other poets, who give us narratives that are utterly and only fabulous, i.e., patently untrue in their literal sense, Dante wanted to take poetry somewhere new. The greatest French medieval poem, the *Romance of the Rose*, is built around the presentation of a series of abstractions speaking to one another in a garden. Marianne Moore, borrowing from another writer, once referred to poems as “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” The *Romance of the Rose* is an imaginary garden filled with imaginary toads; the *Comedy* presents itself as a real garden containing real toads. If the student (or teacher) who is wrestling with the

difficult matter for the first time takes only this much away from this discussion, it should be of considerable aid. The reader is not asked by the poem to see Virgil as Reason, Beatrice as Faith (or Theology or Revelation), Francesca as Lust, Farinata as Heresy, etc. We may banish such abstractions from mind, unless Dante himself insists on them. On occasion he does—e.g. the Lady Poverty, beloved of St. Francis [*Paradiso* XI.74], who is not to be confused with an historical earthly woman, but is to be regarded as the ideal of Christ's and the Apostle's renunciation of the things of this world. It is a useful and pleasing freedom that, in consequence, we may enjoy: "The allegory of the *Comedy* is not allegory as the commentators urge me to apply it. I may read this poem as history, and understand it better." That, at least provisionally, is a good way to begin reading this poem.

## (2) *Virgil*.

We should be aware that Virgil was not always Dante's guide in poetry. The *Vita nuova* is essentially without major reference to him; *De vulgari* and the first three treatises of *Convivio* are similar in this respect. It is only in the fourth and last treatise of the latter that we can begin to see how the *Comedy* could make Virgil so essential a presence, for there Virgil's texts are present in important ways, as Dante begins to think of moral philosophy, Roman politics, and the jettisoning of allegorical procedures in the same breath. As the world of political reality, of human choices made in time and with real consequence, for the first time becomes a stage for Dante's thought, Virgil becomes his most important resource. As is widely understood, Dante's recovery of Virgilian text is the most noteworthy example of the phenomenon that we find in the Middle Ages. We have not yet entered the world of the Renaissance, but we are getting close.

There are few surprises awaiting the reader of the *Comedy* as unsettling as to find a pagan poet serving as guide in a Christian poem. We have perhaps gotten so used to the idea of Dante's Virgil that we forget to be surprised by it. For reasons that we find it difficult to fathom, Dante needed Virgil in order to make this poem; and he wanted him to serve as central character in it. Lesser minds would have made a less provocative choice: a learned anonymous friar, a learned Christian theologian, anyone less troubling than Virgil. Our tradition of Christian reception of Virgil, which is at least as old as the emperor Constantine, held that his much-discussed fourth *Eclogue* actually foretold the coming of Christ. Had Dante so believed, his choice of guide might have been less burdensome. However, we may be certain from *Monarchia* (I.xi.1) that Dante knew that Virgil's "virgin" was not the blessed Mary but Astraea, or "justice." Any number of passages within the *Comedy* make it plain that Dante did not consider the Roman poet a Christian *avant-la-lettre*. We must conclude that he willfully chose a pagan as his guide, leaving us to fathom his reasons for doing so.

In recent years a growing number of Dante's interpreters have been arguing for the view that Dante deliberately undercuts the Latin poet, showing that both in some of his decisions as guide and in some of his own actual texts he is, from Dante's later and Christian vantage point, prone to error. If this is the case, we must not forget that Dante at the same time was intent upon glorifying Virgil. And then we might consider the proposition that Dante's love for him, genuine and heartfelt, needed to be held at arm's length and chastised, perhaps revealing to a pagan-hating reader that Dante knew full well the limitations of his Virgil. Yet he could not do without him. Virgil is the guide in Dante's poem because he served in that role in Dante's life. It was Virgil's *Aeneid* and not the works of Aristotle or of Aquinas which

served as model for the poem; it was Virgil who, more than any other author, helped to make Dante Dante.

It may take readers years of rereading before they discover an extraordinary fact about Dante's Virgil. For all the excitement, even exhilaration, brought forth by Virgil's mere presence in this poem (a text that would seem to need to exclude him on theological grounds), sooner or later the fact that he is treated, on occasion, rather shabbily begins to impress us. This is so obvious, once it is pointed out, that one can begin to understand how thoroughly trained we have all been to look with pleased eyes upon a Dantean love for Virgil that heralds Renaissance humanism. To take only a few examples from the goodly supply presented in the text of *Inferno* (and *Purgatorio* will add many another), we witness Virgil embarrassed by the recalcitrant fallen angels who deny him entrance to the City of Dis (*Inferno* VIII and IX); later teased by his pupil for that momentary failure (XIV); being careful to guard Dante out of observing distance lest Geryon prove as difficult as the rebel angels had been and thus embarrass him again (XVI); completely fooled by the demons of the pitch, which cause him acute discomfort over three cantos (XXI–XXIII). If such scenes make it seem more than unlikely that Virgil could possibly represent Reason (and commentators who think so grow silent at the margins of these scenes, only occasionally being honest enough even to say “here the allegory is intermittent”), they also make us wonder about Dante's motives in treating his “master and author” so disrespectfully. It is perhaps only because he loved Virgil so deeply that he feels the need to remind himself and his reader that the pagan was, in the end, a failure, capable of causing another Roman poet, Statius, to convert to Christianity, but not of taking that step himself. All of that seems wrong to us. There is perhaps no doctrine in the entire *Comedy* so hateful to modern readers as that which makes pagans—and others outside the Christian dispensation—responsible for knowing Christ. When we consider Dante's situation, however, his motives may seem more understandable to us. Having fought off the temptation to make Virgil a Christian, Dante must now show himself and his reader that he has not gone overboard in his affections.

There is another disturbing element to Dante's Virgilianism. Not only is Virgil the character forced to undergo some seriously humiliating moments, but his texts are also on the receiving end of Dante's playful mockery. Perhaps the most evident moment of this occurs in the twentieth canto, where Virgil is made to revise an episode in the tenth book of the *Aeneid* so that it accords better with Christian ideas about divination. It is a richly woven scene, and extremely funny (Dante is a much funnier poet than we like to acknowledge), once we begin to understand the literary game that is being played under our eyes. And this is not the only time that Virgil's texts receive such treatment. We will even find the *Aeneid* remembered in the very last canto of *Paradiso*, with its reminder of what the Sibyl told of Christian truth to an ear that could understand her utterance—if not Virgil's.

It is simply impossible to imagine the *Comedy* without Virgil. And no one before Dante, and perhaps very few after, ever loved Virgil as he did. At the same time there is a hard-edged sense of Virgil's crucial failure as poet of Rome, the city Dante celebrates for its two suns—church and empire, but which Virgil saw only in the light of the one. For Dante, that is his great failure. As unfair as it seems to us, so much so that we frequently fail to note how often Virgil is criticized by the later poet who so loved him, it is the price that Dante forces him to pay when he enters this Christian precinct. And it may have been the price that he exerted



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