

The Divine Comedy

Inferno

Dante Alighieri

Translated by J.G. Nichols

With illustrations by
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Inferno

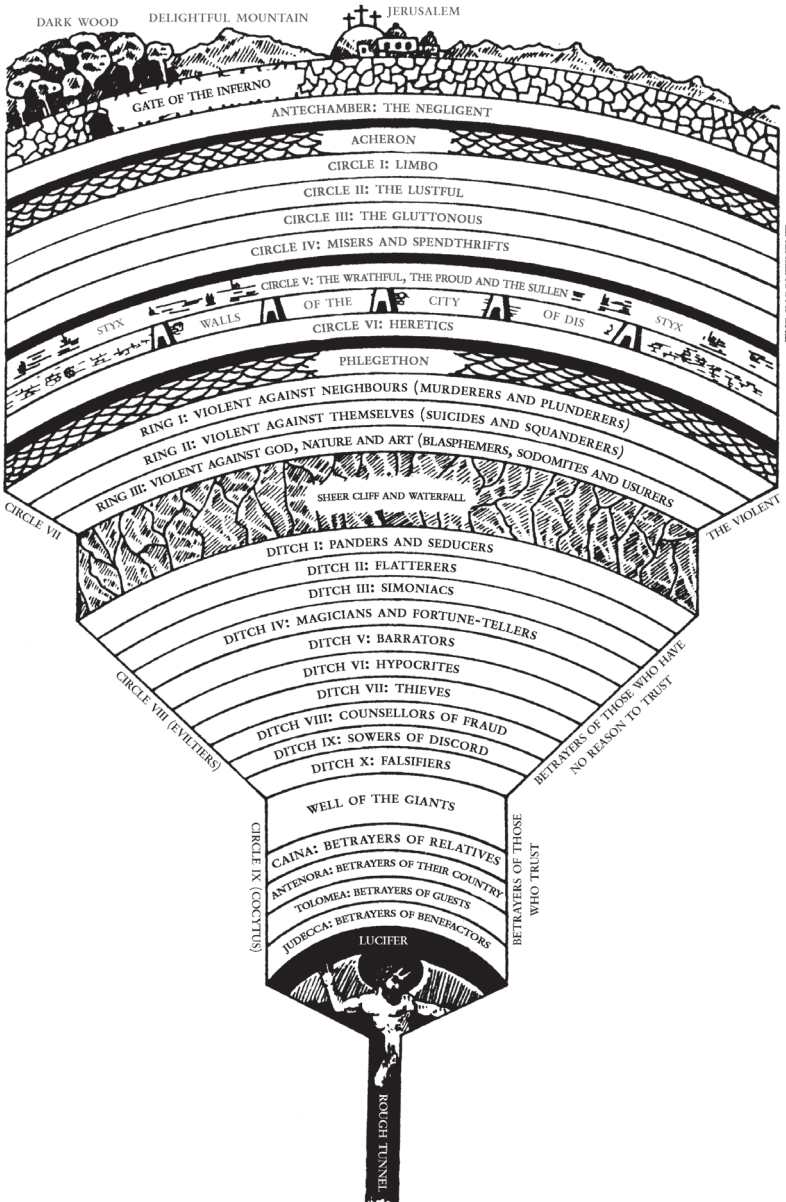


Illustration of Dante's Inferno

CANTO I

This canto, the prologue to Dante's journey through the Inferno, acts also as an introduction to *The Divine Comedy* as a whole.

At the age of thirty-five Dante realizes he is lost in a dark, terrifying wood. He takes heart when he sees in front of him a hilltop shining in sunlight. But, as he starts to climb the hill, he is frightened by a leopard which obstructs him in a threatening manner, and then by an angry lion, and finally by a she-wolf – the most alarming animal of the three. So Dante is driven back into the darkness which – as we soon come to realize about everything in this poem – is both real and allegorical. (There are, throughout this poem, many kinds of allegory. For instance, the leopard, the lion and the she-wolf – emblems rather than symbols, and therefore in need of interpretation – are of a different order from the dark wood, whose import is obvious.)

A human figure approaches, and Dante, uncertain whether it is a living being or a ghost, implores its help. The figure explains that he is the shade of Virgil. This is the poet whom Dante, as he is quick to declare, admires more than any other. Virgil encourages Dante, and explains that he must travel by a different road if he is to find a way out of his difficulties.

After making an obscure prophecy about the coming of a hound which will kill the she-wolf and also be the saviour of Italy, Virgil says that he will guide Dante through the realms of the Inferno, inhabited by the souls of the damned, who are beyond all hope; and also through Purgatory, where the souls of those now doing penance for their sins are residing, glad to suffer because they have the certain hope of going ultimately to Paradise. Virgil, because he was a pagan who lived and died before Christ and so could not believe in Him, cannot accompany Dante into Paradise. But he says there is another guide who will take Dante there. Dante accepts Virgil's guidance, and they set off.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
 mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
 ché la diritta via era smarrita.
 Ah, quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
 esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
 che nel pensier rinova la paura!
 Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
 ma per trattar del ben ch'io vi trovai,
 dirò dell'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.
 Io non so ben ridir com'io v'entrai, 10
 tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto
 che la verace via abbandonai.
 Ma poi ch'i' fui al piè d'un colle giunto,
 là dove terminava quella valle
 che m'avea di paura il cor compunto,
 guardai in alto, e vidi le sue spalle
 vestite già de' raggi del pianeta
 che mena dritto altrui per ogni calle.
 Allor fu la paura un poco queta 20
 che nel lago del cor^a m'era durata
 la notte ch'i' passai con tanta pièta.
 E come quei che con lena affannata
 uscito fuor del pelago alla riva
 si volge all'acqua perigliosa e guata,
 così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
 si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
 che non lasciò già mai persona viva.
 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. 30
 Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar dell'erta,
 una lonza leggiera e presta molto,
 che di pel macolato era coverta;
 e non mi si partìa d'innanzi al volto,
 anzi impediva tanto il mio cammino
 ch'i' fui per ritornar più volte vòlto.^b

- a. A lyrical expression, lit. “in the heart’s lake”, or (to quote Yeats) “in the deep heart’s core”, the heart being the seat of the passions.
- b. Lit. “often turned to go back”; “*volte vòlto*” exemplifies the figure of *traductio*, a play on words with similar sounds but different meanings.

Halfway along our journey to life's end
 I found myself astray in a dark wood,
 Since the right way was nowhere to be found.
 How hard a thing it is to express the horror
 Of that wild wood, so difficult, so dense!
 Even to think of it renews my terror.
 It is so bitter death is scarcely more.
 But to convey what goodness I discovered,
 I shall tell everything that I saw there.
 How I got into it I cannot say: 10
 I'd fallen into such a heavy sleep
 The very instant that I went astray.
 But when I came beneath a steep hillside –
 Which rose at the far end of that long valley
 That struck my stricken heart with so much dread –
 I lifted up my eyes, and saw the height
 Covered already in that planet's rays¹
 Which always guides all men and guides them right.
 And then the fear I felt was somewhat less,
 Though it had filled my heart to overflowing 20
 The whole night I had spent in such distress.
 And as somebody, trying to get his breath,
 Emerging from the sea, now safe on shore,
 Turns round to look at where he cheated death,
 Just so inside my mind, which was still fleeing,
 I turned to look again upon that pass
 Which never left alive one human being.
 When I'd rested my body for a time,
 I made my way across deserted foothills,
 Keeping my low foot always the more firm.² 30
 And then, just where the hill began to rise,
 I saw a leopard, light upon its paws,
 Covered all over in a spotted hide!³
 It would not move, but stood in front of me,
 And so obstructed me upon my journey
 I kept on turning round to turn and flee.

1. According to the Ptolemaic system, accepted in Dante's time, the sun was one of several planets revolving round the earth. The dark wood and the comforting sunlight mark the beginning of that symbolism of light and darkness which runs through the whole *Comedy*.
2. He was climbing.
3. This leopard is an embodiment of the sin of lust, or sensuality in general, commonly associated with youth.

Temp'era dal principio del mattino,
 e 'l sol montava 'n su con quelle stelle
 ch'eran con lui quando l'amor divino
 mosse di prima quelle cose belle; 40
 sì ch'a bene sperar m'era cagione
 di quella fera alla^c gaetta pelle
 l'ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;
 ma non sì che paura non mi desse
 la vista che m'apparve d'un leone.
 Questi pareva che contra me venisse
 con la test'alta e con rabbiosa fame,
 sì che pareva che l'aere ne tremesse.^d
 Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame
 sembiava carca nella sua magrezza, 50
 e molte genti fe' già viver grame;
 questa mi porse tanto di gravezza
 con la paura ch'uscìa di sua vista,
 ch'io perdei la speranza dell'altezza.
 E qual è quei che volentieri acquista,
 e giugne 'l tempo che perder lo face,
 che 'n tutt'i suoi pensier piange e s'attrista;
 tal mi fece la bestia senza pace,
 che, venendomi incontro, a poco a poco
 mi ripigneva là dove 'l sol tace. 60
 Mentre ch'i' rovinava in basso loco,
 dinanzi alli occhi mi si fu offerto
 chi per lungo silenzio pareva fioco.^e
 Quando vidi costui nel gran deserto,
 "Miserere di me," gridai a lui,
 "qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!"
 Rispuosemi: "Non omo, omo già fui,
 e li parenti miei furon lombardi,
 mantovani per patria ambedui.
 Nacqui sub Julio, ancor che fosse tardi, 70
 e vissi a Roma sotto 'l buono Augusto
 nel tempo delli dei falsi e bugiardi.

c. In modern Italian: "dalla".

d. Another reading is "temesse" ("was afraid"); "tremesse" is preferable: there are two further uses of the same expression (iv, 27 and 150)

e. "Hoarse" and "wan". See l. 54 of the canzone 'Donna pietosa...' (from *Vita nuova*): "I saw a man appear, pale, hoarse and wan." The figure of Virgil appears "hoarse" because the voice of reason (which Virgil represents) has long been silent to Dante. The figure also appears "wan", or seen only dimly, through the dark atmosphere: the "*lungo silenzio*" may be a metaphor, similar to that in l. 60 "*dove 'l sol tace*" ("where the sun is mute").

By then it was the first hour of the morning,
 With the sun rising in the constellation
 That came with him when stars we still see burning
 Were set in motion by divine love first.⁴ 40
 And so I had good cause to feel encouraged –
 About the lithe and gaily coloured beast –
 By that glad time of day and time of year.
 But not so much encouraged that a lion
 Failed to inspire alarm as it drew near.
 It did seem that the beast was drawing near,
 With head held high, and so irate with hunger
 The air itself seemed shivering in fear.⁵
 And then a she-wolf! Though she was so lean,
 She looked about to burst, being crammed with cravings, 50
 She who'd made many draw their breath in pain.⁶
 The pain she caused me was so terrible,
 And such the terror coming from her sight,
 I lost all hope of climbing up the hill.
 And like that miser, happy while he's gaining,
 Who when luck changes and he starts to lose,
 Gives himself up to misery and moaning –
 That's how I was, faced by that restless brute,
 Which always coming nearer, step by step
 Drove me back down to where the sun is mute.⁷ 60
 Then suddenly, as I went slipping down,
 Someone appeared before my very eyes,
 Seemingly through long silence hoarse and wan.⁸
 When I caught sight of him in that wide waste,
 "Take pity on me," I shouted out to him,
 "Whatever you are, a real man or a ghost!"
 He answered: "Not a man, though I was once.
 Both of my parents came from Lombardy,
 And both of them were native Mantuans.
 I came to birth *sub Julio*, rather late,⁹ 70
 And lived in Rome under the good Augustus¹⁰
 When false, deceptive gods still held their state.

4. It was a common medieval belief that, when the world was created, the season was early spring, with the sun in the constellation of Aries.
5. The lion embodies the sins of wrath and pride, commonly associated with middle age.
6. The she-wolf embodies the sin of avarice, commonly associated with old age.
7. As an example of synaesthesia this may at first seem more striking than apt, but during the course of the *Comedy* light, or the lack of it, "speaks" volumes.
8. This is the shade of someone who has been dead a long time.
9. When Caesar was dominant in Rome, but too late to be acquainted with him.
10. The Emperor Augustus.

Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
 figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia
 poi che 'l superbo Ilión fu combusto.
 Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
 perché non sali il dilettoso monte
 ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?"
 "Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
 che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?" 80
 rispuos'io lui con vergognosa fronte.
 "O delli altri poeti onore e lume,
 vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
 che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.
 Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore:
 tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
 lo bello stilo^f che m'ha fatto onore.
 Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi:
 aiutami da lei, famoso saggio,
 ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi." 90
 "A te convien tenere altro viaggio,"
 rispuose poi che lagrimar mi vide,
 "se vuo' campar d'esto loco selvaggio:
 ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,
 non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,
 ma tanto lo 'mpedisce che l'uccide;
 e ha natura sì malvagia e ria,
 che mai non empie la bramosa voglia,
 e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria.
 Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia, 100
 e più saranno ancora, infin che 'l veltro
 verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.
 Questi non ciberà terra né peltro,
 ma sapienza, amore e virtute,
 e sua nazion sarà tra feltro e feltro.^g
 Di quella umile Italia fia salute
 per cui morì la vergine Cammilla,
 Eurialo e Turno e Niso di ferute.

f. The high, or tragic, or sublime style, as distinguished from the middle style (chosen for general use in the *Comedy*) and the low style. The high style is used in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and for some moral and allegorical *canzoni* by Dante, written before 1300, which had earned him a reputation.

g. As so often with prophecies, the expression is deliberately enigmatic. It may refer to humble origins (felt being a cheap cloth), or to ecclesiastical origins (with reference to the Franciscan habit). It may also, if we use capitals, mean that this saviour originates from somewhere between Feltre and Montefeltro: there could be an allusion to Dante's patron Cangrande della Scala.

I was a poet, and I sang the good
 Son of Anchises who came out of Troy
 When Ilium was burned in all its pride.¹¹
 But you, why d'you go back to misery?
 Why don't you climb up the delightful mountain,
 The origin and cause of perfect joy?"
 "Then are you Virgil, you, that spring, that stream
 Of eloquence, that ever-widening river?" 80
 I answered, red with reverence and shame.
 "Oh every poet's glory and guiding light!
 May I be aided by the love and zeal
 That made me turn your pages day and night.
 You are my only master and my author,
 You only are the one from whom I took
 That style which has bestowed on me such honour.
 You see the beast that made me turn in flight.
 Save me from her, O famous fount of wisdom!
 She makes the blood run from my veins in fright." 90
 "Now you must travel by a different road,"
 He answered when he saw that I was weeping,
 "If you wish to escape from this wild wood.
 This beast, the reason that you cry out loud,
 Will not let people pass along this way,
 But hinders them, and even has their blood.
 She is by nature such an evildoer
 Her avid appetite is never slaked,
 And after food she's hungrier than before.
 And many are the beasts she's mating with,¹² 100
 And there'll be many more, until the hound¹³
 Arrives, to bring her to a painful death.
 This hound will not be fed with land or pelf,
 But rather feed on wisdom, love, and valour.
 He will originate in folds of felt.¹⁴
 He'll be the saviour of low-lying lands
 Of Italy for which Camilla died,
 Turnus, Nisus, Euryalus, of their wounds.¹⁵

11. This is Virgil, and the poem he refers to is his *Aeneid*, whose hero, Aeneas, a refugee from Troy (or Ilium), is the son of Anchises. The theme of the *Aeneid*, the events leading up to the foundation of Rome, was particularly dear to Catholic Europe because Rome eventually became the seat of the Papacy.

12. Many people will indulge in the sin of avarice.

13. Various interpretations as a political or religious saviour (there are many candidates) or – most satisfactorily – as a prophecy left deliberately vague.

14. Again obscure, but as translated here it suggests a humble origin.

15. All characters in the *Aeneid*.

Questi la caccerà per ogni villa,
 fin che l'avrà rimessa nello 'nferno, 110
 là onde invidia prima dipartilla.
 Ond'io per lo tuo me' penso e discerno
 che tu mi segui, e io sarò tua guida,
 e trarrotti di qui per luogo eterno,
 ove udirai le disperate strida,
 vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti,
 che la seconda morte ciascun grida;^h
 e vederai color che son contenti
 nel fuoco, perché speran di venire,
 quando che sia, alle beate genti. 120
 Alle qua' poi se tu vorrai salire,
 anima fia a ciò più di me degna:
 con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire;
 ché quello imperador che là su regna,
 perch'io fu' ribellante alla sua legge,
 non vuol che 'n sua città per me si vegna.
 In tutte parti impera e quivi regge –
 quivi è la sua città e l'alto seggio:
 oh felice colui cu' ivi elegge!”
 E io a lui: “Poeta, io ti richeggio 130
 per quello Dio che tu non conoscesti,
 acciò ch'io fugga questo male e peggio,
 che tu mi meni là dove 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.

h. “The second death”, possibly referring to a hope of annihilation, but more probably to the final sentence of damnation after the Last Judgement. Even if “grida” means “invokes”, that fits the second interpretation, since the damned in a sense desire their damnation, see III, 125–6.

This hound will hunt that creature high and low
 Until he thrusts her back in the Inferno 110
 Whence envy freed her first and let her go.
 I therefore think and judge it would be best
 For you to follow me. And I shall lead
 You to a region that will always last,
 Where you will hear shrieks of despair and grief,
 And see the ancient spirits in their pain,
 As each of them begs for their second death.
 And you'll see spirits happy in the fire,
 Because they live in hope that they will come,
 Sooner or later, where the blessed are. 120
 And if you wish to join that company,
 One worthier than I will take you up.¹⁶
 I'll leave you with her when I go away.
 That Emperor who has His kingdom there¹⁷
 Lets no one come through me into his city,
 Because I was a rebel to his law.¹⁸
 He governs all creation, ruling where
 He has His capital and His high throne.
 Happy are those he chooses to have there!"
 I answered: "What I beg of you is this – 130
 By that God whom you never knew – so that
 I may escape this evil and much worse,
 Take me to both those places as you said,
 To see the gate kept by St Peter¹⁹ and
 Those souls you say are desperately sad."²⁰
 Then he set off. I followed on behind.

16. Beatrice, the woman loved by Dante in his youth and a lasting means of grace leading him to God. Dante's own account of his love, *Vita Nuova* (*New Life*), a work in prose with lyrics interspersed, is by far the best introduction to the *Comedy*.

17. God. In the *Inferno* God tends to be alluded to rather than named, while Christ is never named.

18. Virgil was a pagan.

19. Either the gate of Purgatory, guarded by an angel obedient to St Peter, or the gate of Paradise.

20. Those in the *Inferno*.