The Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri

A Translation into English Prose

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POETRY IN TRANSLATION

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Inferno Canto I:1-60 The Dark Wood and the Hill
In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there.

I cannot rightly say how I entered it. I was so full of sleep, at that point where I abandoned the true way. But when I reached the foot of a hill, where the valley, that had pierced my heart with fear, came to an end, I looked up and saw its shoulders brightened with the rays of that sun that leads men rightly on every road. Then the fear, that had settled in the lake of my heart, through the night that I had spent so miserably, became a little calmer. And as a man, who, with panting breath, has escaped from the deep sea to the shore, turns back towards the perilous waters and stares, so my mind, still fugitive, turned back to see that pass again, that no living person ever left.

After I had rested my tired body a while, I made my way again over empty ground, always bearing upwards to the right. And, behold, almost at the start of the slope, a light swift leopard with spotted coat. It would not turn from before my face, and so obstructed my path, that I often turned, in order to return.

The time was at the beginning of the morning, and the sun was mounting up with all those stars, that were with him when Divine Love first moved all delightful things, so that the hour of day, and the sweet season, gave me fair hopes of that creature with the bright pelt. But not so fair that I could avoid fear at the sight of a lion, that appeared, and seemed to come at me, with raised head and rabid hunger, so that it seemed the air itself was afraid; and a she-wolf that looked full of craving in its leanness, and, before now, has made many men live in sadness. She brought me such heaviness of fear, from the aspect of her face, that I lost all hope of ascending. And as one who is eager for gain, weeps, and is afflicted in his thoughts, if the moment arrives when he
loses, so that creature, without rest, made me like him: and coming at me, little by little, drove me back to where the sun is silent.

While I was returning to the depths, one appeared, in front of my eyes, who seemed hoarse from long silence. When I saw him, in the great emptiness, I cried out to him ‘Have pity on me, whoever you are, whether a man, in truth, or a shadow!’ He answered me: ‘Not a man: but a man I once was, and my parents were Lombards, and both of them, by their native place, Mantuans.'
I was born sub Julio though late, and lived in Rome, under the good Augustus, in the age of false, deceitful gods. I was a poet, and sang of Aeneas, that virtuous son of Anchises, who came from Troy when proud Ilium was burned. But you, why do you turn back towards such pain? Why do you not climb the delightful mountain, that is the origin and cause of all joy?’

I answered him, with a humble expression: ‘Are you then that Virgil, and that fountain, that pours out so great a river of speech? O, glory and light to other poets, may that long study, and the great love, that made me scan your work, be worth something now. You are my master, and my author: you alone are the one from whom I learnt the high style that has brought me honour. See the creature that I turned back from: O, sage, famous in wisdom, save me from her, she that makes my veins and my pulse tremble.’

When he saw me weeping, he answered: ‘You must go another road, if you wish to escape this savage place. This creature, that distresses you, allows no man to cross her path, but obstructs him, to destroy him, and she has so vicious and perverse a nature, that she never sates her greedy appetite, and after food is hungrier than before.’
Inferno Canto I:100-111 The salvation of Italy

‘Many are the creatures she mates with, and there will be many more, until the Greyhound comes who will make her die in pain. He will not feed himself on land or wealth, but on wisdom, love and virtue, and his birthplace will lie between Feltro and Feltro. He will be the salvation of that lower Italy for which virgin Camilla died of wounds, and Euryalus, Turnus, and Nisus. He will chase the she-wolf through every city, until he has returned her to Hell, from which envy first loosed her.’

Inferno Canto I:112-136 Virgil will be his guide through Hell

‘It is best, as I think and understand, for you to follow me, and I will be your guide, and lead you from here through an eternal space where you will hear the desparate shouts, will see the ancient spirits in pain, so that each one cries out for a second death: and then you will see others at peace in the flames, because they hope to come, whenever it may be, among the blessed. Then if you desire to climb to them, there will be a spirit, fitter than I am, to guide you, and I will leave you with her, when we part, since the Lord, who rules above, does not wish me to enter his city, because I was rebellious to his law.'
He is lord everywhere, but there he rules, and there is his city, and his high throne: O, happy is he, whom he chooses to go there!’

And I to him: ‘Poet, I beg you, by the God, you did not acknowledge, lead me where you said, so that I might escape this evil or worse, and see the Gate of St. Peter, and those whom you make out to be so saddened.’

Then he moved: and I moved on behind him.

**Inferno Canto II:1-42 Dante’s doubts as to his fitness for the journey**

*The day was going*, and the dusky air was freeing the creatures of the earth, from their labours, and I, one, alone, prepared myself to endure the inner war, of the journey and its pity, that the mind, without error, shall recall.

O Muses, O high invention, aid me, now! O memory, that has engraved what I saw, here your nobility will be shown.

I began: ‘Poet, who guides me, examine my virtue, see if I am fitting, before you trust me to the steep way. You say that *Aeneas*, the father of Sylvius, while still corruptible flesh, went to the eternal world, and in his senses. But if God, who opposes every evil, was gracious to him,
thinking of the noble consequence, of who and what should derive from him, then that does not
seem unreasonable to a man of intellect, since he was chosen to be the father of benign Rome,
and of her empire. Both of them were founded as a sacred place, where the successor of the great
Peter is enthroned. By that journey, by which you graced him, Aeneas learned things that were
the source of his victory and of the Papal Mantle. Afterwards Paul, the Chosen Vessel, went
there, to bring confirmation of the faith that is the entrance to the way of salvation.

But why should I go there? Who allows it? I am not Aeneas: I am not Paul. Neither I, nor others,
think me worthy of it. So, if I resign myself to going, I fear that going there may prove foolish:
you know, and understand, better than I can say.’ And I rendered myself, on that dark shore, like
one who unwishes what he wished, and changes his purpose, in new thinking, so that he leaves
off what he began, completely, since in thought I consumed action, that had been so ready to
begin.

Inferno Canto II:43-93 Virgil explains his Mission: Beatrice

The ghost of the generous poet replied: ‘If I have understood your words correctly, your spirit is
attacked by cowardly fear, that often weighs men down, so that it deflects them from honourable
action, like a creature seeing phantoms in the dusk. That you may shake off this dread yourself, I
will tell you why I came, and what I heard at the first moment when I took pity on you.

I was among those, in Limbo, in suspense, and a lady called to me, she so beautiful, so blessed,
that I begged her to command me. Her eyes shone more brightly than the stars, and she began to
speak, gently, quietly, in an angelic voice, in her language: ‘O noble Mantuan spirit, whose fame
still endures in the world, and will endure as long as time endures, my friend, not fortune’s
friend, is so obstructed in his way, along the desert strand, that he turns back in terror, and I fear
he is already so far lost, that I have started too late to his aid, from what I heard of him in heaven.
Now go, and help him so, with your eloquence, and with whatever is needed for his relief, that I
may be comforted. I am Beatrice, who asks you to go: I come from a place I long to return to:
love moved me that made me speak. When I am before my Lord, I will often praise you to him.’
Then she was silent, and I began: ‘O lady of virtue, in whom, alone, humanity exceeds all that is contained in the lunar heaven, which has the smallest sphere, your command is so pleasing to me, that, obeying, were it done already, it were done too slow: you have no need to explain your wishes further. But tell me why you do not hesitate to descend here, to this centre below, from the wide space you burn to return to.’

She replied: ‘Since you wish to know, I will tell you this much, briefly, of why I do not fear to enter here. Those things that have the power to hurt are to be feared: not those other things that are not fearful. I am made such, by God’s grace, that your suffering does not touch me, nor does the fire of this burning scorch me.’

Inferno Canto II:94-120 The Virgin sends Lucia to Beatrice

‘There is a gentle lady in heaven, who has such compassion, for this trouble I send you to relieve, that she overrules the strict laws on high. She called Lucia, to carry out her request, and said: “Now, he who is faithful to you, needs you, and I commend him to you.” Lucia, who is opposed to all cruelty, rose and came to the place where I was, where I sat with that Rachel of antiquity. Lucia said: “Beatrice, God’s true praise, why do you not help him, who loved you, so intensely, he left behind the common crowd for you? Do you not hear how pitiful his grief is? Do
you not see the spiritual death that comes to meet him, on that dark river, over which the sea has no power?”

No one on earth was ever as quick to search for their good, or run from harm, as I to descend, from my blessed place, after these words were spoken, and place my faith in your true speech, that honours you and those who hear it.' She turned away, with tears in her bright eyes, after saying this to me, and made me, by that, come here all the quicker: and so I came to you, as she wished, and rescued you in the face of that wild creature, that denied you the shortest path to the lovely mountain.'

**Inferno Canto II:121-142 Virgil strengthens Dante’s will**

‘What is it then? Why, do you hold back? Why? Why let such cowardly fear into your heart?

Why, when three such blessed ladies, in the courts of heaven, care for you, and my words promise you so much good, are you not free and ardent?’

As the flowers, bent down and closed, by the night’s cold, erect themselves, all open, on their stems, when the sun shines on them, so I rose from weakened courage: and so fine an ardour coursed through my heart, that I began to speak, like one who is freed: ‘O she, who pities, who helps me, and you, so gentle, who swiftly obeyed the true words she commanded, you have filled my heart with such desire, by what you have said, to go forward, that I have turned back to my first purpose.

Go now, for the two of us have but one will, you, the guide, the lord, the master.’ So I spoke to him, and he going on, I entered on the steep, tree-shadowed, way.

**Inferno Canto III:1-21 The Gate of Hell**

THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE INFERNAL CITY:

THROUGH ME THE WAY TO ETERNAL SADNESS:

THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE LOST PEOPLE.

JUSTICE MOVED MY SUPREME MAKER:

I WAS SHAPED BY DIVINE POWER,

BY HIGHEST WISDOM, AND BY PRIMAL LOVE.

BEFORE ME, NOTHING WAS CREATED,

THAT IS NOT ETERNAL: AND ETERNAL I ENDURE.

FORSAKE ALL HOPE, ALL YOU THAT ENTER HERE.
These were the words, with their dark colour, that I saw written above the gate, at which I said: ‘Master, their meaning, to me, is hard.’ And he replied to me, as one who knows: ‘Here, all uncertainty must be left behind: all cowardice must be dead. We have come to the place where I told you that you would see the sad people who have lost the good of the intellect.’ And placing his hand on mine, with a calm expression, that comforted me, he led me towards the hidden things.

_Inferno Canto III:22-69 The spiritually neutral_

Here sighs, complaints, and deep groans, sounded through the starless air, so that it made me weep at first. Many tongues, a terrible crying, words of sadness, accents of anger, voices deep and hoarse, with sounds of hands amongst them, making a turbulence that turns forever, in that air, stained, eternally, like sand spiralling in a whirlwind. And I, my head surrounded by the horror, said: ‘Master, what is this I hear, and what race are these, that seem so overcome by suffering?’

And he to me: ‘This is the miserable mode in which those exist, who lived without praise, without blame. They are mixed in with the despised choir of angels, those not rebellious, not faithful to God, but for themselves. Heaven drove them out, to maintain its beauty, and deep Hell does not accept them, lest the evil have glory over them.’ And I: ‘Master, what is so heavy on them, that makes them moan so deeply?’ He replied: ‘I will tell you, briefly. They have no hope of death, and their darkened life is so mean that they are envious of every other fate. Earth allows no mention of them to exist: mercy and justice reject them: let us not talk of them, but look and pass.’

And I, who looked back, saw a banner, that twirling round, moved so quickly, that it seemed to me scornful of any pause, and behind it came so long a line of people, I never would have believed that death had undone so many.
Inferno Canto III:58-69 Their punishment

When I had recognised some among them, I saw and knew the shade of him who from cowardice made ‘the great refusal’. Immediately I understood that this was the despicable crew, hateful to God and his enemies. These wretches, who never truly lived, were naked, and goaded viciously by hornets, and wasps, there, making their faces stream with blood, that, mixed with tears, was collected, at their feet, by loathsome worms.

Inferno Canto III:70-99 Charon, the ferryman of the Acheron

And then, as I looked onwards, I saw people on the bank of a great river, at which I said:

‘Master, now let me understand who these are, and what custom makes them so ready to cross over, as I can see by the dim light.’ And he to me: ‘The thing will be told you, when we halt our steps, on the sad strand of Acheron.’ Then, fearing that my words might have offended him, I stopped myself from speaking, with eyes ashamed and downcast, till we had reached the flood.

And see, an old man, with white hoary locks, came towards us in a boat, shouting: ‘Woe to you, wicked spirits! Never hope to see heaven: I come to carry you to the other shore, into eternal darkness, into fire and ice. And you, who are there, a living spirit, depart from those who are dead.’
But when he saw that I did not depart, he said: ‘By other ways, by other means of passage, you will cross to the shore: a quicker boat must carry you.’ And my guide said to him: ‘Charon, do not vex yourself: it is willed there, where what is willed is done: ask no more.’ Then the bearded mouth, of the ferryman of the livid marsh, who had wheels of flame round his eyes, was stilled.

**Inferno Canto III:100-136 The souls by the shore of Acheron**

But those spirits, who were naked and weary, altered colour, and gnashed their teeth, when they heard his former, cruel words. They blasphemed against God, and their parents, the human species, the place, time, and seed of their conception, and of their birth. Then, all together, weeping bitterly, they neared the cursed shore that waits for every one who has no fear of God.

*Charon*, the demon, with eyes of burning coal, beckoning, gathers them all: and strikes with his oar whoever lingers. As the autumn leaves fall, one after another, till the branches see all their spoilage on the ground, so, one by one, the evil seed of Adam, threw themselves down from the bank when signalled, like the falcon at its call. So they vanish on the dark water, and before they have landed over there, over here a fresh crowd collects.

The courteous Master said: ‘My son, those who die subject to God’s anger, all gather here, from every country, and they are quick to cross the river, since divine justice goads them on, so that their fear is turned to desire. This way no good spirit ever passes, and so if Charon complains at you, you can well understand, now, the meaning of his words.

When he had ended, the gloomy ground trembled so violently, that the memory of my terror still drenches me with sweat. The weeping earth gave vent, and flashed with crimson light, overpowering all my senses, and I fell, like a man overcome by sleep.
Inferno Canto IV:1-63 The First Circle: Limbo: The Heathens

A heavy thunder shattered the deep sleep in my head, so that I came to myself, like someone woken by force, and standing up, I moved my eyes, now refreshed, and looked round, steadily, to find out what place I was in. I found myself, in truth, on the brink of the valley of the sad abyss that gathers the thunder of an infinite howling. It was so dark, and deep, and clouded, that I could see nothing by staring into its depths.

The poet, white of face, began: ‘Now, let us descend into the blind world below: I will go first, and you go second.’ And I, who saw his altered colour, said: ‘How can I go on, if you are afraid, who are my comfort when I hesitate?’ And he to me: ‘The anguish of the people, here below, brings that look of pity to my face, that you mistake for fear. Let us go, for the length of our journey demands it.’ So he entered, and so he made me enter, into the first circle that surrounds the abyss.

Here there was no sound to be heard, except the sighing, that made the eternal air tremble, and it came from the sorrow of the vast and varied crowds of children, of women, and of men, free of torment. The good Master said to me: ‘You do not demand to know who these spirits are that you see. I want you to learn, before you go further, that they had no sin, yet, though they have worth, it is not sufficient, because they were not baptised, and baptism is the gateway to the faith that you believe in. Since they lived before Christianity, they did not worship God correctly, and I myself am one of them. For this defect, and for no other fault, we are lost, and we are only tormented, in that without hope we live in desire.’

When I heard this, great sadness gripped my heart, because I knew of people of great value, who must be suspended in that Limbo. Wishing to be certain in that faith that overcomes every error, I began: ‘Tell me my Master, tell me, sir, did anyone ever go from here, through his own merit or because of others’ merit, who afterwards was blessed?’
And he, understanding my veiled question, replied: ‘I was new to this state, when I saw a great one come here crowned with the sign of victory. He took from us the shade of Adam, our first parent, of his son Abel, and that of Noah, of Moses the lawgiver, and Abraham, the obedient Patriarch, King David, Jacob with his father Isaac, and his children, and Rachel, for whom he laboured so long, and many others, and made them blessed, and I wish you to know that no human souls were saved before these.

Inferno Canto IV:64-105 The Great Poets

We did not cease moving, though he was speaking, but passed the wood meanwhile, the wood, I say, of crowded spirits. We had not gone far from where I slept, when I saw a flame that overcame a hemisphere of shadows. We were still some way from it, but not so far that I failed to discern in part what noble people occupied that place.

‘O you, who value every science and art, who are these, who have such honour that they stand apart from all the rest?’ And he to me: ‘Their fame, that sounds out for them, honoured in that life of yours, brings them heaven’s grace that advances them.’ Meanwhile I heard a voice: ‘Honour the great poet: his departed shade returns.’

After the voice had paused, and was quiet, I saw four great shadows come towards us, with faces that were neither sad nor happy. The good Master began to speak: ‘Take note of him, with a sword in hand, who comes in front of the other three, as if he were their lord: that is Homer, the
sovereign poet: next *Horace* the satirist: *Ovid* is the third, and last is *Lucan*. Because each is worthy, with me, of that name the one voice sounded, they do me honour, and, in doing so, do good.’

So I saw gathered together the noble school, of the lord of highest song, who soars, like an eagle, above the rest. After they had talked for a while amongst themselves, they turned towards me with a sign of greeting, at which my Master smiled. And they honoured me further still, since they made me one of their company, so that I made a sixth among the wise.

So we went onwards to the light, speaking of things about which it is best to be silent, just as it was best to speak of them, where I was.

**Inferno Canto IV:106-129 The Heroes and Heroines**

We came to the base of a noble castle; surrounded seven times by a high wall; defended by a beautiful, encircling, stream. This we crossed as if it were solid earth: I entered through seven gates, with the wise: we reached a meadow of fresh turf. The people there were of great authority in appearance, with calm, and serious looks, speaking seldom, and then with soft voices. We moved to one side, into an open space, bright and high, so that every one, of them all, could be seen. There, on the green enamel, the great spirits were pointed out to me, directly, so that I feel exalted, inside me, at having seen them.

I saw *Electra* with many others, amongst whom I knew *Hector, Aeneas* and *Caesar*, armed, with his eagle eye. I saw *Camilla* and *Penthesilea*, on the other side, and the King of Latium, *Latinus*, with *Lavinia* his daughter. I saw that *Brutus* who expelled *Tarquin, Lucretia, Julia, Marcia*, and *Cornelia*, and I saw *Saladin*, by himself, apart.

**Inferno Canto IV:130-151 The Philosophers and other great spirits**

When I lifted my eyes a little higher, I saw the Master of those who know, *Aristotle*, sitting amongst the company of philosophers. All gaze at him: all show him honour. There I saw *Socrates*, and *Plato*, who stand nearest to him of all of them; *Democritus*, who ascribes the world to chance, *Diogenes, Anaxagoras*, and *Thales; Empedocles, Heraclitus*, and *Zeno*; and I saw the good collector of the qualities of plants, I mean *Dioscorides*: and saw *Orpheus, Cicero, Linus*, and *Seneca* the moralist; *Euclid* the geometer, and *Ptolemaeus, Hippocrates, Avicenna*, and *Galen*; and *Averrhoës*, who wrote the vast commentary.

I cannot speak of them all in full, because the great theme drives me on, so that the word falls, many times, short of the fact. The six companions reduce to two: the wise guide leads me, by another path, out of the quiet, into the trembling air, and I come to a region, where nothing shines.

**Inferno Canto V:70-142 Paolo and Francesca**

After I had heard my teacher name the ancient knights and ladies, pity overcame me, and I was as if dazed. I began: ‘Poet, I would speak, willingly, to those two who go together, and seem so
light upon the wind.’ And he to me: ‘You will see, when they are nearer to us, you can beg them, then, by the love that leads them, and they will come.’

As soon as the wind brought them to us, I raised my voice: ‘O weary souls, come and talk with us, if no one prevents it.’ As doves, claimed by desire, fly steadily, with raised wings, through the air, to their sweet nest, carried by the will, so the spirits flew from the crowd where Dido is, coming towards us through malignant air, such was the power of my affecting call.
'O gracious and benign living creature, that comes to visit us, through the dark air, if the universe’s king were our friend, we, who tainted the earth with blood, would beg him to give you peace, since you take pity on our sad misfortune. While the wind, as now, is silent, we will hear you and speak to you, of what you are pleased to listen to and talk of.

The place where I was born is by the shore, where the River Po runs down to rest at peace, with his attendant streams. Love, that is quickly caught in the gentle heart, filled him with my fair form, now lost to me, and the nature of that love still afflicts me. Love, that allows no loved one to be excused from loving, seized me so fiercely with desire for him it still will not leave me, as you can see. Love led us to one death. Caïna, in the ninth circle waits, for him who quenched our life.’

These words carried to us, from them. After I had heard those troubled spirits, I bowed my head, and kept it bowed, until the poet said: ‘What are you thinking?’ When I replied, I began: ‘O, alas, what sweet thoughts, what longing, brought them to this sorrowful state? Then I turned to them again, and I spoke, and said: ‘Francesca, your torment makes me weep with grief and pity. But tell me, in that time of sweet sighs, how did love allow you to know these dubious desires?’

And she to me: ‘There is no greater pain, than to remember happy times in misery, and this your teacher knows. But if you have so great a yearning to understand the first root of our love, I will be like one who weeps and tells. We read, one day, to our delight, of Lancelot and how love constrained him: we were alone and without suspicion. Often those words urged our eyes to meet, and coloured our cheeks, but it was a single moment that undid us. When we read how that lover kissed the beloved smile, he who will never be separated from me, kissed my mouth all trembling. That book was a Galeotto, a pandar, and he who wrote it: that day we read no more.’
While the one spirit spoke, the other wept, so that I fainted out of pity, and, as if I were dying, fell, as a dead body falls.