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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’altrre cose ch’i’ v’ho scorte.
Io non so ben ridir com’io v’entrai,
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
che nel lago del cora m’era durata
la notte ch’i’ passai con tanta pieta.
E come quei che con lena affannata
uscito fuor del pelago alla riva
si volge all’acqua perigliosa e guata,
cosi 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.
Ed ecco, quasi al cominciare dell’erta,
una lonza leggiera e presta molto,
che di pel macolato era coerta;
e non mi si partia d’innanzi al volto,
anzi impediva tanto il mio cammino
ch’i’ fui per ritornar più volte vòlto.

a. A lyrical expression, lit. “in the heart’s lake”, or (to quote Yeats) “in the
depth heart’s core”, the heart being the seat of the passions.
b. Lit. “often turned to go back”; “volte vòlto” exemplifies the figure of tra-
ductio, 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:
    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
    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
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;
   si ch’a bene sperar m’era cagione
di quella fera alla 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 parea che contra me venisse
   con la test’alta e con rabbiosa fame,
sì che parea che l’aere ne tremesse.
Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame
   sembiava carca nella sua magrezza,
   e molte genti fe’ già viver grame;
questa mi porse tanto di gravezza
   con la paura ch’uscia di sua vista,
   ch’io perdei la speranza dell’altezza.
E qual è quei che volentieri acquista,
   e giunge ’l tempo che perder lo face,
   che ‘n tutt’i suoi pensier piange e s’attrista;
tal mi fece la bestia sanza pace,
   che, venendomi incontro, a poco a poco
   mi ripigneva là dove ’l sol tace.
Mentre ch’i’ rovinava in basso loco,
   dinanzi alli occhi mi si fu offerto
   chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco.
Quando vidi costui nel gran diserto,
   “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,
   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”); “temesse” 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.  
   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.  
And then a she-wolf! Though she was so lean,
   She looked about to burst, being crammed with cravings,
   She who’d made many draw their breath in pain.  
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.  
Then suddenly, as I went slipping down,
   Someone appeared before my very eyes,
   Seemingly through long silence hoarse and wan.
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,
   And lived in Rome under the good Augustus.
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 si largo fiume?”
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 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.”
“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 si 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,
e più saranno ancora, infin che ’l veltro
verrà, che la farà morir con dogia.
Questi non ciberà terra né peltro,
ma sapienza, amore e virtute,
e sua nazion sarà tra feltro e feltro.
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
And there’ll be many more, until the hound 13
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. Variously interpreted 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,
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.

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 richioggio
per quello Dio che tu non conoscesti,
acciò ch’io fugga questo male e peggio,
che tu mi meni là dove or dicesti,
si ch’io veggia la porta di san Pietro
e color cui tu fai cotanto mesti.”

Allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro.
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.

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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.
CANTO II

The sun is now setting. This is a time when most creatures settle down to rest. Dante, however, is preparing himself for the coming day-long journey and its hardships.

He invokes the Muses to help him give a true account of his journey. Then he tells Virgil how he doubts his own ability to complete the task, and expresses his perplexity as to why he has been chosen for such an unusual enterprise. He can understand why Aeneas was chosen, the man of destiny who was to found the race that founded Rome, the ruling city of a great empire and the seat of the Holy See. But Dante cannot think that any such destiny is prepared for him. He can understand too why St Paul was taken temporarily into Heaven while still alive. But no one could believe that Dante is worthy of such a favour.

To these doubts Virgil replies by saying that Dante is simply afraid. To combat Dante’s fear he will explain how he came to help him. Beatrice came to him in Limbo and asked for his help to save Dante from damnation. She promised in return to praise Virgil frequently in the presence of God. In answer to Virgil’s question, Beatrice explains how she was not afraid to venture down from Heaven: the souls in bliss are not tormented by earthly things. Beatrice describes how Mary, the Mother of Christ, had asked St Lucy to help Dante, and St Lucy then asked her.

With three such ladies caring for him (an outstanding example of the communion of the saints, in contrast to the lack of a sense of community we find in the Inferno) Dante must have nothing to fear. Duly encouraged, Dante sets off with Virgil.
Lo giorno se n’andava, e l’aere bruno
toglieva li animai che sono in terra
dalle fatiche loro – e io sol uno
m’apparecchiava a sostener la guerra
si del cammino e si della pietate,
che ritrarrà la mente che non erra.
O muse, o alto ingegno, or m’aiutate –
o mente che scrivesti ciò ch’io vidi,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.
Io cominciai: “Poeta che mi guidi,
guarda la mia virtù s’ell’è possente,
prima ch’all’alto passo tu mi fidi.
Tu dici che di Silvio il parente,
corruttibile ancora, ad immortale
secolo andò, e fu sensibilmente.
Però, se l’avversario d’ogni male
cortese i fu, pensando l’alto effetto
ch’uscir dovea di lui, e ’l chi e ’l quale,
non pare indegno ad omo d’intelletto,
ch’e’ fu dell’alma Roma e di suo impero
nell’empireo ciel per padre eletto:
la quale e ’l quale, a voler dir lo vero,
fu stabilita per lo loco santo
u’ siede il successor del maggior Piero.
Per questa andata onde li dai tu vanto,
intese cose che furon cagione
di sua vittoria e del papale ammanto.
Andovvi poi lo Vas d’elezione,
per recarne conforto a quella fede
ch’è principio alla via di salvazione.
Ma io perché venirvi? o chi ’l concede?
Io non Enea, io non Paulo sono:
me degno a ciò né io né altri crede.
Per che, se del venire io m’abbandono,
temo che la venuta non sia folle:
se’ savio – intendi me’ ch’i’ non ragiono.”
The light was failing, and the growing gloom
Relieving every creature on the earth
Of all its toil and trouble. I alone
Was getting ready to endure the stress
Both of the road and the resultant anguish,
Which never-erring memory will rehearse.
O Muses, O my genius, lend me aid!
O memory, who wrote down what I saw,
Here your capacity will be well tried!
I started: “Poet, you who are my guide,
Consider if I have the strength and skill,
Before you set me on this rugged road.
The father of Silvius,¹ as you tell it, while
He was corruptible, travelled beyond
This world of ours, being still corporeal.
And, if the enemy of all that’s bad
Did favour him, because of who he was
And what he was, and what at last he did,
That must, to men of sense, seem not unfair,
Since he was chosen in the highest heaven
As father of great Rome and Rome’s Empire.
The City of Rome, to tell the truth of it,
Was destined to become that sacred place
Where his successor² sits in Peter’s seat.
On this strange journey you ascribe to him,
He heard of things that were to bring about
His triumph and the papal power in Rome.
That is a road the Vessel of Election³
Went upon also, strengthening the faith
Which starts us on our journey to salvation.
But why should I go there? By whose decree?
Aeneas³ I am not, and not Paul either.
That I am worthy no one would agree.
And so, if I agree to go that way,
I am afraid of being overbold.
You’re wise. You understand more than I say.”

¹. Aeneas, the hero of the Aeneid. In the sixth book of that poem Aeneas journeys through the underworld and is rewarded with a prophecy of the future glory of Rome.
². St Peter’s successor, the Pope.
³. St Paul, the “chosen vessel” mentioned in Acts 9:15. Paul himself describes how “he was caught up into paradise” (2 Cor. 12: 2–4).
E qual è quei che disvuol ciò che volle
e per novi pensier cangia proposta,
sì che dal cominciari tutto sì tolle,
tal mi fec’io in quella oscura costa,
perché, pensando, consumai la ’mpresa
che fu nel cominciari cotanto tosta.
“S’i’ ho ben la parola tua intesa,”
rispuose del magnanimo quell’ombra,
“l’anima tua è da viltate offesa;
la qual molte fiate l’omo ingombra
sì che d’onrata impresa lo rivolve,
come falso veder bestia quand’ombra.
Da questa tema acciò che tu ti solve,
diriotti perch’io venni e quel ch’io ’ntesi
nel primo punto che di te mi dole.
Io era tra color che son sospesi,
e donna mi chiamò beata e bella,
tal che di comandare io la richiesi.
Lucevan li occhi suoi più che la stella,
e cominciamo a dir soave e piana,
con angelica voce, in sua favella:
‘O anima cortese mantovana,
di cui la fama ancor nel mondo dura,
e durerà quanto ’l mondo lontana,
l’amico mio, e non della ventura,
nella diserta piaggia è impedito
sì nel cammin, che volt’è per paura;
etemo che non sia già sì smarrito
ch’io mi sia tardi al soccorso levata,
per quel ch’i’ ho di lui nel cielo udito.
Or movi, e con la tua parola ornata
e con ciò ch’ha mestieri al suo campare
l’aiuta, sì ch’i’ ne sia consolata.
I’ son Beatrice che ti faccio andare –
vegno del loco ove tornar disio –
amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.

a. “Ombra”: here a verb (“darkness falls”), while in l. 44 it is a noun (“shade”): another instance of *traductio*, see notes to i, 36.
Just as one is who unmeans what he meant,
Changing that mind of his on second thoughts,
Wholly diverted from his first intent –
That’s how I stood upon that gloomy slope:
By thinking through it, I’d consumed the venture
For which I was so eager starting up.
“If I have understood your words aright,”
Answered the shade of that high-minded man,
“Your cowardly soul has simply taken fright.
Fear often faces men with obstacles
To make them turn from honourable endeavours,
As beasts fear shadows when the daylight fails.
That you may lose this fear and so come through,
I’ll tell you why I came, and what I learnt
At the first instant when I pitied you.
I was among those souls who are suspended.4
A lady called to me, so bright and blessed
I asked her to make known what she commanded.
Her eyes were shining brighter than the stars.
She spoke in her own tongue, in gentleness,
And said in that angelic voice of hers:
‘O Mantuan soul, the soul of courtesy,
Whose glory is still current in the world,
And shall endure till this world cease to be,
This friend of mine (though not a friend of fate)
Is so encumbered on the lonely hillside
He has been driven from his path in fright.
It could be that he has already strayed
So far I’m here too late to give him succour,
Judging by what in heaven I have heard.
Now go, and with your noted eloquence,
And everything he needs for his escape,
Come to his aid. I shall take comfort thence.
For I am Beatrice putting you to work.
I come from where I’m anxious to return.
Love urged me on to this – Love makes me speak.

4. In Limbo, described in iv. Limbo is the part of the Inferno reserved for those who had lived virtuously but were not baptized, and so are held in suspense between their desire for God and the impossibility of ever seeing Him.
Quando sarò dinanzi al Signor mio,  
di te mi loderò sovente a lui.’

Tacette allora, e poi comincia’ io:

‘O donna di virtù, sola per cui
l’umana spezie eccede ogni contento
di quel ciel c’ha minor li cerchi sui,
tanto m’aggrada il tuo comandamento
che l’ubidir, se già fosse, m’è tardi:
più non t’è uopo aprirmi il tuo talento.

Ma dimmi la cagion che non ti guardi
dello scender qua giuso in questo centro
dell’ampio loco ove tornar tu ardi.’

‘Da che tu vuo’ saper cotanto a dentro,
dirotti brievemente,’ mi rispose,
‘perch’io non temo di venir qua entro.

Temer si dee di sole quelle cose
c’hanno potenza di fare altrui male –
dell’altre no, ché non son paurose.

Io son fatta da Dio, sua mercé, tale
che la vostra miseria non mi tange,
né fiamma d’esto incendio non m’assale.

Donna è gentil nel ciel che si compiange
di questo impedimento ov’io ti mando,
sì che duro giudicio là su frange.

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

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

Disse: “Beatrice, loda di Dio vera,
ché non soccorri quei che t’amò tanto,
ch’uscì per te della volgare schiera?
non odi tu la pièta del suo pianto?
non vedi tu la morte che ’l combatte
sulla fiumana onde ’l mar non ha vanto?”
When I’m once more in presence of my Lord,
I’ll sing your praises to him frequently.’
At that point she fell silent. Then I said:
‘O lady full of virtue, and through whom
The human race surpasses everything
Beneath the narrow circle of the moon,’
I am so gratified by what you order,
If I’d obeyed already I’d be tardy.
There is no need to express your wishes further.
But tell me first the reason you don’t spurn
Descending to this centre from broad spaces
Where, as you say, you’re anxious to return.’
‘Because you feel the urge to understand,
I shall explain quite briefly,’ she replied,
‘Why I am not too frightened to descend.
We should be frightened of those things alone
Which have the ability to do us evil.
Things are not frightening if they do no harm.
I’m formed in such a fashion, by God’s grace,
That your unhappiness does not affect me.
Nor do the fires that rage throughout this place.
A lady in heaven has such great sympathy,
Given the encumbrances through which I send you,
That the stern judgement up above gives way.
She called on Lucy, and she said to her:
“One who is faithful to you now has need
Of you, and I commend him to your care.”
St Lucy, foe to all malignity,
Rose at those words and, coming where I sat
With venerable Rachel, said to me:
“Beatrice, veritable praise of God,
Why do you not help him who loved you so
That for your sake he stood out from the crowd?
Can you not hear his cries of misery?
Can you not see him caught in a death struggle
Upon that flood as fearful as the sea?”

5. The moon was considered to be the planet nearest to the earth. All above its orbit was considered everlasting, and all below mortal.
6. “This centre” is the earth, seen in the Ptolemaic system as the centre of the universe. The “broad spaces” refers to the Empyrean, the highest heaven, the sphere farthest from the earth.
7. The Virgin Mary.
8. A saint to whom Dante was particularly devoted. Her name is derived from the Latin “lux” meaning light.
Al mondo non fur mai persone ratte
a far lor pro o a fuggir lor danno,
com’io, dopo cotai parole fatte,
venni qua giù del mio beato scanno,
fidandomi del tuo parlare onesto,
ch’onorare te e quei ch’udito l’hanno.’

Poscia che m’ebbe ragionato questo,
l’occhi lucenti lacrimando volse,
per che mi fece del venir più presto;
e venni a te così com’ella volse;
d’innanzi a quella fiera ti levai
che del bel monte il corto andar ti tolse.

Dunque che è? Perché, perché restai?
Perché tanta viltà nel core allette?
Perché ardire e franchezza non hai?
Poscia che tai tre donne benedette
curan di te nella corte del cielo,
e ’l mio parlar tanto ben ti promette?”

Quale i fioretti, dal notturno gelo
chinati e chiusi, poi che ’l sol li ’mbianca
si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo,
tal mi fec’io di mia virtute stanca,
e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse,
ch’i’ cominciai come persona franca:
“Oh pietosa colei che mi soccorse!
e te cortese ch’ubidisti tosto
alle vere parole che ti porse!
Tu m’hai con disiderio il cor disposto
si al venir con le parole tue,
ch’i’ son tornato nel primo proposto.
Or va’, ch’un sol volere è d’ambidue:
tu duca, tu segnore e tu maestro.”

Così li dissi; e poi che mosso fue,
intraì per lo cammino alto e silvestro.
Nobody in the world was ever so quick
To seek advantage and to run from loss
As I, the instant I had heard her speak,
Was quick to leave my seat among the blessed,
Putting my faith in your fine honest speech, a
Which honours you and those who read it best.'
As soon as she had said these words to me,
She turned her eyes, shining with tears, aside,
Which made me the more eager to obey.
And so I came since she requested it,
And saved you from that savage beast that barred
The short way up the mountain of delight.
What is it then? Why do you hesitate?
Why do you relish living like a coward?
Why cannot you be bold and keen to start?
Are not three blessèd ladies, after all,
Concerned and speaking up for you in heaven?
And does not what I've said promise you well?"
As tiny blossoms, when the cold night air
Has made them droop and close, lift up their heads
And spread their petals once it's dawn once more,
So I did also, after being exhausted.
And such great ardour streamed into my heart
That like somebody freed from fear I started:
“Oh how compassionate to bring me aid!
And you, how courteous you were! When she
Spoke those true words, how swiftly you obeyed!
You have instilled such longing in my heart
To come with you, because of all you say,
That I have now gone back to my first thought.
Now go, for we are thoroughly at one.
You are my leader, my master, and my lord.”
Those were my words. And so, as he went on,
I started on that rugged, savage road.

9. Virgil's poetry, especially the *Aeneid.*