

Dante: *Commedia*

The (*Divine*) *Comedy* is composed of over 14,000 lines that are divided into three canticas (Ital. pl. *cantiche*) — *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* — each consisting of 33 cantos (Ital. pl. *canti*). An initial canto serves as an introduction to the poem and is generally considered to be part of the first cantica, bringing the total number of cantos to 100. The number 3 is prominent in the work, represented here by the length of each cantica. The verse scheme used, *terza rima*, is hendecasyllabic (lines of eleven syllables), with the lines composing tercets according to the rhyme scheme *aba, bcb, cdc, ded, ...*

The poem is written in the first person, and tells of Dante's journey through the three realms of the dead, lasting from the night before Good Friday to the Wednesday after Easter in the spring of 1300. The Roman poet Virgil guides him through Hell and Purgatory; Beatrice, Dante's ideal of womanhood, guides him through Heaven. Beatrice was a Florentine woman whom he had met in childhood and admired from afar in the mode of the then-fashionable courtly love tradition, a story told in Dante's earlier work *La Vita Nuova*.

In Northern Italy's political struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines, Dante was part of the Guelphs, who in general favored the Papacy over the Holy Roman Emperor. Florence's Guelphs split into factions around 1300, the White Guelphs, and the Black Guelphs. Dante was among the White Guelphs who were exiled in 1302 by the Lord-Mayor Cante de' Gabrielli di Gubbio, after troops under Charles of Valois entered the city, at the request of Pope Boniface VIII, who supported the Black Guelphs. This exile, which lasted the rest of Dante's life, shows its influence in many parts of the *Comedy*, from prophecies of Dante's exile to Dante's views of politics to the eternal damnation of some of his opponents.

In Hell and Purgatory, Dante shares in the sin and the penitence respectively. The last word in each of the three parts of the *Divine Comedy* is *stelle*, "stars."

Inferno

The poem begins on the night before Good Friday in the year 1300, "halfway along our life's path" (*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*). Dante is thirty-five years old, half of the biblical life expectancy of 70 (Psalms 90:10), lost in a dark wood, assailed by beasts (a lion, a leopard, and a she-wolf) he cannot evade, and unable to find the "straight way" (*diritta via*) - also translatable as "right way" - to salvation (symbolized by the sun behind the mountain). Conscious that he is ruining himself and that he is falling into a "deep place" (*basso loco*) where the sun is silent (*l sol tace*), Dante is at last rescued by Virgil, and the two of them begin their journey to the underworld. Each sin's punishment in *Inferno* is a contrapasso, a symbolic instance of poetic justice; for example, fortune-tellers have to walk with their heads on backwards, unable to see what is ahead, because that was what they had tried to do in life.

Allegorically, the *Inferno* represents the Christian soul seeing sin for what it really is, and the three beasts represent three types of sin: the self-indulgent, the violent, and the malicious. These three types of sin also provide the three main divisions of Dante's Hell: Upper Hell (the first 5 Circles) for the self-indulgent sins; Circles 6 and 7 for the violent sins; and Circles 8 and 9 for the malicious sins.

At the start of his journey, Dante passes through the gate of Hell, which bears an inscription, the ninth (and final) line of which is the famous phrase "*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*", or "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." Before entering Hell completely, Dante and his guide see the Uncommitted, souls of people who in life did nothing, neither for good nor evil (among these Dante recognizes either Pope Celestine V or Pontius Pilate; the text is ambiguous). Mixed with them are outcasts who took no side in the Rebellion of Angels. These souls are neither in Hell nor out of it, but reside on the shores of the Acheron, their punishment to eternally pursue a banner (i.e. self interest) while pursued by wasps and hornets that continually sting them while maggots and other such insects drink their blood and tears. This symbolizes the sting of their conscience and the repugnance of sin.

Then Dante and Virgil reach the ferry that will take them across the river Acheron and to Hell. The ferry is piloted by Charon, who does not want to let Dante enter, for he is a living being. Virgil forces Charon to take him by means of another famous line *Vuolsi così colà ove si puote* (which translates to *So it is wanted there where the power lies*, referring to the fact that Dante is on his journey on divine grounds), but their passage across is undescribed since Dante faints and does not awake until he is on the other side.

Virgil guides Dante through the nine circles of Hell. The circles are concentric, representing a gradual increase in wickedness, and culminating at the center of the earth, where Satan is held in bondage. Each circle's sinners are punished in a fashion fitting their crimes: each sinner is afflicted for all of eternity by the chief sin he committed. People who sinned but prayed for forgiveness before their deaths are found not in Hell but in Purgatory, where they labor to be free of their sins. Those in Hell are people who tried to justify their sins and are unrepentant.

Purgatorio

Having survived the depths of Hell, Dante and Virgil ascend out of the undergloom, to the Mountain of Purgatory on the far side of the world. The Mountain is on an island, the only land in the Southern Hemisphere, created by the displacement of rock which resulted when Satan's fall created Hell (which Dante portrays as existing underneath Jerusalem).

Dante starts the ascent of Mount Purgatory at sunrise. On the lower slopes (designated as "ante-Purgatory" by commentators) Dante meets first a group of excommunicated souls. Ascending higher, he encounters those too lazy to repent until shortly before death, and those who suffered violent deaths (often due to leading extremely sinful lives). These souls will be admitted to Purgatory thanks to their genuine repentance, but must wait outside for an amount of time equal to their lives on earth (Cantos III through VI). Finally, Dante is shown a beautiful valley where he sees the lately deceased monarchs of the great nations of Europe, and a number of other persons whose devotion to public and private duties hampered their faith (Cantos VII and VIII). From this valley Dante is carried (while asleep) up to the gates of Purgatory proper (Canto IX).

From there, Virgil guides the pilgrim Dante through the seven terraces of Purgatory. These correspond to the seven deadly sins, each terrace purging a particular sin in an appropriate manner. Those in purgatory can all leave their circle voluntarily, but will only do so when they have corrected the nature within themselves that caused them to commit that sin. Souls can only move upwards and never backwards, since the intent of Purgatory is for souls to ascend towards God in Heaven, and can ascend only during daylight hours, since the light of God is the only true guidance. A dramatic reconciliation scene between Beatrice and Dante, in which she rebukes his sin (Cantos XXX and XXXI), helps cover the disappearance of Virgil, who, as a non-Christian, can help him no further and in the rest of the *Divine Comedy*, Beatrice is Dante's guide.

Paradiso

After an initial ascension (Canto I), Beatrice guides Dante through the nine celestial spheres of Heaven. These are concentric and spherical, similar to Aristotelian and Ptolemaic cosmology. Dante admits the vision of heaven he receives is the one that his human eyes permit him to see. Thus, the vision of heaven found in the Cantos is Dante's own personal vision, ambiguous in its true construction. The addition of a moral dimension means that a soul that has reached Paradise stops at the level applicable to it. Souls are allotted to the point of heaven that fits with their human ability to love God. Thus, there is a heavenly hierarchy. All parts of heaven are accessible to the heavenly soul. That is to say all experience God but there is a hierarchy in the sense that some souls are more spiritually developed than others. This is not determined by time or learning as such but by their proximity to God (how much they allow themselves to experience Him above other things). In Dante's schema all souls in Heaven are, on some level, always in contact with God.

While the structures of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* were based around different classifications of sin, the structure of the *Paradiso* is based on the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues.

From the ninth sphere, the "Primum Mobile", Dante ascends to a region beyond physical existence, called the Empyrean (Cantos XXX through XXXIII). Here the souls of all the believers form the petals of an enormous rose. Here, Beatrice leaves Dante with Saint Bernard, because theology has reached its limits. Saint Bernard prays to Mary on behalf of Dante. Finally, Dante comes face-to-face with God Himself, and is granted understanding of the Divine and of human nature. His vision is improved beyond that of human comprehension. God appears as three equally large circles within each other representing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit with the essence of each part of God, separate yet one. The book ends with Dante trying to understand how the circles fit together, how the Son is separate yet one with the Father but as Dante put it "that was not a flight for my wings" and the vision of God becomes equally inimitable and inexplicable that no word or intellectual exercise can come close to explaining what he saw. Dante's soul, through God's absolute love, experiences a unification with itself and all things, "but already my desire and my will were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed, by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars."

Inferno 1

When I had journeyed half of our life's way,
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray.

Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was,
that savage forest, dense and difficult,
which even in recall renews my fear: 6
so bitter-death is hardly more severe!
But to retell the good discovered there,
I'll also tell the other things I saw. 9

I cannot clearly say how I had entered
the wood; I was so full of sleep just at
the point where I abandoned the true path. 12
But when I'd reached the bottom of a hill-
it rose along the boundary of the valley
that had harassed my heart with so much fear- 15
I looked on high and I saw its shoulders clothed
already by the rays of that same planet
which serves to lead men straight along all roads. 18
At this my fear was somewhat quieted,
for through the night of sorrow I had spent,
the lake within my heart felt terror present. 21
And just as he who, with exhausted breath,
having escaped from sea to shore, turns back
to watch the dangerous waters he has quit, 24
so did my spirit, still a fugitive,
turn back to look intently at the pass
that never has let any man survive. 27
I let my tired body rest awhile.
Moving again, I tried the lonely slope-
my firm foot always was the one below. 30
And almost where the hillside starts to rise-
Look there!-a leopard, very quick and lithe,
a leopard covered with a spotted hide. 33
He did not disappear from sight, but stayed;
indeed, he so impeded my ascent
that I had often to turn back again. 36

Dante meets his guide to Inferno, Virgil

While I retreated down to lower ground,
before my eyes there suddenly appeared
one who seemed faint because of the long silence. 63
When I saw him in that vast wilderness,
"Have pity on me," were the words I cried,
"whatever you may be- a shade, a man." 66
He answered me: "Not man; I once was man.
Both of my parents came from Lombardy,
and both claimed Mantua as native city. 69
And I was born, though late, sub julio,
and lived in Rome under the good Augustus-
the season of the false and lying gods. 72
I was a poet, and I sang the righteous
son of Anchises who had come from Troy
when flames destroyed the pride of Ilium. 75

But why do you return to wretchedness?
 Why not climb up the mountain of delight,
 the origin and cause of every joy?" 78

"And are you then that Virgil, you the fountain
 that freely pours so rich a stream of speech?"
 I answered him with shame upon my brow. 81

"O light and honour of all other poets,
 may my long study and the intense love
 that made me search your volume serve me now. 84

You are my master and my author, you-
 the only one from whom my writing drew
 the noble style for which I had been honored. 87

You see the beast that made me turn aside;
 help me, o famous sage, to stand against her,
 for she has made my blood and pulses shudder." 90

"It is another path that you must take,"
 he answered when he saw my tearfulness,
 "if you would leave this savage wilderness; 93

the beast that is the cause of your outcry
 allows no man to pass along her track,
 but blocks him even to the point of death; 96
 her nature is so squalid, so malicious
 that she can never sate her greedy will;
 when she has fed, she's hungrier than ever. 99
 She mates with many living souls and shall
 yet mate with many more, until the Greyhound
 arrives, inflicting painful death on her. 102
 That Hound will never feed on land or pewter,
 but find his fare in wisdom, love, and virtue;
 his place of birth shall be between two felts. 105
 He will restore low-lying Italy
 for which the maid Camilla died of wounds,
 and Nisus, Turnus and Euryalus. 108
 And he will hunt that beast through every city
 until he thrusts her back again to Hell,
 from which she was first sent above by envy. 111
 Therefore, I think and judge it best for you
 to follow me, and I shall guide you, taking
 you from this place through an eternal place, 114
 where you shall hear the howls of desperation
 and see the ancient spirits in their pain,
 as each of them laments his second death; 117
 and shall see those souls who are content
 within the fire, for they hope to reach-
 whenever that may be-to the blessed people. 120
 If you would then ascend as high as these,
 a soul more worthy than I am will guide you;
 I'll leave you in her care when I depart, 123
 because that Emperor who reigns above,
 since I have been rebellious rebellious to His law,
 will not allow me entry to His city. 126
 He governs everywhere, but rules from there;

there is His city, His high capital:
 o happy those He chooses to be there!" 129
 And I replied: "O poet-by that God
 whom you had never come to know-I beg you,
 that I may flee this evil and worse evils, 132
 to lead me to the place of which you spoke,
 that I may see the gateway of Saint Peter
 and those whom you describe as sorrowful." 135
 Then he set out, and I moved on behind him.

Virgil tells how Beatrice sent him to help Dante. They arrive at the gate to the Underworld.

Through me the way to the city of woe,
 Through me the way into eternal pain, 3
 Through me the way among the lost.
 Justice moved my maker on high.
 Divine power made me, 6
 Wisdom supreme, and primal love.
 Before me nothing was but things eternal,
 And I endure eternally. 9
 Abandon all hope, you who enter here.
 These words, dark in hue, I saw inscribed
 over an archway. And then I said: 12
 'Master, for me their meaning is hard.'
 And he, as one who understood:
 'Here you must banish all distrust, 15
 here must all cowardice be slain.
 'We have come to where I said
 you would see the miserable sinners 18
 who have lost the good of the intellect.'
 And after he had put his hand on mine
 with a reassuring look that gave me comfort, 21
 he led me toward things unknown to man.
 Now sighs, loud wailing, lamentation
 resounded through the starless air, 24
 so that I too began to weep.
 Unfamiliar tongues, horrendous accents,
 words of suffering, cries of rage, voices 27
 loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands—
 all these made a tumult, always whirling
 in that black and timeless air, 30
 as sand is swirled in a whirlwind.
 And I, my head encircled by error, said:
 'Master, what is this I hear, and what people 33
 are these so overcome by pain?'
 And he to me: 'This miserable state is borne
 by the wretched souls of those who lived 36
 without disgrace yet without praise.
 'They intermingle with that wicked band
 of angels, not rebellious and not faithful 39
 to God, who held themselves apart.

'Loath to impair its beauty, Heaven casts them out,
and depth of Hell does not receive them 42
lest on their account the evil angels gloat.'
And I: 'Master, what is so grievous to them,
that they lament so bitterly?' 45
He replied: 'I can tell you in few words.
'They have no hope of death,
and their blind life is so abject 48
that they are envious of every other lot.
'The world does not permit report of them.
Mercy and justice hold them in contempt. 51
Let us not speak of them—look and pass by.'
And I, all eyes, made out a whirling banner
that ran so fast it seemed as though 54
it never could find rest.
Behind it came so long a file of people
that I could not believe 57
death had undone so many.
After I recognized a few of these,
I saw and knew the shade of him 60
who, through cowardice, made the great refusal.
At once with certainty I understood
this was that worthless crew 63
hateful alike to God and to His foes.
These wretches, who never were alive,
were naked and beset 66
by stinging flies and wasps
that made their faces stream with blood,
which, mingled with their tears, 69
was gathered at their feet by loathsome worms.
And then, fixing my gaze farther on,
I saw souls standing on the shore of a wide river, 72
and so I said: 'Master, permit me first
'to know who they are and then what inner law
makes them so eager for the crossing, 75
or so it seems in this dim light.'
And he to me: 'You shall know these things,
but not before we stay our steps 78
on the mournful shore of Acheron.'
Then, my eyes cast down with shame,
fearing my words displeased him, 81
I did not speak until we reached that stream.
And now, coming toward us in a boat,
an old man, his hair white with age, cried out: 84
'Woe unto you, you wicked souls,
'give up all hope of ever seeing heaven.
I come to take you to the other shore, 87
into eternal darkness, into heat and chill.
'And you there, you living soul,
move aside from these now dead.' 90
But when he saw I did not move,
he said: 'By another way, another port,

not here, you'll come to shore and cross. 93
A lighter ship must carry you.'
And my leader: 'Charon, do not torment yourself.
It is so willed where will and power are one, 96
and ask no more.'
That stilled the shaggy jowls
of the pilot of the livid marsh, 99
about whose eyes burned wheels of flame.

Inferno Canto 5

Now notes of desperation have begun
to overtake my hearing; now I come
where mighty lamentation beats against me.

I reached a place where every light is muted,
which bellows like the sea beneath a tempest,
when it is battered by opposing winds.

The hellish hurricane, which never rests,
drives on the spirits with its violence:
wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.

When they come up against the ruined slope,
then there are cries and wailing and lament,
and there they curse the force of the divine.

I learned that those who undergo this torment
are damned because they sinned within the flesh,
subjecting reason to the rule of lust.

And as, in the cold season, starlings' wings
bear them along in broad and crowded ranks,
so does that blast bear on the guilty spirits:

now here, now there, now down, now up, it drives them.
There is no hope that ever comforts them-
no hope for rest and none for lesser pain.

And just as cranes in flight will chant their lays,
arraying their long file across the air,
so did the shades I saw approaching, borne
by that assailing wind, lament and moan;
so that I asked him: "Master, who are those
who suffer punishment in this dark air?"

"The first of those about whose history
you want to know", my master then told me,
"once ruled as empress over many nations.

Her vice of lust became so customary
that she made license licit in her laws
to free her from the scandal she had caused.

She is Semiramis, of whom we read
that she was Ninus' wife and his successor:
she held the land the Sultan now commands.

That other spirit killed herself for love,
and she betrayed the ashes of Sychaeus;
the wanton Cleopatra follows next.

See Helen, for whose sake so many years

of evil had to pass; see great Achilles,
who finally met love-in his last battle.

See Paris, Tristan . . ."-and he pointed out
and named to me more than a thousand shades
departed from our life because of love.

No sooner had I heard my teacher name
the ancient ladies and the knights, than pity
seized me, and I was like a man astray.

My first words: "Poet, I should willingly
speak with those two who go together there
and seem so lightly carried by the wind."

And he to me: "You'll see when they draw closer
to us, and then you may appeal to them
by that love which impels them. They will come."

No sooner had the wind bent them toward us
than I urged on my voice: "O battered souls,
if One does not forbid it, speak with us."

Even as doves when summoned by desire,
borne forward by their will, move through the air
with wings uplifted, still, to their sweet nest,
those spirits left the ranks where Dido suffers,
approaching us through the malignant air;
so powerful had been my loving cry.

"O living being, gracious and benign,
who through the darkened air have come to visit
our souls that stained the world with blood, if He
who rules the universe were friend to us,
then we should pray to Him to give you peace,
for you have pitied our atrocious state.

Whatever pleases you to hear and speak
will please us, too, to hear and speak with you,
now while the wind is silent, in this place.

The land where I was born lies on that shore
to which the Po together with the waters
that follow it descends to final rest.

Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart,
took hold of him because of the fair body
taken from me-how that was done still wounds me.

Love, that releases no beloved from loving,
took hold of me so strongly through his beauty
that, as you see, it has not left me yet.

Love led the two of us unto one death.

Caina waits for him who took our life."

These words were borne across from them to us,

When I had listened to those injured souls,
I bent my head and held it low until
the poet asked of me: "What are you thinking?"

When I replied, my words began: "Alas,
how many gentle thoughts, how deep a longing,

had led them to the agonizing pass!"

Then I addressed my speech again to them,
and I began: "Francesca, your afflictions
move me to tears of sorrow and of pity.

But tell me, in the time of gentle sighs,
with what and in what way did Love allow you
to recognize your still uncertain longings?"

And she to me: "There is no greater sorrow
than thinking back upon a happy time
in misery-and this your teacher knows.

Yet if you long so much to understand
the first root of our love, then I shall tell
my tale to you as one who weeps and speaks.

One day, to pass the time away, we read
of Lancelot-how love had overcome him.
We were alone, and we suspected nothing.

And time and time again that reading led
our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale,
and yet one point alone defeated us.

When we had read how the desired smile
was kissed by one who was so true a lover,
this one, who never shall be parted from me,
while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth.

A Gallehault indeed, that book and he
who wrote it, too; that day we read no more."

And while one spirit said these words to me,
the other wept, so that-because of pity-
I fainted, as if I had met my death.

In the lowest pit of Hell, virtually covered in ice, is Satan / Lucifer. After seeing him, Dante and Virgil emerge on the opposite side of the world.

Inferno Canto 34

But after we had made our way ahead,
my master felt he now should have me see
that creature who was once a handsome presence; 18
he stepped aside and made me stop, and said:
"Look! Here is Dis, and this the place where you
will have to arm yourself with fortitude." 21
O reader, do not ask of me how I
grew faint and frozen then-I cannot write it:
all words would fall far short of what it was. 24
I did not die, and I was not alive;
think for yourself, if you have any wit,
what I became, deprived of life and death. 27
The emperor of the despondent kingdom
so towered from the ice, up from midchest,
that I match better with a giant's breadth 30
than giants match the measure of his arms;
now you can gauge the size of all of him

if it is in proportion to such parts. 33
If he was once as handsome as he now
is ugly and, despite that, raised his brows
against his Maker, one can understand 36
how every sorrow has its source in him!
I marveled when I saw that, on his head,
he had three faces: one-in front-bloodred; 39
and then another two that, just above
the midpoint of each shoulder, joined the first;
and at the crown, all three were reattached; 42
the right looked somewhat yellow, somewhat white;
the left in its appearance was like those
who come from where the Nile, descending, flows. 45
Beneath each face of his, two wings spread out,
as broad as suited so immense a bird:
I've never seen a ship with sails so wide. 48
They had no feathers, but were fashioned like
a bat's; and he was agitating them,
so that three winds made their way out from him- 51
and all Cocytus froze before those winds.
He wept out of six eyes; and down three chins,
tears gushed together with a bloody froth. 54
Within each mouth-he used it like a grinder-
with gnashing teeth he tore to bits a sinner,
so that he brought much pain to three at once. 57
The forward sinner found that biting nothing
when matched against the clawing, for at times
his back was stripped completely of its hide. 60
"That soul up there who has to suffer most,"
my master said: "Judas Iscariot-
his head inside, he jerks his legs without. 63
Of those two others, with their heads beneath,
the one who hangs from that black snout is Brutus-
see how he writhes and does not say a word! 66
That other, who seems so robust, is Cassius.
But night is come again, and it is time
for us to leave; we have seen everything." 69
Just as he asked, I clasped him round the neck;
and he watched for the chance of time and place,
and when the wings were open wide enough, 72
he took fast hold upon the shaggy flanks
and then descended, down from tuft to tuft,
between the tangled hair and icy crusts. 75
When we had reached the point at which the thigh
revolves, just at the swelling of the hip,
my guide, with heavy strain and rugged work, 78
reversed his head to where his legs had been
and grappled on the hair, as one who climbs-
I thought that we were going back to Hell. 81
"Hold tight," my master said-he panted like
a man exhausted-"it is by such stairs
that we must take our leave of so much evil." 84

Then he slipped through a crevice in a rock
and placed me on the edge of it, to sit;
that done, he climbed toward me with steady steps. 87
I raised my eyes, believing I should see
the half of Lucifer that I had left;
instead I saw him with his legs turned up; 90
and if I then became perplexed, do let
the ignorant be judges-those who can
not understand what point I had just crossed. 93
"Get up," my master said, "be on your feet:
the way is long, the path is difficult;
the sun's already back to middle tierce." 96
It was no palace hall, the place in which
we found ourselves, but with its rough-hewn floor
and scanty light, a dungeon built by nature. 99
"Before I free myself from this abyss,
master," I said when I had stood up straight,
"tell me enough to see I don't mistake: 102
Where is the ice? And how is he so placed
head downward? Tell me, too, how has the sun
in so few hours gone from night to morning?" 105
And he to me: "You still believe you are
north of the center, where I grasped the hair
of the damned worm who pierces through the world. 108
And you were there as long as I descended;
but when I turned, that's when you passed the point
to which, from every part, all weights are drawn. 111
And now you stand beneath the hemisphere
opposing that which cloaks the great dry lands
and underneath whose zenith died the Man 114
whose birth and life were sinless in this world.
Your feet are placed upon a little sphere
that forms the other face of the Judecca. 117
Here it is morning when it's evening there;
and he whose hair has served us as a ladder
is still fixed, even as he was before. 120
This was the side on which he fell from Heaven;
for fear of him, the land that once loomed here
made of the sea a veil and rose into 123
our hemisphere; and that land which appears
upon this side-perhaps to flee from him-
left here this hollow space and hurried upward." 126
There is a place below, the limit of
that cave, its farthest point from Beelzebub,
a place one cannot see: it is discovered 129
by ear-there is a sounding stream that flows
along the hollow of a rock eroded
by winding waters, and the slope is easy. 132
My guide and I came on that hidden road
to make our way back into the bright world;
and with no care for any rest, we climbed- 135
he first, I following-until I saw,

through a round opening, some of those things
of beauty Heaven bears. It was from there 138
that we emerged, to see-once more-the stars.

The last lines of Paradise 33 (lines 82-145), the Vision of God

O grace abounding, through which I presumed
to set my eyes on the Eternal Light
so long that I spent all my sight on it!
In its profundity I saw ingathered
and bound by love into one single volume
what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered:
substances, accidents, and dispositions
as if conjoined in such a way that what
I tell is only rudimentary.
I think I saw the universal shape
which that knot takes; for, speaking this, I feel
a joy that is more ample. That one moment
brings more forgetfulness to me than twenty-
five centuries have brought to the endeavor
that startled Neptune with the Argo's shadow!
So was my mind completely rapt, intent,
steadfast, and motionless gazing; and it
grew ever more enkindled as it watched.
Whoever sees that Light is soon made such
that it would be impossible for him
to set that Light aside for other sight;
because the good, the object of the will,
is fully gathered in that Light; outside
that Light, what there is perfect is defective.
What little I recall is to be told,
from this point on, in words more weak than those
of one whose infant tongue still bathes at the breast.
And not because more than one simple semblance
was in the Living Light at which I gazed
for It is always what It was before
but through my sight, which as I gazed grew stronger,
that sole appearance, even as I altered,
seemed to be changing. In the deep and bright
essence of the exalted Light, three circles
appeared to me; they had three different colors,
but all of them were of the same dimension;
one circle seemed reflected by the second,
as rainbow is by rainbow, and the third
seemed fire breathed equally by those two circles.
How incomplete is speech, how weak, when set
against my thought! And this, to what I saw
is such--to call it little is too much.
Eternal Light, You dwell within
Yourself, and only You know You; Self-knowing,
Self-known, You love and smile upon Yourself!
That circle--which, begotten so, appeared

in You as light reflected--when my eyes
had watched it with attention for some time,
within itself and colored like itself,
to me seemed painted with our effigy,
so that my sight was set on it completely.
As the geometer intently seeks
to square the circle, but he cannot reach,
through thought on thought the principle he needs,
so I searched that strange sight; I wished to see
the way in which our human effigy
suited the circle and found place in it--
and my own wings were far too weak for that.
But then my mind was struck by light that flashed
and, with this light, received what it had asked.
Here force failed my high fantasy; but my
desire and will were moved already--like
a wheel revolving uniformly--by
the Love that moves the sun and the other stars (*Paradiso* XXXIII.82-145).