

INFERNO

DANTE
ALIGHIERI



TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL PALMA
EDITED BY GIUSEPPE MAZZOTTA

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Dante Alighieri
INFERNO



A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION
BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Translated by
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Edited by
GIUSEPPE MAZZOTTA
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Introduction

On March 10, 1302, the thirty-seven-year-old Dante, who while in Siena a few weeks earlier had been sentenced to exile, was permanently banished from his native Florence under pain of death. The exile, which lasted until he died in 1321, completely changed Dante's life and was the experience that turned Dante from a major Italian poet—the author of the autobiographical amorous-poetic *Vita nova* and a number of philosophical songs—into the major poet of the western tradition.

But in 1302 Dante probably did not understand exile as the spiritual, providential itinerary it became when he sat down to write *Inferno*. At that time it simply meant the loss of family, status, and security. Nothing was left to him and he could do nothing but begin walking the narrow and uncertain path—under the threat of getting lost—that would take him from one court of Northern Italy to another. He had at his disposal neither maps nor supplies, no guide or guideline to lead him, no fig-tree in the shade of which he could rest. What exactly caused his life to turn upside down?

The reversal of his fortune found Dante unprepared, but it was not sudden. Indeed, he had not lived a quiet, sheltered existence in his homeland before the bitter news of exile and threat of death hit him. The storm that caught him in the winter of 1302, while on an embassy to the pope on behalf of Florence, surprised him. Yet premonitions of danger had been everywhere. Since entering public life in 1295, he passed a harsh judgment against Pope Boniface VIII's political-financial interferences in Tuscany; he had spoken fiercely against the French king's connivance with the pope; he had denounced the ruthless political theater of Guelphs and Ghibellines (largely scheming bankers vying for control of the Church's money) that would on a daily basis and under any flimsy pretext plunge the city into anarchy; and he had no compunction, while serving as an executive officer of the city, to exile some of its prominent members, including even his friend and poet/philosopher Guido Cavalcanti.

The crossing of local and Church politics may account for the interruption of Dante's political plans and grand ambitions. Before that,

the defining experience of his youth, was his childhood encounter with Beatrice, a Florentine girl who later married the wealthy banker Simone de' Bardi. When he saw her a second time, he had turned eighteen, and in his imagination she became the very incarnation of love and a sign of Providence. Even after her premature death in 1290 he cast her as star whose glow would not allow him to lose himself, and eventually she would play the role of a spirit-angel keeping watch over him. This love story is told in the *Vita nova*, the autobiographical story of Dante's double apprenticeship: in both poetry and love for Beatrice. These poems worked toward the poetic mode that would later be known as the *Sweet New Style*, a style that is adequate to Dante's refined love for Beatrice and records his inner life as well as his visionary experiences. By adopting the styles of the Provençal poets, of the Sicilian poets, of Guido Guinizelli and Guido Cavalcanti, he came to understand Beatrice as a unique, irreplaceable figure of love.

Beatrice's death brought some changes in his intellectual orientations. Till that point Dante had been schooled in the classics and in political rhetoric by Brunetto Latini, a cosmopolitan man of letters and statesman who had taken part in Florence's political life, had traveled through France, and was familiar with the philosophical debates unfolding in Europe. After 1290 Dante broadened his focus as he began his philosophical studies with the Franciscans and Dominicans. From the Dominicans, such as Remigio de' Girolami (who had been Thomas Aquinas's student in Paris) and who were housed in Santa Maria Novella, he learned the philosophical theology constructed by Aristotelian scholastics. Questions of ethics, politics, as well as larger issues, such as the legitimacy and limits of philosophy, and the necessity of theology figured in their training. And in the same Dominican circles he became familiar with the writings of the Averroists, radical Aristotelians who, like natural philosophers, denied the immortality of the soul and upheld the theory of the "double truth," the truth of faith and the truth of reason. On the other hand, from the Franciscans, such as Pierre Olivi, who had Joachimistic leanings and who for a few years both gave homilies and taught in the Church of Santa Croce, he learned the theological basis for a critique of the Church, such as the one launched by the Franciscan "spirituals" (Ubertino da Casale). These ideas—the rhetorical Roman humanism of Brunetto Latini; the philosophical rigor of the Dominicans; and the moral-religious fervor and sense of reform of the Franciscans—shaped and brought complexity to Dante's later political vision. They also help explain why his political career would collide with the stubborn *real-politik* of his time, and why his public and private life floundered in 1302. The tragic contrast between the pure Franciscan sense of poverty and a cult of naked power will

be memorably dramatized in *Inferno* XXVII where Dante represents the power of the pope's manipulation of a Franciscan friar.

At the beginning of his exile and for a few years (roughly between 1303–07), he devoted himself to writing a treatise on language, *De vulgari eloquentia* (*Of the Vulgar Language*) and a philosophical tract, *Convivio* (the *Banquet*). Neither of them was ever completed. In the first book of *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante theorizes about the origin of language (which is not human, but a gift of God), as well as the historical alterations to which language is subjected, and he describes the traits of the Romance languages and, above all, of Italian. The purpose of his original investigation of language's history is clear: he is bent on forging a vulgar language, born of the Latin vernacular, which would serve the poetic, political, legal, and courtly needs of Italy. In the second book, he theorizes about poetics. Thus, he discusses the poetic forms developed by the Provençal poets (such as Bertran de Born), sentence constructions, the learned and elegant varieties of style, its degrees (lofty or tragic, middle or elegiac, and low or comical), and he cites the poetry of his contemporaries (Guinizelli, Cavalcanti, Cino da Pistoia) as well as his own.

In *Convivio*, Dante turns to pondering questions of philosophy (as ethics) and of authority (political and philosophical). These philosophical investigations, taken by themselves, signal the restlessness of his mind, his inability to remain confined within the perimeter of one discipline or the straits of received opinions. Yet he never straggles. From the standpoint of this treatise, the world of the *Sweet New Style* appears as a world apart, a distant aristocratic game of the passions, a chapter of one's youth now secluded from the turmoil of history. *Convivio*, as a matter of fact, comes through as nothing less than an epitaph of the *Sweet New Style*: in the second book (chapter twelve), Dante tells how, seeking consolation for the death of Beatrice, he read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Cicero's *Laelius* (*De amicitia*) (*On Friendship*). And if the *Vita nova* had given an Italian voice to the European lyrical dramatization of the subject and of love (or the desiring self), *Convivio* made the Italian vernacular the language of philosophy. Something of the ideals shaping *De vulgari eloquentia* plainly remains in the new text. But the differences between them are sharp. By writing a commentary on his own doctrinal-philosophical songs, Dante sought to provide a doctrine of the good earthly life, as such a life was led by men who are noble not by virtue of blood but by spiritual election. Around this ethical core he aimed at writing fourteen books that would prove the nature of the virtues and of rational activity, of human acts, their intentions and executions, and of the will as intellectual appetite in its bearing on things of the mind.

Dante interrupted writing the *Convivio* to begin writing *Inferno*, which he completed in 1314. No doubt, the material genesis of this first canticle is to be found in the personal, moral, political, and spiritual disarray of his life. It can be called a transfigured summary of his multifaceted past experiences. A number of themes, like musical motifs, run through this first canticle of the *Divine Comedy* and they can be conveniently extrapolated: the challenges of autobiographical writing and the voice of the poet, his authority and doubts; the nature of lyrical poetry, such as the one written by the love poets of the *Sweet New Style* and by Dante himself in his *Vita nova*; the moral demands implicit in the writing of poetry; the authority of the past and the limits of the classical tradition (Virgil and the Greek hero Ulysses); the question of poetic representation and poetic language; civil wars and the lawlessness of Italian cities; the peculiar responsibilities of counselors and advisers of kings and popes (see, for instance, Pier delle Vigne in Canto XIII and Guido da Montefeltro in Canto XXVII); the modalities of prophetic language; the nature of the moral life; the pilgrim's own spiritual apprenticeship; and the dangers of reading literature and deciphering the language of others. Dante does not present these specific themes in an isolated fashion. Rather, he shows how each implicates the others and is entangled with the others, so that *Inferno* comes through as a vast poetic, political, moral, and religious phantasmagoria.

In a real way, *Inferno* recounts how the poet is capable of writing only by returning to the path of his childhood, to the memory of his love for Beatrice, who appears at the start of the poem to beg that Virgil help her friend lost in the wilderness. If this is the autobiographical impulse triggering the dramatic action of the poem, *Inferno*'s opening canto focuses on other spiritual-poetic questions. Properly speaking, it begins by featuring two journeys: the protagonist's effort to escape from the dark woods by following the direction of the sunlight as well as his actual descent into Hell. His first, attempted journey, which can be understood as a neo-Platonic effort at transcendence, ends in failure. The pilgrim cannot escape from his quandary by taking only a philosophical route. In fact, he has to learn that he can ascend to the sunlit plain of truth only by first descending into humility: in a Christian conversion, which he experiences, the way up is down into the depths of Hell as a precondition for ascending into Purgatory and Paradise. The way down—which is the journey the pilgrim will undertake—will occur under the guidance of Virgil, the author of the *Aeneid*, the poem of Rome and of history. Virgil will lead his disciple through the circles of incontinence, violence, and fraud which constitute the topography of Hell. The moral structure of Hell is figured through Aristotle's moral philosophy (and Aquinas's commentary) available in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The choice of Virgil (and of the *Aeneid* as the poem of Rome) is crucial to grasping the poetic-political discussion of *Inferno*. Dante was certainly aware of St. Augustine's critique of the Empire and of Virgil available in the *City of God*. Augustine, arguably the greatest Roman philosopher, had understood the originality and morality of the Roman ideas of freedom as a form of political foundation. Yet, he still objected to the imperial ideology of Rome put forth in the *Aeneid*. The Roman Empire, so he argued, far from being a providential institution, was another tragic episode in history's succession of violence. Dante provides a radical reversal of Augustine's theory of history. The Roman Empire—as he eventually will argue in *Monarchia* (written in 1317)—is willed by God as a way of healing the unspeakable violence triggered by the civil war, which for him is the metaphor of all historical reality, wherein one's neighbor is one's enemy.

Dante's pervasive consciousness of the divisions brought in by the civil war invests all forms of representation in *Inferno*. One steady rhetorical feature of this canticle can be called the "polemical," whereby characters are presented as if they were at odds with each other: they oppose each other and display unabashedly their partisan passions, as well as their penchant to think against each other. Dante's own voice belongs to this climate of partisanship and divisions: he takes sides, condemns, and passes judgments. In effect, he stages the violence of the city while he confesses the violence lodged in him. But a subtle distinction is needed. For Dante, thinking is more than a contrarian's act, it is a form of an encounter. And so, more than opposing St. Augustine's rejection of the Roman Empire, Dante figures a crossroads where Virgil's celebration of the Empire and Augustine's doubts about it converge.

Accordingly, *Inferno*'s most political cantos (VI, X, XIII, XV, XVI, XXXIII) focus not on the empire, which, as a matter of fact, is a distant and almost absent model, but on the sinister reciprocity of violence, on violence as the only form of reciprocity. In *Inferno* X, the canto where the Epicureans, the philosophers, such as his friend Guido Cavalcanti, do not believe in the immortality of the soul, Dante re-enacts the commonplace, unchanging quarrels joining and dividing Guelphs and Ghibellines in the city of Florence. The city, which for Plato is the soul writ larger, is soulless for Dante and it is tragically split into unrelated parts. In *Inferno* XV, the canto where his teacher Brunetto Latini dwells, Dante stages the sparks of violence (disguised as educational projects) that dismantle the very foundations of Florence. By the same token, *Inferno* XIX, the canto where simony (or commerce of sacred things) is punished, shows the impure mixture of the sacred and the secular, which is crystallized by the Donation of Constantine, the "gift" the emperor made to the

Church and by which the Church has historically contaminated her spiritual essence. The memorable spectacle of the popes' corruption gives rise to the poet's prophetic stance.

No doubt, through these sinners (not to mention Paolo and Francesca, who, in *Inferno* V, endlessly whirl around the circle of the lustful, seduced into sin by the reading of love-poetry and the French romance of *Lancelot*, or Ulysses, Guido da Montefeltro, Pier delle Vigne, and Ugolino), Dante unveils two insights constitutive of the moral experience: the human refusal to take guilt upon oneself and the desire to cling to familiar habits (which lies at the heart of one's surrendering to the world and eternalizing the past). These moral traits derive from Aristotle's classical moral philosophy and from St. Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the *Ethics*. For Dante, they are not abstractions available in manuals for the good life. They invest, rather, all the sinners who abide in the crater of the nine circles of Hell—those who have sinned from incontinence (lust, gluttony, prodigality and avarice, sloth and anger), those who dwell within the walled city of Dis (heretics), and the violent and deceivers (procurers, flatterers, simonists, fortune-tellers, swindlers, hypocrites, thieves, evil counselors, trouble-makers, forgers, and the traitors).

In a way, Dante responds to the philosophical musings of Aristotle and Virgil by posing the question of how man's wounded will, which is the locus of sin, can be healed. The sinners' self-deceptions and willful blindness to their own existential-moral reality is at one with their habit of sin. To break this habit, so the poetry of *Inferno* tells us and the pilgrim's dramatic experience shows, we must journey out of our familiar world and, to put it simply in Dante's own metaphor, just out of the world. By contrast, all the sinners in Hell believed that the world—this world—is the source of their beings and their values. Therefore, they were unwilling to estrange themselves from it. They would surrender and cling to its lure, even after death, in the unalterable conviction that only the world could give them a sense of their importance and value.

One can find in *Inferno* some different forms of the sinners' distorted self-understanding. Ulysses, for instance, takes a journey away from the familiar world: he leaves behind his father Laertes, his wife Penelope, and his son Telemachus as he travels into the unknown. So powerful and seductive was his adventure that the ancient neo-Platonists interpreted it allegorically in the *Odyssey* as the flight of the soul. It was an audacious venture, conducted without any guidance other than the light of his own reason, cutting through all boundaries between earth and sky. For Dante the Greek hero's quest as transgression—as evidenced in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*—bears an uncanny affinity to his own quest as the Christian pilgrim-poet.

But there is a radical difference between them. Ulysses ends up in a catastrophe: he plunges into the abyss as his gaze rends the night of the world. Unlike the Greek hero, Dante will manage to gather the fire of the sky and see God face-to-face.

What is the reason that would make the difference between these two heroes possible and plausible? The answer is clear. Dante differs from Ulysses because he understands the power of the "beginning" as the only way of breaking the habit. *Inferno* begins literally, "midway through the journey of our life." Dante begins his poem "midway" because, in a sense, present things, such as the crisis enveloping the pilgrim in the woods, are not the real beginnings. The present is rooted in distant origins and causes. Thus, very soon in the first canto of *Inferno*, Dante goes on to evoke the luminous puzzle of the "beginning." As the pilgrim, who had tried to climb the hill, is driven back, again and again, into the dark valley by three beasts, the poet describes the time of the day, the hour of morning, when the sun was in the constellation of Aries: "Temp'era dal principio del mattino / e 'l sol montava 'n sù con quelle stelle / ch'eran con lui quando l'amor divino / mosse di prima quelle cose belle; . ." (*Inf.* I, 37–40) (. . . It was the break of day, / the sun was mounting in the morning sky / with the same stars as when that whole array / of lovely things was first given movement by / divine love).

Ulysses, like the pilgrim in *Inferno* I, follows the sun and its repetitive cycles: like Ulysses, the pilgrim returns, over and over again, to the same place and with the same results. They get nowhere. Unlike Ulysses and unlike his own prior experience as a lost wayfarer, Dante grasps the fact that to escape his spiritual impasse, he, the poet of the first things, must look at the "principio," which is the beginning and a break with the past. He must look for what makes things new. And what makes things new and sets them in motion, to put it in St. Augustine's terminology, is the idea of the beginning of the world, which the biblical Genesis calls creation and the Romans call foundation. In short, Dante knows, in a way that Ulysses did not, that what makes things new is Love, of which *Inferno* gives merely the feeblest of glows, but which he could find as an awe-struck young man in the streets of Florence and, later, midway through the journey of his life, he could recall at the bleakest hour of his exile.

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Translator's Note

Dante's *Inferno* is, without a doubt, the most frequently translated work of our time. Over the last decade or so, new versions have appeared in the United States at the rate of about one every year. Why are there so many? It is possible to produce a definitive translation of a novel, even a great novel, but poetry, with its rich and complex use of language and its tight interweaving of form and content, is a very different matter. One can easily imagine five or even ten translations of a single Rilke sonnet, all of them good in their own way, all of them reasonable approximations of at least some aspects of the original, and all of them substantially different from one another. With the *Inferno*, we are dealing not with a mere fourteen lines but with forty-seven hundred, with a book-length poem that not only tells a vivid and intricate story but also engages dimensions of religion, morality, history, politics, myth, philosophy, psychology, and the author-protagonist's personal experiences. In addition to all this, it is a work in which matters of tone and diction, and of form and structure, are of critical importance. A work of such stunning artistry and complexity creates space enough not only for the translations already in the field, but for undreamt-of others as well.

The often striking differences among Dante translations can be explained by an awareness of the different aspects of the original that they emphasize and the different audiences for which they are intended. Translations by scholars, conceived for a readership of scholars and students, are principally concerned to render the paraphrasable content of the text as accurately and precisely as possible. Other versions, aimed at a youthful or a broad general audience, seek to capture the poem's plot and its striking characterizations as directly, and often as simply, as they can. In both such instances, there is little if any concern with the poetic dimensions of the text, and the translations are usually either in prose or in a line-by-line rendering that makes no attempt to reproduce the rhythmic and tonal effects of the original.

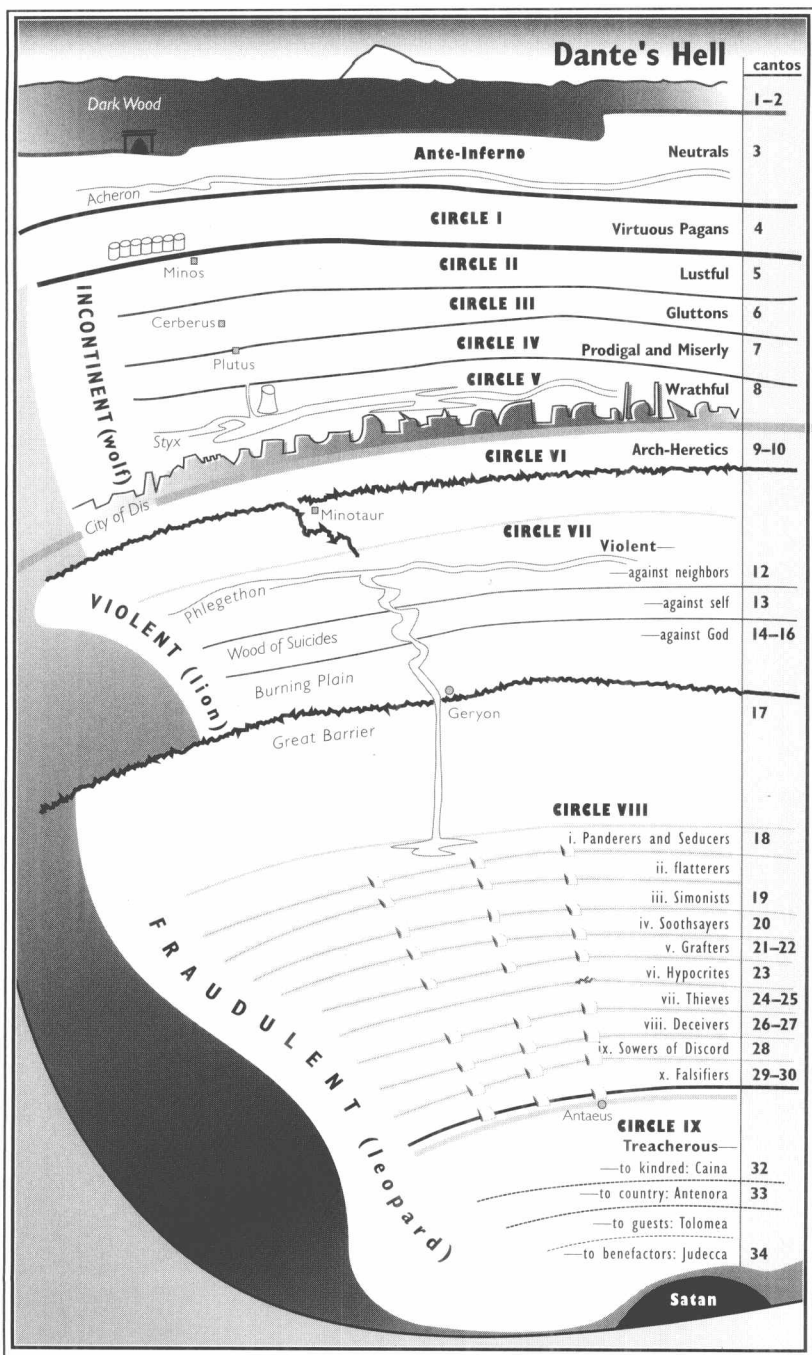
As a poet myself, I have sought to re-create the poetry of the *Inferno*, as I see it on the page and hear it my head when I read the

original. To me, a large and necessary part of what this means is an attempt to re-create the *terza rima* structure that Dante devised for the *Divine Comedy*. But it does not mean that I am less interested in the narrative or in any of the other aspects of the poem mentioned above, since, as I have said, the best poetry (and Dante's poetry fits that description as well as anyone's) is an interplay of form and content in which, ideally, neither element is made to suffer at the expense of the other. So far as I am aware, no other American translator of the past seventy-five years has attempted a fully rhymed version of the *Inferno*. Modern American translators of the poem, even those who are poets writing for an audience of poetry lovers, have, like most modern translators in general, chosen not to strictly reproduce the rhyme scheme of the original text. Some have abandoned rhyme (and some, even meter) altogether, while others have attempted to at least suggest the nature of Dante's practice by a more sparing use of rhyme or by the use of off-rhymes.

An ideal translation, which is of course impossible, would say everything that Dante says exactly as he says it, in exactly the same form that he employs. In attempting to approach that ideal as closely as possible, I have always translated poetry in the same way that I have always written poetry, striving to achieve the blend of form and content that I spoke of earlier. To abandon or severely compromise the poem's form in the hope of thereby honoring its content is, to my way of thinking, to destroy the balance necessary to achieve that blend. Thus, rather than begin with a hierarchy of values which dictates that some of the elements of the original must be downplayed, or even eliminated, at the expense of others, I hope to salvage as high a percentage as I can of all the elements of the poem.

In practical terms, this means that every problem of translation must be solved not by the unflinching imposition of some abstract theory or principle, but by the immediate needs, in context, of that particular moment of the poem. Sometimes that requires as literal an approximation of Dante's statement as possible; sometimes it demands the reproduction of a rhetorical figure or structure; and so on. Some compromises are, of course, inevitable: the occasional resort to inexact rhymes; the compression or expansion of content to fit the metrical pattern; and—again—so on. But while all of this was taking place, I always kept in mind the harmony, integration, and clarity of the original in order to create as harmonious, integrated, and clear an approximation as I could. The beauty of the *Inferno* lies in its tiniest details and in its grand design, and in seeking to attend to both the details and the design, I hope that I have managed to convey something of that beauty to the readers of this translation.

Michael Palma





Italy, around 1300. From *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, ed. and trans. Robert Durling. Copyright © 1996 by Robert Turner.

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The Text of
INFERNO

