

**DANTE'S
DIVINE COMEDY I:
INFERNO**

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With an Introduction by Brian Phillips



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INTRODUCTION

What happens after you die? Is there life after death? Is heaven real? What about hell? If heaven and hell exist, what are they like and who goes there?

These questions arise almost universally. At some point, every person asks them, or a variation of them. And, in the history of literature, many authors have taken their readers on fascinating journeys into the afterlife, venturing to heaven, hell, hades, or other spirit worlds.

And while such stories are numerous, none of them approach the beauty and influence of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*—an epic poem that has stood the test of time, captured imaginations for centuries, and calls the reader to ponder life's (and death's) most important questions.

The World Around

Dante was born and lived in Renaissance Italy, during a time of cultural rebirth and change. Florence, Dante's birth city, was the home of numerous poets, artists, and scholars. Additionally, Peter Leithart notes, "In Dante's time, Florence was a large and prosperous city of

some 90,000 residents, a center of banking.... More importantly, it was a city split apart by political factions.”*

These “political factions” largely swirled around the role of the Pope in the government, but as many political controversies do, they also involved money and influence. The Guelfs supported the Pope and his claims to political power in Florence, while the Ghibellines held to the Holy Roman Emperor. Dante, following his family line, sided with the Guelfs, who prevailed when Dante was very young.

The political strife was far from over, however, and the prevailing Guelfs later split amongst themselves—into Black Guelfs (who remained staunchly in support of the Pope) and White Guelfs (who would eventually come to side with the Ghibellines).† Dante sided with the White Guelf faction and, when the Black Guelfs took control of the city in 1302, Dante was sentenced to death or exile.

Niccolo Machiavelli, another prominent Florentine citizen, noted that in Dante’s time, “there resulted more murders, banishments, and destruction of families than ever in any city known to history.”‡

The 1300s were a time of great turmoil beyond Florence as well, filled with events that demonstrate why an epic poem about the afterlife resonated so powerfully, in Dante’s time (begun in 1308) and beyond.

- 1314—The Battle of Bannockburn in which the Scottish forces of Robert the Bruce defeated the much larger army of England’s King Edward II.
- 1337—The Hundred Years’ War between England and France began.
- 1347—The Black Death, or bubonic plague, began to ravage Europe, resulting in the death of approximately one-third

* *Ascent to Love* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2001), 46.

† Leithart, 48.

‡ Quoted in the biographical note of Anthony Esolen’s translation of the *Inferno* (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), v.

of the continent's population (somewhere between 19 and 35 million people).

About the Author

Scholars know next to nothing about the life of Homer, though he authored two of the most influential epic poems in the history of Western civilization (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). Similarly, little is known of the life of William Shakespeare, leading some to (wrongly) question his very existence.

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), on the other hand, is well known as a person and author—predominantly because his most famous work, *The Divine Comedy*, was largely autobiographical, with Dante as the central protagonist through all three books. As a result, almost any biographical information about Dante intersects with his writing.

Born in Florence, Italy to a family of good standing, Dante's early education was likely given by Franciscan and Dominican monks, and later by Brunetto Latini, a scholar and Guelf statesman. In 1292, Dante began formal study of theology. Dante, then, was well educated in philosophy, theology, and classical literature—developing a particular love for the work of Virgil, who would be portrayed as his guide through the *Inferno*.

Dante's personal life was marked by his love for Beatrice Portinari, whom he met when very young. She remained his muse throughout his life, but he married another woman, Gemma Donati, with whom he had four children. Beatrice died in 1290, some thirty years before the completion of Dante's epic.[§]

Dante's public life was characterized by his involvement in the political strife that fiercely divided Florence. While Dante reached the

§ Many helpful biographical notes about Dante are included in various editions of the *Inferno*, in particular those in Anthony Esolen's translation by *The Modern Library* and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's translation by *Barnes & Noble Classics*.

part. But, nonetheless, he is driven away from where he wants to go and into the path of Virgil who seems to be awaiting him.

From there, Dante and his guide descend into hell, through its varied circles and sublevels. Along the way, Dante meets and occasionally talks with sinners, learning their stories of how they ended up condemned. Among the many striking encounters is when Dante meets many of his heroes in the first circle. These virtuous pagans included Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and many other great minds in antiquity.

While Dante meets many souls who are likely familiar to the reader—from the virtuous pagans mentioned above, to Odysseus, Helen, Paris, and more—some, however, are entirely unknown to modern readers, meaning we often find ourselves obliged to consult footnotes and text notes from the various editions of the *Inferno*. That's okay. When reading the *Inferno*, try not to be discouraged by unfamiliar names. Simply try to follow the story and consult the notes when necessary.

Worldview Analysis

“Therefore I think and judge it for thy best
 Thou follow me, and I will be thy guide,
 And lead thee hence through the eternal place...”

In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, wandering Odysseus continues recounting his journeys to the Phaiakians, telling them of his journey to Hades, the underworld. There, he reunites with many familiar faces, from Agamemnon to Achilles.

Particularly moving is his reunion with his mother, Antikleia. Odysseus asks her, “Tell me about the wife I married, what she wants,

* Quotations are from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's translation of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, first published in 1867.

what she is thinking, and whether she stays fast by my son, and guards everything, or if she has married the best man among the Achaians.”[†] Odysseus longs for news of his wife and home because the goal of his perilous journey is reunion with them.

Aeneas’s journey to the underworld (recorded in Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*) was endured with the primary purpose of gaining important help from his father, Anchises—a journey which also included a horribly uncomfortable encounter with Dido (the queen of Carthage who committed suicide after being abandoned by Aeneas).

Clearly, Dante’s journey into afterlife is not completely original, but it mirrors and differs from the journeys of Odysseus and Aeneas in significant ways. Like Odysseus, Dante is carried through his journey by love. Odysseus was driven by love for his wife Penelope, his son Telemachus, and his home in Ithaka. Dante was driven by his love of Beatrice, her love for him, and Divine love—which proves to be the focus of the entire *Divine Comedy*.

Like Aeneas, Dante encounters numerous souls who are suffering, and he is led by a guide (Aeneas by the Sybil, Dante by Virgil). And, given that Dante’s guide in the *Inferno* is Virgil, we can assume these similarities are intentional. Unlike Odysseus and Aeneas, however, Dante’s journey is not ultimately aimed at attaining information or help for his journey back home. Rather, Dante’s voyage through the afterlife is intended to prepare him to live in the light of Divine love, to prepare him for heaven.

Yet, as Peter Leithart wrote, “Dante will first descend before he can begin to ascend.”[‡] Unlike Odysseus and Aeneas, Dante’s journey cannot take him to just one place. In Greco-Roman belief, the afterlife was essentially one place—Hades, or the Underworld, with areas of punishment and reward in close proximity. As a Roman Catholic,

[†] *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (1965; New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 172.

[‡] *Ascent to Love*, 76.

Dante believed in Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory (the second section of the *Divine Comedy*)—the place where Christian souls were purified from sin before entering Paradise. Therefore, Dante's journey begins in hell, where the darkness of his soul would lead him if not for heaven's grace purging him from sin.

Virgil & the Virtuous Pagans

For Dante, Virgil was the perfect guide to lead him through Hell and Purgatory. Not only was Virgil a poet hero of Dante's (as seen by his inclusion in the poet band of Canto IV), and the one who recorded *the* defining epic of Italy, he was also a personification of Human Reason, and is numbered among the "Sages" (IV.110).

Yet, because Virgil is a picture of Human Reason, he is unable to guide Dante into Paradise. A far greater guide will be needed for that. Virgil tells Dante of this limitation in I.112-123 (parentheses mine):

"Therefore I think and judge it for thy best
 Thou follow me, and I will be thy guide,
 And lead thee hence through the eternal place,

Where thou shalt hear the desperate lamentations,
 Shalt see the ancient spirits disconsolate,
 Who cry out each one for the second death; (Hell)

And thou shalt see those who contented are
 Within the fire, because they hope to come
 Whene'er it may be, to the blessed people; (Purgatory)

To whom, then, if thou wishest to ascent,
 A soul shall be for that than I more worthy;
 With her at my departure I will leave thee;



CANTO I

Dante finds himself astray in a dark Wood, where he spends a night of great misery. He says that death is hardly more bitter than it is to recall what he suffered there; but that he will tell the fearful things he saw, in order that he may also tell how he found guidance, and first began to discern the real causes of all misery. He comes to a Hill; and seeing its summit already bright with the rays of the Sun, he begins to ascend it. The way to it looks quite deserted. He is met by a beautiful Leopard, which keeps distracting his attention from the Hill, and makes him turn back several times. The hour of the morning, the season, and the gay outward aspect of that animal, give him good hopes at first; but he is driven down and terrified by a Lion and a She-wolf. Virgil comes to his aid, and tells him that the Wolf lets none pass her way, but entangles and slays every one that tries to get up the mountain by the road on which she stands. He says a time will come when a swift and strong Greyhound shall clear the earth of her, and chase her into Hell. And he offers to conduct Dante by another road; to show him the eternal roots of misery and of joy, and leave him with a higher guide that will lead him up to Heaven.

Midway along the highroad of our days,
I found myself within a shadowy wood,
Where the straight path was lost in tangled ways.
Ah! had I words to tell, if any could,

The fierce harsh aspect that wild forest wore.
 If I but think thereon my fear's renewed!
 So bitter is it. Death is hardly more; 7
 But to make plain the good I found 'twere well
 To say what other fate I met before.
 How I came there, in truth I cannot tell; 10
 Sleep lay so heavy on me in that hour
 That, dreaming, out of my true path I fell;
 But when above I saw the mountain tower, 13
 There where the valley ended whence had flowed
 The fear, which on my heart had set its power,
 I looked on high, and lo! its shoulder glowed 16
 Already in the rays of that fair sun
 That guides men right, wherever lies their road.*
 Then was the fear a little past and done, 19
 Which deep within my heart-springs had endured,
 That night, through which in sorrow I had won;
 And like a man, by chance from death secured, 22
 Who, panting, struggles from the sea to land,
 Then turns to view his peril, ill assured.
 So, in my mind still trembling and unmanned, 25
 I turned and looked along the gloomy strait,
 Where living soul can never hope to stand.
 Then after resting from my wearied state, 28
 Toward the desert country set my face,
 So that my lower foot still bore my weight.
 And now behold! e'en at the mountain's base, 31
 A Leopard, covered with a spotted hide,
 Nimble withal and very swift of pace.
 And still before mine eyes it would abide, 34

* Dante is lost in a dark wood, but he sees, not the light, but a mountain with light shining on it. Dante now has hope to reach the mountain and see the light.

And ever hindered so my longed-for way,
 That to go backward oft I turned aside.
 It was the earliest hour of rising day; 37
 Now mounted up the sun, and with it were
 The stars, that did as its companions stay
 When Love Divine first moved these things so fair:† 40
 In truth that hour and gentle season's spell,
 Good cause for hope to me did minister,
 Facing that fierce beast with the garish fell; 43
 Yet not so far but that my heart did quake
 To see a lion, grim and terrible.
 It moved as though my path it meant to take, 46
 With head upraised and all unsated maw,
 So that methought the very air did shake.
 And then a wolf, hungry and gaunt I saw, 49
 So lean, it seemed compact of all desire,
 Well may the nations grieve beneath her law!
 More heaviness of soul and terror dire 52
 Possessed me than my forces could sustain,
 At once I lost all hope of mounting higher,
 And like to one, rejoicing o'er his gain, 55
 Who meets his hour and sees his winnings fly,
 While every thought renews his grief and pain;
 E'en so before the restless beast was 58
 That moving tow'rd me, nearer and more near,

† Throughout the poem, we will see, God is spoken of as the Love that moves the universe. Unlike us, the medievals believed that the planets went in orbits around the earth and that they were embedded in spheres of crystal that rubbed together and made beautiful sounds, the "music of the spheres." Aristotle said these spheres moved because of an unmoved mover, but the medievals said that they moved because of love for their creator.

Drove down where sunless shadows silent lie.*
 As aimlessly I roamed that desert drear, 61
 Lo! suddenly a shade, whose voice was grown
 Faint, through the lapse of many a silent year,
 And when I saw him in that wild-wood lone, 64
 "Have pity on me," then my crying ran,
 "Whether as man or ghost thou mayst be known."
 He spoke: "Not now, but once, I was a man, 67
 Lombards were both my parents in their right,
 And both rejoiced to name them Mantuan.
 "Neath Julius, all too late I saw the light, 70
 And lived at Rome in great Augustus' days,
 While yet the false and lying gods had might.
 "Poet I was; and made my verse in praise 73
 Of that just man of Troy, Anchises' son,
 Who wandered forth from Ilion's towers ablaze.
 "Why tum'st thou back to evil past and done? 76
 Why dost thou not ascend the blissful hill
 The source and cause of every joy in one?
 "O! art thou Virgil†, fountain flowing still, 79
 Spreading a mighty stream to all men's sight?
 I said while awe and shame my heart did fill,
 "Thou, of all other singers, pride and light! 82
 Well worth to me the love and labor true,

* Dante's quest seems to be abortive. Scholars have tried, fruitlessly, to explain what these three beasts symbolize. Some say that they symbolize the sins of different ages: the lust of youth (the leopard), the pride or rage of one's prime (the lion), and the greed of old age (the wolf). Others say that they foreshadow different circles: the Wolf represents lust (circles 2-5), the Lion represents violence (circle 7), and the Leopard represents fraud (circles 8-9).

† Publius Vergilius Maro (70 BC – 19 BC), the poet who wrote the Aeneid for Caesar Augustus, celebrating pagan virtue and the Italian Empire created by Julius Caesar. Aeneas, son of Anchises was the hero of his epic.

That o'er thy volumes in my life unite.
 "Thou art my master, and my author too; 85
 From thee alone, the noble style I gain,
 That brings me fame the world of poets through.
 "Behold this beast, that would my course restrain; 88
 Save me from her, most famous of the wise,
 Who makes me tremble, every pulse and vein."
 "Another pathway thou must needs devise," 91
 He answered, when he saw my sorrow's tears,
 "To shun the wilderness that round thee lies;
 "Since this fell monster that inspires thy fears, 94
 Lets never living soul pursue this road;
 Death is the barrier her persistence rears;
 "Such wickedness in her has its abode, 97
 Her foul desires are never satisfied,
 All she devours serves for new hunger's goad.
 "With many a beast she couples in her pride, 100
 And shall, until the greyhound come, her bane,
 And dolorously she at last has died.
 "That hero shall not strive for land or gain, 103
 In him shall wisdom, love and valor dwell,
 From Feltro on to Feltro[‡] he shall reign.
 "With lowly Italy 'twill then be well, 106
 For whom Camilla died, a virgin fair,
 And Tumus, Nisus, Euryalus fell.[§]
 "Then shall this wolf be chased from every lair, 109
 Until to Hell she must perforce return,

‡ This greyhound is a reference to Dante's hoped-for Italian Emperor, who never came. Scholars don't know whether "Twixt feltro and feltro" means between Feltre and Montefeltro in Italy or the rough fabric of Franciscans.

§ Camilla, Euryalus, Turnus, and Nisus are all characters from the *Aeneid* who die fighting for Italy.

Whence envy loosed her to our mortal air.
 “Now therefore it were well, as I discern, 112
 That thou should'st follow whither I shall guide,
 And through eternal worlds the pathway learn;
 “Where thou shalt hear those cry whose hope has died, 115
 And see the sorrows of the souls of old,
 Who long to die again and are denied.
 “Then those more happy ones thou shalt behold, 118
 Who hope, and so contented can endure,
 To be at last in Heaven's ranks enrolled.
 “There worthier than I, a soul more pure, 121
 Must guide thee on, if still thou long to rise;
 Parting I'll leave thee to her guidance sure;
 “For the great Lord who rules the upper skies, 124
 Since that I lived a rebel on earth's plains,
 Ever that city fair, to me denies.
 “In every place He rules, but there He reigns, 127
 There is His citadel, and lofty seat;
 Happy the soul, who to His bliss attains!”
 Then I to him: “O Poet, I entreat, 130
 By the great God Whom thou didst never know,
 Lest now this evil, or a worse I meet,
 “The road that thou hast told me, straightway show; 133
 That I may see St. Peter's gate, and those
 So sore tormented and so full of woe.”
 Then he moved onward and I followed close. 136

* The portals of St. Peter are the gates to Purgatory; the other place is, well, the other place.



CANTO II

End of the first day. Brief Invocation. Dante is discouraged at the outset, when he begins seriously to reflect upon what he has undertaken.

That very day, his own strength had miserably failed before the Lion and the she-wolf. He bids Virgil consider well whether there be sufficient virtue in him, before committing him to so dreadful a passage. He recalls the great errands of Aeneas and of Paul, and the great results of their going to the immortal world; and, comparing himself with them, he feels his heart quail, and is ready to turn back. Virgil discerns the fear that has come over him; and in order to remove it, tells him how a blessed Spirit has descended from Heaven expressly to command the journey. On hearing this, Dante immediately casts off all pusillanimity, and at once accepts the Freedom and the Mission that are given him.

Day was departing, and the dusky light
To every earthly creature gently brought
The end of toil; I only, while I might.
Prepared me for the battle to be fought 4
Of toil and pity both; my memory
Shall trace my course again and err in naught.
Ye muses aid me! aid me, Genius high! 7
And thou, my soul, that must the story tell,