

The Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri

The New Translation by Gerald J. Davis

Insignia Publishing

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Canto I

Midway through our life's journey, I found myself in a dark woods, for I had gone astray from the correct path. Ah, how hard it is to describe this forest, so savage and strange and stark, the very memory of which brings back my fear. So bitter is my dread of the forest that death is but little more frightening. Yet, in order to relate the Good that I found, I will tell you of other things I discovered there.

Verily, I know not how I first entered therein, for I was so drowsy from slumber at the point at which I had abandoned the true way. But, after I had reached the foot of a mountain, where ended the valley that had frozen my heart with fright, I glanced upward and beheld the mountaintop bathed in those sunbeams which lead one toward the right way along every road.

Then was my terror somewhat abated, which, in the depths of my heart, had lasted throughout all the night that I had endured so wretchedly. And thus, just as he who, short of breath, issues forth from the sea unto the shore and turns to behold the perilous waters, so did my spirit, which was yet fleeing from that distress, turn back to look again upon the pass through which never did a living person exit.

After I had rested my weary body a little, I resumed my journey upward upon the slope of the incline, firmly planting one foot above the other. And, lo, almost as soon as I had begun to climb, a Leopard, exceedingly nimble and swift, all covered with a spotted hide, appeared before me. The beast did not move from in front of me, but rather did try to block my way, so that, many times, I was tempted to return the way I had come.

The hour was early in the morning, when the sun was beginning its ascent with those stars which accompanied it when Love Divine first set in motion

this beautiful creation of the universe. So the time of day and the sweet season of spring occasioned in me some hope that I might overcome my fear of that wild animal. But then did I perceive a Lion come toward me, foretelling even greater horrors, its head held high and ravenous with hunger, so that it seemed the very air was fearful.

Then there came a She-Wolf, most lean and hungry. O, many are the souls that she has laid low. And the sight of her overwhelmed me with such disquiet, from fear of her dreadful aspect, that I surrendered all hope of reaching the summit. Thus, like one who delights in his winnings, but when the time comes that he suffers a loss, he weeps and is downcast, so did this creature cause me to be agitated. This She-Wolf, approaching me little by little, drove me back to a place where I could no longer see the sun.

Whereupon, as I retreated with backward step toward the lowland, there appeared before mine eyes the figure of a man whose voice, when he attempted to speak, sounded weak from long disuse. And, as I beheld him in that deserted wasteland, I cried out, "Have pity upon me, whatsoever you may be, whether you are a ghost or a mortal man!"

At which he answered me, "I am not now a man, although I was once a man. My parents were of Lombardy, both Mantuan by birthplace. I was born late in the time of Julius Caesar and lived at Rome under the good Augustus, during that era of the false and lying Gods. A Poet I was, and I sang the praises of Aeneas, that righteous son of Anchises, who fled to Italy after haughty Troy had been set aflame. But you, why do you turn back in the face of such disheartening perils? Why do you not ascend this pleasing mountain which is the source and cause of every delight?"

"Are you then Virgil, that fountainhead from which springs such magnificent splendor of speech?" I abashedly responded. "O, glory and light of Poets, I have long studied and greatly love your verses. You are my Master and my Author. You alone are the one from whom I stole that exquisite style which has brought me honor. Look at this beast that has caused me to turn back. Protect me from her, O famous Sage, for she makes my body to tremble."

"Then you must pursue another path if you wish to escape from this savage

place,” he said, when he perceived me weeping. “For this beast, because of which you cry out, permits no man to pass by her, but instead does so much impede him till she destroys him. And she has a nature so malignant and so ruthless that never sated is her ravenous appetite and, after she has eaten, she is even hungrier than before. Many are the animals with whom she mates, and yet many more will there be, until that Champion comes who shall at last put her to a sorrowful death. This Champion shall not seek lands or chattel, but instead wisdom, love and virtue. And his birthplace shall be in Verona, betwixt Feltro and Montefeltro. He shall be the salvation of fallen Italy, on whose account the virginal Camilla was slain in battle, and also Euryalus, Turnus and Nisus, who perished from their wounds in the war against Troy. He shall pursue the She-Devil through every village till he drives her back unto Hell, from whence Envy first set her loose to unleash Death upon the world.

“Therefore I think and I believe it would be best for you to follow me and I will be your guide. I shall lead you from hence through an eternal place. There will you witness many unhappy ancient spirits, each one uttering its despairing lamentations, bewailing the second death, which is the lake that burns with fire and brimstone. And you shall see those who are contented, even within the flames of Purgatory, for they hope to dwell among the blessed, whenever that may chance to be. If you wish to ascend into those regions, a soul more worthy than I will lead you. And I will leave you with her upon my departure. For that Eternal King, Who rules above, has decreed that none shall enter His city through me, because I rebelled against His law. He governs in every place, and reigns over all. There is His city and His exalted throne. O, happy is the one whom He chooses to reside there.”

And so I said unto him, “Poet, I beg you, by the God you never knew, in order that I may escape from this evil and malevolence, lead me to where you said, so that I can espy Saint Peter’s Portal, the Gate of Purgatory, and those you say are so disconsolate.”

Then he moved on, and close behind him did I follow.

Canto II

The daylight was departing, and the air, darkening with shadows, released all earthly animals from their daily toil. And I resolved to continue this effort which my unerring memory will herein relate, both of the way and of the woe.

O Muses, O Lofty Genius, do now come to my aid. O Memory, which did inscribe what I saw, here shall your worth become apparent.

Thus did I begin: "Poet who guides me, regard my virtue, if it be sufficient, before you entrust to me this difficult passage. You say that Aeneas, the father of Silvius, while still embodying his corruptible flesh, journeyed unto the immortal world, and was present there in corporeal form. But if God, implacable foe to all evil, showed him such favor, considering the illustrious progeny who would issue forth from his loins, this does not appear unseemly to a reasonable man. For Aeneas was chosen by empyrean Heaven to be the father of mighty Rome and her Empire. And that is where, to tell the truth, was ordained and established the holy place wherein sits the successor to great Peter. On his heroic journey, which you so well described, Aeneas did learn of his impending victory and the foretelling of the Papal mantle. And, later, Paul the Chosen Vessel went thither to bring confirmation of that Faith which is the beginning of the way to true salvation.

"But I, why do I go thither? Who does permit it? I am not Aeneas. I am not Paul. I do not deem myself worthy of it, nor do others. Therefore, if I allow myself to go, I fear this voyage will only end in folly. You are wise. My meaning do you comprehend better than I can express it."

And I, as one who no longer desires what he has once desired, and because of second thoughts does change his former intention, so did I withdraw from my objective. Thus did I become hesitant upon that dark mountainside, for,

with further deliberation, I decided to forsake the enterprise I had at first so eagerly embraced.

“If I have correctly understood your words,” said the ghost of that great Poet, “your soul is overcome by cowardice, something which oft times does encumber a man. It makes him to recoil from an honorable undertaking, just as a false sight does cause a beast to shy away. So that you may free yourself from this fear, I shall tell you why I came hither and what I heard from the first moment I pitied you.

“I was one among those souls in Limbo,” Virgil continued, “suspended betwixt torment and bliss, when a Lady, so lovely and so saintly, called out unto me in such a way that I beseeched her to command me. Brighter than the brightest stars did her eyes shine. And she began to say, with an angelic voice, soft and low, ‘O courteous spirit of Mantua, whose famous verses are still renowned throughout all the world, and will endure as long as the world endures, hearken unto my words. A friend of mine, but not a friend of Fortune, is so impeded by fear on his climb up the desolate slope that he may already be lost. I am afraid that I have come too late to succor him, from what I have heard of him in Heaven. And so I beseech you to make haste now and, with your elegant words, and with whatever else is necessary for his deliverance, assist him so that I may rest contented. I am Beatrice, who does fervently bid you to go unto him. I come from that exalted place unto which I greatly desire to return. Love carried me hence, and compelled me to speak thus. When I am once again in the presence of my Lord, full oft will I sing your praises unto Him.’

“She then paused, and so I began to say, ‘O virtuous Lady, because of whom mankind surpasses everything contained within that Heaven of the lesser circles, so pleasing to me is your commandment that, even if it were already done, it would indeed seem too late. There is no need for you to further explain your wish. But tell me the reason why you do not hesitate to descend into these depths, so far below that celestial place unto which you so ardently desire to return?’

“Beatrice answered me, ‘Since you want to know, I shall tell you briefly why I do not dread to enter herein. One should fear only those things which have the power to do harm. Nothing else, for they are not to be feared. God,

of His mercy, created me such that no agony of yours touches me, nor does any flame of this fierce fire assail me. The Blessed Virgin in Heaven has so much pity for this impediment which hinders my friend, which I send you to remove, that God's unbending decree bends to her Will. So the Virgin Mary summoned Saint Lucia and said to her, "Your faithful servant now stands in need of your aid, and unto you do I commend him."

'Whereupon Saint Lucia, inimical enemy of all that is cruel, hurried away and came to the place where I was seated with Rachel of ancient times. And Saint Lucia said, "Beatrice, true praise of God, why do you not succor him who loved you so? For you did he forsake the vulgar masses. Do you not hear his pitiful lament? Do you not see the Fate that awaits him because of the flood over which the sea itself holds no dominion?"

'Never was a soul so swift,' Beatrice said, 'to work for its good and to free from its harm as I was when I heard these words. And so I descended hither from my blessed seat, trusting in your eloquence, which honors you and all those who listen to your stanzas.'

"After Beatrice, weeping, had thus spoken unto me, she turned her luminous eyes away. And so, because of her tearful entreaty, I swiftly hastened unto you as she wished. I delivered you from that beast which prevented you from ascending the heavenly mountain. What does trouble you now? Why, why do you tarry? Why is this cowardice lodged in your breast? Why do you yet lack daring and courage when three such blessed Ladies express so much concern for you in the Court of Heaven, and when my words do promise that manifold good awaits you?"

Just as flowers, closed and bowed by the night-time chill, open and uplift themselves when the sun shines upon them, just so was my flagging spirit restored. And such unbounded courage coursed through my heart that, like a fearless man, I said, "O, compassionate Lady, who succored me, and courteous Virgil, who so speedily obeyed her earnest commandment, you have, by your words, infused my heart with such a desire to return unto my first intent. Now proceed onward. Only one Will is there in both of us. You are my Guide, my Lord and my Master."

Thus did I speak unto him. And, when he led the way, I followed him along that dark and dangerous passage.