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Dante
The Divine Comedy

A new verse translation by

Clive James

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DANTE

THE DIVINE COMEDY

A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION BY

CLIVE JAMES

PICADOR



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TO PRUE SHAW

without whom this book, like all my other books,

would never have existed

Mouth, do what you can . . .
—*Heaven*, 14, 79

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

For Dante it was a strict rule not to rhyme the word "Christ" with any other word except itself. I have followed him in that, as in any other matter of decorum. But when it comes to vocabulary, the translator needs a decorum of his own. Dante, the man on the spot, never had to think about whether his words were apt to the age, whereas the translator, if he is not careful, will find himself thinking of nothing else. Not wanting to get between the reader and the original, I have tried to avoid anachronistic language except when it could hide itself in the blur of time. I used the word *"bastille"* only after checking that it might—just might—have reached Florence from Paris in time for Dante to hear it. "Breaker's yard" is no doubt a modern term, but for a long time there have been ships and there were always places where they were broken up, so I thought a term like that might be slipped in, whereas one could not possibly use, say, "napalm," a word which would have been very employable in the lower regions of Hell. Such a modern coinage would stand out like a phrase of recent slang in one of those television dramas where millions have been spent on the look of the thing but the whole effect is dissipated by an untimely phrase coming out of an actor's mouth. Down among the Evil-Claws, however, I used modern low-life filth because a shock effect is exactly what such scatological language is always after.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, on numerous occasions I thought it useful to employ the time-honoured consensus of the

scholarship in the interests of clarity, and lift a name, as it were, from the footnotes to the text. Let one instance stand for many. For hundreds of years it has been more or less agreed among the scholars that one of the animals Dante meets early in the poem is a symbol for Avarice. So I put that in. On the other hand, I have left some of the mysteries unsolved because there has never been an answer to them. Who was the Veltro? Scholars are still wondering, so the reader of this translation will have to wonder too. Such a question will soon become recognizable as a Dantesque puzzle. The renowned German scholar Karl Vossler once said that Dante was a great mystifier. And so he was, but not as much as he wasn't. Really he was a great clarifier. The *Divine Comedy* is a vast act of illumination. Even for Hell, Gustav Doré was too dark an illustrator, and by the time we get to Purgatory the whole universe is lighting up, so that you can see, in fine detail, everything that the poet refers to. I may have taken a liberty, towards the very end, in making Dante seem to intuit the space-time continuum. Nobody ever intuited that before Einstein. But one of the tributes we must pay Dante's great poem is that all subsequent human knowledge seems to unfold from it.

As to my chosen stanza form, there are no puzzles at all. The form is a quatrain, either simple or augmented, and any augmentations use the same rhymes, so *abab* might grow to *ababa* or *ababab* or sometimes more. The aim is an easy-seeming onward flow, except at the end of the canto, where a couplet closes the action with a snap. In every other formal respect, the layout is established by Dante himself. It was his idea to have one hundred cantos divided into three lots of thirty-three, with a single canto to start things off. These three groupings of cantos are known to scholars as canticles, but it is perhaps less ponderous to call them books. Dante ends each book with the word "stars." It would be nice if the translator could do the same, but in English the word "stars" has very few words with which to rhyme. Rather than write a strained couplet to close each book, I wrote a final line in which the stars indeed show up, but not as the last word.

In the poetic world of Dante, things happen in a certain order;

with the words, from start to distant finish, always sounding inevitable. Therein will lie the translator's most daunting obstacle. Some of the phrases, known by heart to every educated person in Italy, sound more wonderful in Italian than they ever can in English. It was bound to happen, because different languages have different words for the same thing. In Italian, for example, there is the beautiful word *"sinistra."* In English we just say "left": nothing like as sinuous. By extension, there will be Italian phrases that the translator can't hope to equal for their sonority. But working on such a large scale, there will be other Italian phrases that will offer opportunities to be rendered in English words as resonant as he knows how to make them. Finally, then, it will come down to what he can do with verse. The poet will be on his mettle. Part of his consolation, as he cudgels his brains through the long nights, is that Dante thought the same about himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to both of my publishers, Robert Weil at Liveright in New York, and Don Paterson at Picador in London. Each of them saw the text before it was finished and to neither of them did it occur that I might be overambitious for wanting to press on to a conclusion: or if it did, they didn't say so. In America, Dennis Looney agreed to vet the text: not necessarily a comfortable offer from my angle, because his standards of scholarship are high. His numerous corrections on points of fact have all been incorporated into the text, and his remarks about interpretation have been listened to at the very least: sometimes, after thinking it over, I simply decided he was right, and sat down to recast a line or even more. I should insist, though, that any moments of excess or carelessness are my responsibility. For his scrutiny of my versification, once again I thank Don Paterson, who has supervised my last two books of verse for Picador: to have his fine ear on the case is a great privilege. An even greater privilege was to have my family looking after me when I fell ill. The actual translation was already done, but the whole business of finalizing the text has taken place during the period of my bad health, and if I had not been looked after I would not have lived to see the book made ready for the press. In that regard, my particular thanks should go to my elder daughter, Claerwen, who made crucial suggestions about the order of events in the preliminary pages.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

In this new translation of the *Divine Comedy,* Dante speaks through Clive James with a strong voice in English we haven't heard before. The translator makes the unusual choice of recasting the original Italian into quatrains (not the tercets of Dante's *terza rima*), which he meticulously constructs with keen attention to rhythm and rhyme. The poetic metre imbues the narrative with a drive that propels the pilgrim on his journey from Hell to Heaven. And with it James develops and sustains an impressive periodic syntax—see, e.g., Adam's appearance in Canto 26 of *Heaven*—that pulls the reader in and pushes him along the poem's course too. Unsuspecting readers will find themselves snagged, and happily so, even in the poem's dense doctrinal passages, where often the most devoted fall by the wayside or simply skip ahead to what they imagine is the next good bit of poetry. Consequently, the Beatrice we hear speaking in these Jamesian quatrains (not to mention Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Peter Damian, among others) may be the most convincing in English verse. In this translation there are no lulls when scholastic doctors or purging souls or prolix demons hold forth. Like the pilgrim, you too, good reader—*lettor*, Dante calls you in more than one direct address—move swiftly to the ultimate destination at the end of the poem.

James also makes the laudable decision to flesh out the more obscure references in Dante's poetry by incorporating into the translation explanatory details culled from commentaries, which

are often necessary to understand fully Dante's point in a given passage. The translator decides where and when to add these for the sake of clarity. These additional bits, tipped in judiciously, actually bring the reader closer to the original by removing the necessity of having to consult notes. Some scholars may balk but the typical reader needs help in negotiating Dante's elaborate network of references and will appreciate not having to search it out in footnotes, endnotes or notes in an accompanying volume. Anyone comparing this translation with the original may wonder at times why Dante didn't do this himself. Clive James has given us a new Dante, a forceful Dante, a Dante who deserves to be heard.

—Dennis Looney

Dennis Looney, a professor of Italian and classics at the University of Pittsburgh, is the author of *'My Muse will have a story to paint': Selected Prose of Ludovico Ariosto* (2010) and *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the* Divine Comedy (2011).

DANTE

THE DIVINE COMEDY

BOOK I

HELL

CANTO 1

At the mid-point of the path through life, I found
Myself lost in a wood so dark, the way
Ahead was blotted out. The keening sound
I still make shows how hard it is to say
How harsh and bitter that place felt to me—
Merely to think of it renews the fear—
So bad that death by only a degree
Could possibly be worse. As you shall hear,
It led to good things too, eventually,
But there and then I saw no sign of those,
And can't say even now how I had come
To be there, stunned and following my nose
Away from the straight path. And then, still numb
From pressure on the heart, still in a daze,
I stumbled on the threshold of a hill
Where trees no longer grew. Lifting my gaze,
I saw its shoulders edged with overspill
From our sure guide, the sun, whose soothing rays
At least a little melted what that night
Of dread had done to harden my heart's lake—
And like someone who crawls, half dead with fright,
Out of the sea, and breathes, and turns to take
A long look at the water, so my soul,
Still thinking of escape from the dark wood

I had escaped, looked back to see it whole,
The force field no one ever has withstood
And stayed alive. I rested for a while,
And then resumed, along the empty slope,
My journey, in the standard crofter's style,
Weight on the lower foot. Harder to cope
When things got steeper, and a mountain cat
With parti-coloured pelt, light on its feet,
In a trice was in my face and stayed like that,
Barring my way, encouraging retreat.
Three beasts—was this the leopard, Lechery?—
Were said to block the penitential climb
For sinners and for all society,
And here was one, sticking to me like lime.
Not only did it hamper me, it made
Me think of turning back. Now was the time
Morning begins. The sun, fully displayed
At last, began its climb, but not alone.
The stars composing Aries, sign of spring,
Were with it now, nor left it on its own
When the First Love made every lovely thing
The world can boast: a thought to give me heart
That I might counter, in this gentle hour
Of a sweet season, the obstructive art,
Pretty to see but frightful in its power,
Of that cat with the coloured coat. But wait:
If fear had waned, still there was fear enough
To bring on Pride, the lion, in full spate:
Head high, hot breath to make the air look rough—
As rocks in summer seem to agitate
The atmosphere above them without cease—
So rabid was its hunger. On its heels
The wolf appeared, whose name is Avarice,
Made thin by a cupidity that steals
Insatiably out of its own increase,
Obtained from many people it made poor.

This one propelled such terror from its face
Into my mind, all thoughts I had before
Of ever rising to a state of grace
Were crushed. And so, as one who, mad for gain,
Must find one day that all he gains is lost
In a flood of tears, a conscience racked with pain,
Just so I felt my hopes came at the cost
Of being forced, by this unresting beast,
Little by little down towards that wood
Whose gloom the sun can never in the least
Irradiate. But all at once there stood
Before me one who somehow seemed struck dumb
By the weight of a long silence. "Pity me,
And try to tell me in what form you come,"
I cried. "Is it a shade or man I see?"
And he replied: "No, not a man. Not now.
I was once, though. A Lombard. Parents born
In Mantua. Both born there." That was how
His words emerged: as if with slow care torn,
Like pages of a book soaked shut by time,
From his clogged throat. "Caesar was getting on
When I was young. That's Julius. A crime,
His death. Then, after he was gone,
I lived in Rome. The good Augustus reigned.
The gods were cheats and liars. As for me,
I was a poet." He grew less constrained
In speech, as if trade-talk brought fluency.
"I sang about Anchises' son, the just
Aeneas, pious, peerless. When proud Troy
Was burned to ashes, ashes turned to dust
Which he shook off his feet, that marvellous boy.
He did what any decent hero must:
Set sail. But you, you turn back. Tell me why.
Why not press on to the delightful peak?
The root cause of all joy is in the sky."
Almost too shocked and overawed to speak—

For now the one who fought for words was I—
I asked him, just as if I didn't know:
"Are you Virgil? Are you the spring, the well,
The fountain and the river in full flow
Of eloquence that sings like a seashell
Remembering the sea and the rainbow?
Of all who fashion verse the leading light?
The man of honour? What am I to say?
Through learning you by heart I learned to write.
My love for your book turned my night to day.
You are my master author. Only you
Could teach me the Sweet Style that they call mine.
I could go on. But what am I to do
About this animal that shows no sign
Of letting me proceed? It scares me so,
My veins are empty, all the blood sucked back
Into the heart. There's nothing you don't know,
My sage, so tell me how this mad attack
Can be called off." Then he: "You need to choose
Another route." This while he watched me weep.
"This way there's no way out. You're bound to lose:
Bound by the spell of this beast pledged to keep
You crying, you or anyone who tries
To get by. In a bad mood it can kill,
And it's never in a good mood. See those eyes?
So great a hunger nothing can fulfil.
It eats, it wants more, like the many men
Infected by its bite. Its catalogue
Of victories will be finished only when
Another dog arrives, the hunting dog:
The Veltro. As for now, it's hard to see
Even his outline through the glowing fog
Of the future, but be assured by me—
The Veltro will make this thing die of shame
For wanting to eat wealth and real estate.
The Veltro's diet will be bigger game:

Love, wisdom, virtue. It will operate
In humble country, eat the humble bread
Of that sad Italy where Trojans fought
Our local tribes: the Latium beachhead.
The brave Princess Camilla there was brought
To death in battle, and Prince Turnus, too—
Killed by Aeneas, of whose Trojan friends
Euryalus and Nisus died. The new
Great Dog will harry this one to the ends
Of that scorched earth and so back down to Hell,
From which, by envious Lucifer, it was
First sent forth. But by now I've pondered well
The path adapted best to serve your cause,
So let me be your guide. I'll take you through
The timeless breaker's yard where you will hear
The death cries of the damned who die anew
Each day, though dead already in the year—
No dated stones remain to give a clue—
The earliest sinners died, when time began.
And you'll see, in the next eternal zone,
Those so content with purging fire they fan
The flames around them, thankful to atone,
Hopeful of being raised to join the blessed.
If you would join them too, we'll reach a stage
When only someone else shows you the rest:
Someone more worthy, though of tender age
Beside me. I can't tell you her name yet,
But what I can say is, the Emperor
Who reigns on high vows he will never let
A non-believer—though I lived before
Belief was possible—see where he sits
In judgement and in joy with the elect."
Sad and afraid, but gathering my wits,
"Poet," I said, "I ask you to effect,
In the name of that God you will never see,
An exit for me from this place of grief,

And then an entry to where I would be—
Beyond the purging flames of which you tell—
In sight of Peter's Gate, though that relief
Demands for prelude that I go through Hell."
And then he moved, and then I moved as well.