Other Books by Mary Jo Bang

The Bride of E
Elegy
The Eye Like a Strange Balloon
Louise in Love
The Downstream Extremity of the Isle of Swans
Apology for Want

Dante Alighieri

INFERNO

Translated,
with an Introduction and Notes, by

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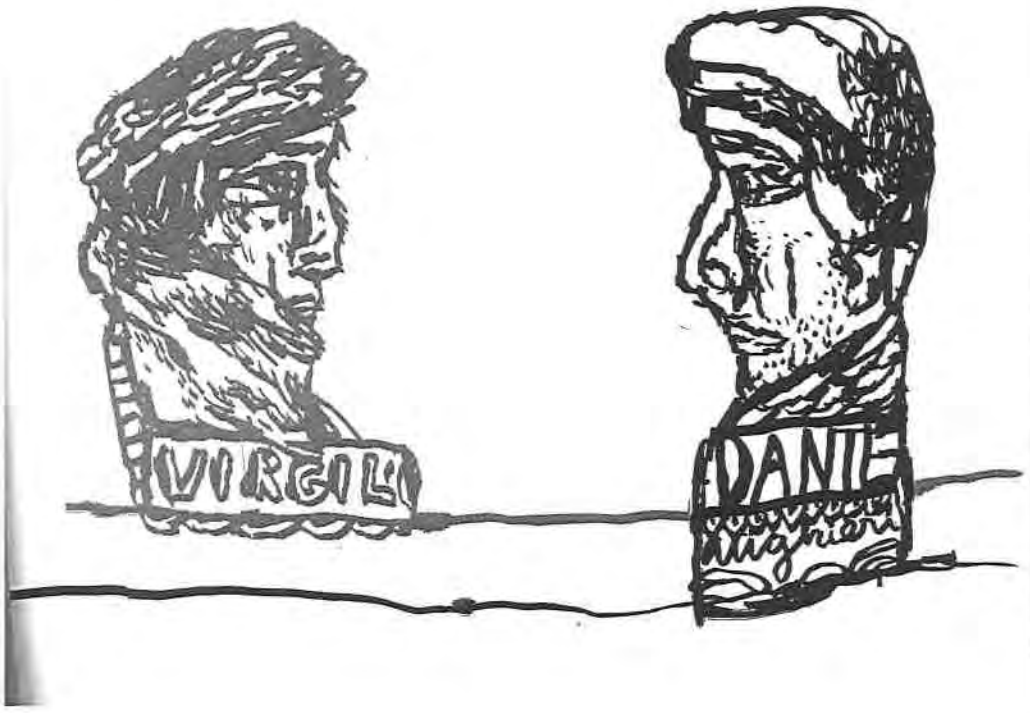


Introduction

You know the story: Heaven, but not yet. First, you have to come to your senses in a dark forest and realize you've strayed from the path. You have to lose hope, then find something bright that renews it. Suddenly, here comes a trio of savage animals—a leopard, a lion, a she-wolf; you relinquish the little hope you had. When you decide you can't go on alone, there's the task of distinguishing a reliable guide from a mirage. Virgil consoles you by saying even animals twitch in fear when they see shadows in their nightmares. The Roman poet explains that Beatrice, the love of your life, interceded when she learned that you were lost; she came down to him in Limbo and begged him to save you. She's now one with the deity you worship. Aloft in His castle, alongside other paragons of purity and beauty, she keeps one ear tuned to a heavenly choir that sings Holy-Holy-Holy.

So, save me, you say. And Virgil says, paradoxically the best way out is by going deeper in. He makes you a promise: follow him into the misery-making depths of Hell and, eventually, the door of Paradise will fall open and just like that, you'll be welcomed in. You wonder if that's possible. Somehow he convinces you and when he says, "Let us go now," it all seems feasible and, as if by a force outside you, you feel your feet move. You're on your way to a place no one alive has ever seen outside imagination.

You come to a gate; above it a sign says, more or less: this threshold marks the end of hope. These words seem cruelly calculated to terrify. And you *are* terrified except that Virgil reminds you it's only your cowardice you have to forfeit, the very cowardice you've come to rely upon. You're in the entrance hall of Hell itself, facing an object lesson of the *n*th degree. The souls you see and hear are those who refused to stand up and instead stood by and allowed evil to enact its awful malice. Here they pay the price. They're not sent to a lower level because the relative benignity of their iniquity would make those who are worse gloat that they'd been truly bad, not just insipid vacillators. Their sentence isn't pretty: they're set upon by wasps that sting like guilt pricks the conscience—unremittingly. He says they're not worth looking at but you can't stop yourself. Even here, they don't take a stand but steadily run after a flapping banner. There are so many of them.

On a nearby shore, a crowd waits for a boat. Charon arrives and berates you; the crowd seems eager to leave. The ground shakes, the wind blows, there's a bright crimson flash like lightning seen through a faded stage curtain. It's too

much. Much too much. You fall into a faint. You wake to thunder and a tremor, the sighs of souls in Limbo. Here you see those who never had a chance to make amends because they lived so long ago. There's a special area for those who did great things on Earth: Aristotle, Plato, Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan and the like. Missing is the shade of Adam, who began us, and Abraham, Abel, Noah, and Rachel and all those lifted up and out when Christ descended to harrow Hell. You realize this is the first circle. And it is circular, and wide, and green with enameled grass, and dim-lit and quiet except for that ever-present, monotonous hum of regret for the fact that Paradise will never be.

The first circle is nothing like the second, which is where you go next. You meet Minos, infallible judge and jury of one; he indicates the sentence for the self-confessed by wrapping his tail around his torso to match the number of the circle where the sentence will be served. When he sees you, he quips, "Just because the door is open, doesn't mean that you can leave." It reminds you of a song. Inside the circle, the sounds are horrendous and a wind bashes the souls about, overwhelming them, as lust once did their reason. You see two locked in an embrace and wonder why. They come by and tell their sad-love story. They're very sympathetic. Which leaves you breathlessly heartbroken. And now for the second time, you're aware of your fragility as the world fades away.

When you come to, you're somewhere else: circle three, which is smaller than two, the way two was smaller than one. Every circle ever-smaller, each one farther down, each one more distant from the love above. At the entrance to the third, you meet three-headed Cerberus, doglike and ravenous, barking up a storm in a constant downpour of sewer water frozen into sheets of sleet. This is the circle of gluttons and you meet one; by coincidence, this little piggy is from your city. You ask whether his second sight allows him to know what the future holds for that place. He says what's already a viper's nest will soon be only more so.

Now, on to circle four where Plutus, symbol of envy and demigod of worldly goods, stands guard. He's like wealth itself, a puffed-up paper bag full of hot air that collapses under the weight of Virgil's insults, and the reminder that someone wants you here, or else you wouldn't be. Here you see two sets of sinners: on one side, lavish spenders; on the other, their grasping penny-pinching alter egos. They engage in a nonstop contest where each side expends every ounce of energy pushing weights across the circle that's shaped like fortune's wheel. When the two groups meet midway, they crash, like two colliding shopping carts full of useless bric-a-brac; they then return and start again. You notice the intemperate clergy are here; they're tonsured, as if they've even spent the hair from off their heads.

From there, you follow a dark stream downhill until it opens out to become the marsh of Styx. This is circle five, for the lifelong angry. Mud-covered souls gnaw at one another the way fury once gnawed them from inside out. And Virgil says, furthermore, underneath the pond's surface are sad-face pouters, who never had a good word or a pleasant thought to offer. Timelessly, through a mouthful of mud, they gurgle up a dirge.

You leave five, but before you reach six, you see far-off lights flickering at the top of a tower. The signal gets returned and suddenly a boat brings Phlegyas, who's enraged. You get in his boat, which sinks under your weight, a clear indication that you're not dead yet. When you see one soul ripped limb from limb by a mob of angry others, you understand how gratifying it feels to get a glimpse of justice.

In the distance, you see circle six—the glowing city of Dis, neon in the perpetual night. At the front door, a thousand fallen angels take offense that you've come, alive, to where only the dead are welcome. Virgil tries and fails to negotiate your entrance. And you? You're in a state of untold terror, which makes the forest in which you were lost seem like a patch of trees behind a summerhouse. Virgil says someone is coming to save you. Really?

You're nervous now and wonder, does he really know the way? He says he does. He says he was down here long ago looking for a soul that a sorceress wanted to stuff back into a body. But you're no longer listening. Your eyes are on three creatures at the top of the wall; they have serpents on their heads instead of hair; they wear snaky belts and bracelets, and scream and cry and slap themselves. These three, the Erinyes, threaten to call down Medusa to turn you into you a concrete block and leave you here, at the base of Hell's dark ever-wall.

And now, the wind rises and the Heaven-sent messenger that Virgil promised moments ago strides toward you. He's haughty and annoyed by this lowly task. He taps a wand; the gate glides open. One tirade later, he turns on his heel and is back to Heaven. He's put an end to angelic resistance and now you're allowed in. All around you are coffins and sarcophagi, out of which are emanating cries of agony. These are the tombs of heretics, grouped by type, each tomb of torment heated by an open fire exquisitely adjusted to match the contents of the tomb.

Among the Epicureans you meet pure hubris in the form of Farinata. He sent your people into exile not once but twice, and tells you so; you explain your people came back and took their turn at scattering his. In the same tomb, you see the father of a friend who wants to know, does his son still see the light of day? Shouldn't the father know? But no, the dead can only know what's

distant, not what's about to be or in the recent past. Farinata gives you a prophecy: in fewer than six years, you'll discover for yourself how hard the art of exile is to master. Virgil says sweet Beatrice, when you finally reach her, will make sense of this prediction.

As you make your way around the bank, you smell an August garbage strike. It takes some time to acclimate and while you wait, Virgil draws a diagram of what you'll find below. Circle seven, for the violent, he says, is subdivided into three: the first, for those who killed, maimed, destroyed, or plundered; the second, for suicides; the third, for blasphemers and rule-breakers who violently scorned God. Circle eight is divided into ten concentric crevices, each for a type of fraud distinctly punished in a manner that befits it. Circle nine has four parts, each based on the form betrayal takes. In this last of the four, the inner circle within the circle, Satan sits. You think you're prepared, but in the event, there's always a measure of bewilderment. Always a jolt of terror when your eyes misread the dark.

You arrive at circle seven by climbing down the remnants of a landslide caused by an earthquake that followed the death of Christ. But first you have a face-off with the Minotaur of Crete. On your way down, a centaur, arrow at the ready, calls across, "Are you coming down to get your fair share of abuse?" But you're not there for that. Virgil asks the one called Chiron for a centaur to carry you across the river of boiling blood; there, the violent suffer the same degree of misery they once inflicted. A centaur carries you across and plays the part of a tour guide, pointing out the infamous.

You find yourself in the middle ring of circle seven, a gigantic grove of thorn trees with spirits trapped inside the branches. These are the suicides; they cry endlessly in their mini-prisons, regretting the moment they gave up hope and hurt themselves. The wood then ends in a barren desert where a rain of fire falls nonstop. This is the last ring of seven. You find the man whose books inspired you there, among the others. It was he who gave you a model for writing that might just make you immortal. Here, the fire of passion scars the skin and causes constant crying. You meet some from your city; they ask how things are there and you tell them, easy wealth has undermined the fabric of civility. They applaud you for speaking with such candor.

You would leave here, but how? The waterfall that cascades down the sheer rock drop makes a roar that deafens. Virgil calls up Geryon, an image of fraud with the face of an affable man, but whose body is pure serpent. Those two hatch a plan, while you talk to a group of lenders who charged excessive interest rates. You and your guide descend to circle eight on the massive back of Geryon, with the memory of Icarus and his melting wings foremost in your

mind. You dismount at Malebolge, circle eight's set of ten stone valleys ever widening out. Stone ridges bridge the crevices—one to two, two to three, et cetera, et cetera—each a level lower and one step closer to Satan's icy pit. You make your way down the ridge, which is jagged and steep. Along the way, you see how plastic fraud is as it assumes its many forms.

In the first crevice, the sinners form two separate rings—one moving with the clock, the other counterclockwise—in one, pimps and panderers; in the other, date-rape and seducer types. All feel the lash of a devil's whip. In the second crevice, drooling flatterers are sunk in a sea of excrement. In the third, simonists who sold church favors are stuck head-down in baptism fonts, their kicking feet on fire. In the fourth, seers and fortune-tellers walk backward, their faces now above their backs and bums—the cost of looking too far forward. The fifth is a tar pit where sadistic devils pass gas and poke down grafters. Those who were once on the take now take the tines of a devil's fork.

And now, disturbing news. The ridge that forms the walkway is broken here, destroyed by the selfsame quake that caused the landslide. A squad of ten devils is selected to escort you to the point where the ridge continues. Or so they say. On the way, they get tricked by a sinner and you leave them in a fix. You can't help thinking you'll get blamed for this. It's true, they do run after you but Virgil saves the day by sliding down a slope into crevice six, where religious hypocrites wear hooded monks' cloaks made of lead gilded with gold paint. Because they're hypocrites, what's outside doesn't match what's within. They lumber along under the weight of their sin.

In crevice seven, thieves are robbed of their bodies by snakes, then made to slither along the nightlike bottom. Crevice eight houses a pit of deceivers hidden now in flames, as they once concealed their nefariousness. Crevice nine holds those who sowed seeds of discord and religious schism. One has his severed head in his hand and swings it like a lantern. In him, two are one and one is two; his punishment is perfect. At last you come to cloister ten where you meet and talk to falsifiers like counterfeiters and impersonators. Each has been turned into something else; each wants what it now can't have. They bitterly goad one another. And you get scolded for listening to bickering, and liking it too much.

And now you're about to see circle nine, where fraud and violence merge. Towering above the bordering wall, you see the tops of giants—each a lesson in what happens when might marries a monster. One is tame enough to take you and Virgil in his hand and hand you down. Now you're on the floor of the horrid pit that bears the weight of Earth above. And you're wondering again, as you have at every turn, how do you write the story of this place? Who would

believe the horror? What does a reader need to know if he or she has never been there? What's the text equivalent of death metal music? What can you say to save someone from grief?

You cross Caina, the outer rim of Cocytus, where the floor is ice, thicker than a frozen lake-top in deadest winter. The souls are frozen in it, heads bowed, teeth miming a machine-gun clatter. Brother-murderers. Father-killers. Those with a hand in a daughter's death. A vast evil cousinage sitting in an ice tray. Caina gives way to Antenora where, unthinkingly, your foot hits a sinner's head. At least you think it was unthinkingly. He was a backstabbing double-crosser who doesn't wish to be remembered. In life, some were more ruthless than others; some would kill a son and set the parent up to watch. They pay here for their treachery.

Antenora cedes to Ptolomea. Here too, a sea of frozen souls, but with their heads bent back: to cry is to suffer more. Their tears freeze, like ice on a ledge in the heart of nuclear winter, then work their way back up under the lids and fill out the sockets. Now the souls are painfully blind, as they were once blind to the suffering they brought their friends and guests. A soul is sometimes sent here to begin its sentence early, leaving the body to walk on Earth—zombielike, a living dead, Iron Maiden's Eddie the Head.

As you walk on, you feel a breeze and see beneath your feet souls submerged in ice like broken bits of straw in glass. Ahead is three-faced Satan: one face a pasty white, one black, one red. His three sets of moving wings create a constant downdraft; the cold air keeps the ice intact. His six eyes cry; in each mouth, hammered by his teeth, a sinner writhes in agony: Judas, Brutus, and Cassius—the latter's back is a mass of missing skin. To witness this feels formal, as if you've almost ceased to be. Not yet dead but not alive. Mind and body caught midmotion in the unfathomable.

There's nothing more to learn here. Virgil picks you up and lowers the two of you down Satan's ladder-legs, turning mid-Earth to push against gravity up toward the opposing pole. When you arrive at the other side you wonder: How can it be that you are where you are? This is what guides are for. To explain, and to point out a possible path that will take you from the oubliette in Hell's basement to an opening where you can look out and see the convulsive beauty of distant stars.

A Note on The Translation

Sometimes we can trace a chain of events back to its beginning. In the *Inferno*, in the middle of his life—a life in some ways similar to ours—Dante finds himself in a dark wood and realizes that he's lost the right way. Every action that follows hinges on that moment.

In June 2006, I picked up a book of poems called *Fig* by Caroline Bergvall and read "Via (48 Dante Variations)"—a found poem composed entirely of the first three lines of the *Inferno* culled from forty-seven translations archived in the British Library as of May 2000, seven hundred years after Dante began his journey. Bergvall had arranged the lines, mostly tercets, alphabetically by the first word of the opening line, with the translator's name and year of publication appended to the end of each selection. The unrelenting repetition-with-revision of the piece creates an incantatory quality; that quality is further enhanced in a recording Bergvall made of her poem, which I would only hear much later. Reading the poem on the page, I was fascinated by the fact that while the simple language of the original three lines (given at the top of the page) never changes, no two translations were identical. The poem is an object lesson: there is no single right way to carry what has been said in one language across to another. For me, Bergvall's poem was a reiteration of a lesson I'd first learned in a workshop I took with William Weaver at Columbia University in 1995, when he brought in copies of three very dissimilar translations of the first chapter of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*—they could have been three separate novels, so different was the writing, each from the others.

Finishing Bergvall's "Via," I had a thought, or rather, a question: How would I translate that first tercet? After seeing those forty-seven versions, representing not even a quarter of the existing English translations, I wondered how else one could say "Midway through our life, I found myself in a dark wood; the right way was lost." How might the lines sound if I were to put them into colloquial English? What if I were to go further and add elements of my own poetic style? Would it sound like a cover song, the words of the original unmistakably there, but made unfamiliar by the fact that someone else's voice has its own characteristics? Could it be, like covers sometimes are, a tribute that pays homage to the original, while at the same time radically departing from it?

Using the parameters established by Bergvall's forty-seven variations, I put the three lines into English. It was fun, although admittedly difficult, since the

possibilities seemed, if not endless, at least myriad. I decided to translate the second tercet. I went to my bookshelf and took down the Charles S. Singleton translation I'd first read a decade earlier. A friend and I had read the *Inferno* together. Using two different translations, we had taken turns reading aloud, stopping at the end of each canto to comment on the differences and discuss the notes.

Now, leaning heavily on Singleton's more or less literal prose translation (tonally elevated and rich with archaicisms) and following the original on the facing page, I translated the second tercet, then a third. At that point it occurred to me that for the first tercet I'd had forty-seven "Virgils"—Bergvall's variations—and now I had only one. I went to the library and selected several translations—ranging in form from terza rima to prose—and ranging in time from Longfellow's first American translation, published in 1867, to Robert and Jean Hollander's, published in 2000; reading all of these, plus their notes, plus Singleton's separate volume of commentary, I continued translating Canto I. I tried to stay scrupulously true to the narrative, and to what I took to be Dante's intent, but wrote as if I were some cyborgian hybrid, myself plus Dante's text, the two parts behaving as if they were one mind, living in the present. For his terza rima, I substituted the dominant music of contemporary poetry—assonant echoes, internal rhyme, alliteration. I capitalized the left margin as a gesture toward the English poetic tradition. At times I fell into accentual patterns, mainly iambs and anapests. With that first canto, I admit I took more liberties than I would later; at times I adopted a comic sensibility, a parodic silliness I would eventually decide was corrosive to the text. I would later radically revise this canto.

In the fall, the first canto finished, I set the Dante aside. By then I had decided that I wanted to continue with the translation and create an English-language version of the *Inferno* that would adhere to the original but would seem neither remote in time nor elevated in diction. I thought one way to do that would be to allow the poem to speak with intimacy about the world we live in: the postmodern, post-9/11, Internet-ubiquitous present. I wanted the poem to feel familiar and yet not alter Dante's odd fusion of Greek mythology, Catholicism, and medieval Tuscan politics. The poem rests on those pillars and on their moral lessons. Farinata, the arrogant Ghibelline military leader we meet in Canto X among the Epicureans, has to remain Farinata, as he has for seven hundred years: confrontational, unapologetic about the damage he did while he was on Earth, self-justifying—reminding Dante that he could have done more harm to the city of Florence but didn't. He's unrepentant and therefore deserving of his end. Virgil has to play the role of Reason. God has

to look down from Heaven; Satan has to sit at the center of Hell, locked in a block of ice. The characters had to remain as they were in the original but I would toy with the poem's rhetorical surface, as well as with the allusions and similes.

Few of us know what it is to be, or to even see, a peasant and his cart; a simile built on that image risks seeming charmingly antique. Even if we work on a farm, we drive a pickup truck or a car to work, or ride a tractor from house to field. The fact is, on the level of language, a peasant is only a refinement of the general category of worker. Similarly, few of us use bows and arrows, so when a boat comes across the pond of Styx "faster than an arrow," the comparison can feel alien and trapped in the distant past. But an Ultimate Aero, one of the fastest production cars in the world, once *the* fastest production car in the world, that's an arrow that feels one with our culture of televised racetracks and glossy magazine ads, one with our personal experience of speed. As I went forward, these were the kind of substitutions I allowed myself—worker for peasant, car for cart, Aero for arrow—ones where the medieval original is embodied in the modern. Of course these substitutions can seem playful; whenever the classical and the modern meet, there's the potential for a slapstick brand of humor. For that reason, I tried not to draw undue attention to those moments, nor to incorporate too many of them into the text. There should be pleasure in those encounters with the present, but the pleasure should be fleeting; their primary role is to demonstrate that Dante's Hell never ages, nor do our basic human failings ever change—they only get enacted against a different background.

In the *Inferno*, Dante paid homage to poets and figures who meant something to him and to his readers; he appropriated stories once told by Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, and sometimes adapted them to suit his purposes. Another means of bringing the poem into the present would be to include, through allusion, some of the poets and storytellers who have lived and left a mark in the time since Dante wrote his poem. And because the distinction between high culture and popular entertainment has all but ceased to exist, I would also include words by poet-songwriters like John Coltrane and Bob Dylan—but only when the fit was as close to exact as with Milton or Shakespeare. I would refer to other aspects of contemporary culture as well, just as Dante did. He mentions the annual race at Verona where the winner was awarded a bolt of green cloth; the loser, a rooster that had to be carried around town. He mentions towers, churches, statues, bells, and whistles, both domestic and imported; he includes thinkers such as Euclid, Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato; historical figures like Cleopatra, Caesar, and Hannibal; religious figures and mythic characters. He

creates a tapestry of verisimilitude, a detailed world filled with everyday objects and recognizable people, architecture, and landscapes. I extended that gesture into the present by including references to such figures and objects as klieg lights and cameras, Susan Sontag and Sigmund Freud, Stephen Colbert and Eric Cartman. They all belong in any mirror that reflects this era.

Walter Benjamin claimed in "The Task of the Translator" that "a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife . . . a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language." Part of that "greater language" comes from a shared human experience. Over time some elements of human life remain unchanged; other elements get altered. Translation is a method of bringing the past back into the present—across geographies, across different time periods, and across cultural difference—and sharing what is common to all. That act is both homage and theft—the first, a worshipful respect; the second, an oedipal bravado that says everything in the past, no matter who first made it, can be used as scraps, out of which a new suit can be sewn, now with wide lapels, now with narrow. Translation keeps a work of literature alive by simultaneously dismantling and reclaiming it. For the translator, there is an intense—and paradoxical—intellectual pleasure that comes from *making* a text that has *already been made* by someone else. It is a strange collaborative camaraderie.

The *Inferno* is a dramatic, harrowing, and often extremely witty demonstration of the timeless pernicious effects of corruption, malice, selfishness, and nefariousness. In that way, the poem remains forever relevant. Dante was a product of his era and his geography; the lens through which he viewed the world was Catholicism. The issues he raises in the *Inferno*, however, are larger than those of a single religious belief system. Dante's poem, a bildungsroman of sorts—lost young man gains emotional knowledge under the influence of a kind but stern tutor—keeps drawing artists to it. I'm hardly alone in my fascination with this poem, or in my desire to make it speak in the language of the present. Among the many revival projects where artists have layered a twenty-first-century sensibility over the medieval text, these stand out: a 2004 version of *Dante's Inferno* (Chronicle Books) by Marcus Sanders, Doug Harvey, and artist-illustrator Sandow Birk that sets the poem in contemporary Los Angeles, where abandoned cars and battered signage line the walls of Hell; a 2005 album by the Eternal Kool Project called *The Inferno Rap*, where MicPwr raps Henry Francis Cary's 1805–1806 blank verse translation of the *Inferno* over a track composed by Mr Moe; a 2006 oversized graphic novel, *Jimbo's Inferno*

(Fantagraphics), by the punk-pop artist Gary Panter, in which Jimbo—with a crew cut, and wearing only a loincloth—rides a talking suitcase called Valise across a barren landscape to a vertical mall that functions like the Inferno; Roberto Benigni's 2009 comedy club tour in which he performed a ninety-minute improv routine called "TuttoDante" ("All About Dante") where he used *The Divine Comedy* to riff on current events and contemporary politics. And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that on February 9, 2009, *Dante's Inferno*—a video game that features a hypermuscular action hero named Dante, "a soldier who defies death and fights for love against impossible odds"—was released by Electronic Arts. A Google search for "Dante's Inferno" brings up the game's official website as the first listing; the Wikipedia listing for the *Inferno*, the first book of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, is the second.

My hope is that this translation does what the original does in terms of raising issues of honesty and scruples, responsibility and religious hypocrisy. Because the translation I've done is one with this particular historical moment, it's destined to become an artifact of its era. The original poem will continue to exist. There are many other translations that more closely adhere to a literal rendering of the Tuscan dialect in which the poem was written; readers who want something that aspires to the original have many options from which to choose. As John Dryden wrote in his preface to *Fables*—his verse translations of Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Chaucer—I've made my version "for their sakes who understand sense and poetry . . . when that poetry and sense is put into words which they understand." I will be most happy if this postmodern, intertextual, slightly slant translation lures readers to a poetic text that might seem otherwise archaic and off-putting. My love of Dante's *Inferno* is what has driven me to unpack the syntax of the ancient original and put it into a spoken form of English that is rich with idiom, and even occasional slang. I hope after reading this translation readers will seek out others.

Charles S. Singleton, in his translation note, urges translators to rely on previous translations, arguing that those texts can serve as "readers" who make suggestions about how to better one's own efforts. In that spirit, I've primarily used four such readers: William Warren Vernon, whose 1906 translation of the *Inferno* traces the commentary on Dante's poem back to Benvenuto da Imola (d. 1388) and other early commentators; Charles S. Singleton, both his 1970 translation and his *Commentary*; John D. Sinclair, for the interesting occasional differences between his 1939 translation and Singleton's; and Robert and Jean Hollander's translation and notes, published in 2000. I've also frequently consulted translations by Ciaran Carson, C. B. Cayley, John Ciardi, Robert M. Durling, Robin Kirkpatrick, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Allen

Mandelbaum, Mark Musa, Charles Eliot Norton, Michael Palma, and Robert Pinsky. A list of all of these works and the editions I used appears at the back of this book. I thank all of these Dante translators—those living, and those gone.

I'd also like to thank Caroline Bergvall, whose "Via (48 Dante Variations)" inspired me to begin this translation. And Timothy Donnelly, with whom I first read Dante. Thanks to William Weaver and to Mónica de la Torre, both of whom showed me what translation might be. Special thanks to Robert Stewart at *New Letters* for asking to publish the first five cantos—which gave me the confidence to continue. Additional thanks are due to Ken Botnick, Bill Clegg, Katie Dublinski, Richard Howard, Fiona McCrae, Julia Musha, Marjorie Perloff, Eleanor Sarasohn, Vincent Sherry, Jeff Shotts, and Steve Zwicker, all of whom supported this project at critical junctures, and sometimes over a long period of time. Thanks to the Rockefeller Foundation for a residency at the Bellagio Center in Italy, and to Washington University for continued support in the form of research funds and a sabbatical leave. Thanks to Matt Stone and Trey Parker for allowing Eric Cartman to play the role of Ciacco, in both the translation and the illustration. Profound gratitude goes to Henrik Drescher for his brilliant illustrations; they are everything I had hoped they would be, and more. Enormous thanks go to Mark Bibbins, who read the translation and the notes with extraordinary care not once but several times and each time made countless extremely valuable suggestions. My debt to him is inestimable.

September 1, 2011 (St. Louis) Mary Jo Bang

canto V

I made my way down from the first circle
To the second, which has a smaller circumference
But much more misery, which makes for more tears.

Hideous Minos stands snarling at the entrance.
One by one, he interrogates each—what crime, which error,
When the misdeed—then twists his coiled tail.

In other words, the unfortunate one before him
Confesses all and Minos, connoisseur of sin,
Renders his infallible opinion as to which

Hellish level is an exact punitive match. He then lashes
His reactive tail around himself. Each twist equals a level,
In this way he indicates how far down the soul is sent.

A many-headed multitude forever stands before him.
One by one, each steps forward: they speak, they hear,
And then they're tossed into the hollow nothingness

Where they spin until they reach the designated ring.
"Hey, you, who've come to the Hotel Woe," said Minos,
When he saw me, neglecting for a second his official duties,

"Be careful where you go and who you talk to.
Don't be fooled by the fact that the door is always open."
"Why are you making this fuss?" my leader asked him.

"Don't you too try your best to hold him back.
It's been willed where the will is irresistible.
That's enough—just give it up."

Now the woeful notes begin to reach me.
Now I'm in a place where the sound
Of so much desperate sobbing hammers at me.

I'd arrived at the site of utter darkness; it was as if
A cyclone howled at the center of a combat
Between two warring factions, each in metal armor.

The unrelenting hellish storm
Yanks the spirits forward, jerking and whipping them.
They're unwilling victims of its violence.

When they arrive at the foot of that fallen wall
They shriek, moan, cry, and curse God's power,
Using all the words that censors bleep.

I learned this special type of torment is reserved
For those whose ravenous appetite for carnal knowledge
Allowed lust to triumph over reason.

Like wings carry starlings off in crowded flocks
When the end of October hints at winter, so the wind
Carried these sinners: up, down, and at an angle,

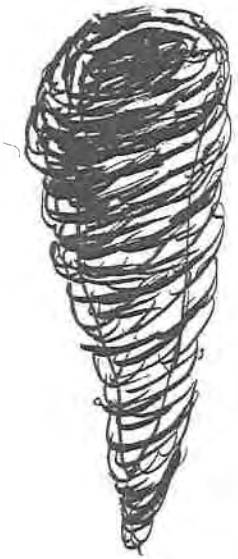
In broad and compact masses.
What is there to comfort them? Neither more peace
Nor less pain, although they beg for both.

As cranes sing their heartbreaking songs
In a line above the rolling level, so I saw the ghosts
Come crying as they were buffeted about

By the stony cold and bitter frictions.
I asked my teacher, "Who are these people
Being thrashed about by the awful air?"

He said, "The first of the enormous group
That you see here was once the queen
Of what was once Assyria.

She legalized unlawful acts of lust
In order to indulge her own depraved desires
And nullify the blame the incest scandal caused.



Her name's Semiramis, and the books say
She succeeded her husband, Ninus,
And took her private kingdom into parts of Egypt.

The next is the one who promised to stay faithful
To the ashes of her late and loving husband,
But did not. Later, she killed herself for love.

Next is lustful Cleopatra. Over there—Helen,
Whose bad-girl behavior set in motion years
Of nonstop mayhem. There's Achilles, who

In the last battle lost to love. There's Paris, Tristan . . ."
He went on, naming and pointing them out, one after
The other, the countless that love had caused to lose their lives.

After listening to the endless list of femmes fatales
And knights of an earlier era,
I was filled with pity, and a bit dazed.

I said to the poet, pointing, "I wish I could talk to those two
Who are locked in an embrace and seem weightless
Against this battering wind."

He said, "You'll see when they're closer;
Just say you'd like to know about the love that leads them
And they'll come right over."

The wind carried them toward us and I raised my voice:
"You two poor things, unless it's forbidden,
Could you please come by and talk to us?"

Like doves glide to a beloved dovecote—
Compelled by some strong desire,
Wings outstretched and steady on—

They came, leaving behind Dido and her kind,
Through the vicious air, drawn near
By the mere politeness with which I'd addressed them.

"You, still alive and all, you're very kind
To have braved this brutal air to visit us
After we've muddied the world with our blood.

If the Ruler of the Universe were our friend,
We'd ask Him to give you peace, since you've shown us pity
In spite of our terrible wickedness.

We can tell you whatever you'd like to know
As long as the wind is calm, as it is now,
And we can hear you, and you us.

I was born in Ravenna, on the Adriatic coast,
Where the Po River and its feeder streams
Peacefully drift off as they empty out to sea.

Love lit a fire in my lover's gentle heart.
He fell in love with the pretty girl I was.
I still resent the way that girl I was was taken from the world.

Love, which is impossible to not return when one is loved,
Made me love him back, so that even now
We're one in Hell, as we were in the world.

Love led us to one death. But the area called Caina
Waits for the one who snuffed out our lives."
These words were carried from them to us.

When the two ruined ones were finished speaking,
I hung my head and kept it down
Until Virgil asked, "What are you thinking?"

I said, "I wonder what *they* were thinking—
How did they fall in love, these pretty two
Who shouldn't have, since it led them straight to this?"

I turned to them and said, "Francesca,
Your suffering makes me want to weep
In sympathy but tell me, what made you aware,

When you first began to feel some spark—
That dubious sense that even the air is softly sighing—
That this was love and worth perdition?"

She answered: "What's sadder than remembering
The happy past when you're feeling wretched?
Just ask your teacher; he could tell you.

Since you're so eager to know
How our young love first began, I'll tell you—
But the whole time I'm talking, I'll be in tears.

One day, to amuse ourselves, we were reading
The tales of love-struck Lancelot; we were all alone,
And naively unaware of what could happen.

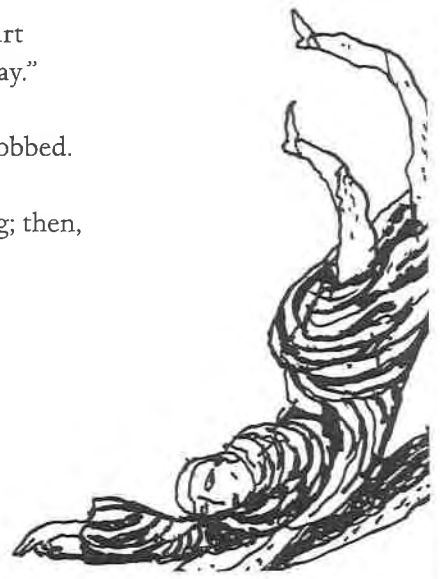
More than once, while reading, we looked up
And saw the other looking back. We'd blush, then pale,
Then look down again. Until a moment did us in.

We were reading about the longed-for kiss
The great lover gives his Guinevere, when that one
From whom I'll now never be parted,

Trembling, kissed my lips.
That author and his book played the part
Of Gallehault. We read no more that day."

As one ghost told the story, the other sobbed.
I so shared their sense of grief,
That I felt my senses go dim, as if dying; then,

My body fell like the dead fall down.



1–2. *I made my way down from the first circle / To the second, which has a smaller circumference*: Hell is arranged in ever-smaller concentric rings. The offenses and punishments get progressively more severe as the circles decrease in size—placing the worst sinners at the farthest remove from Heaven.

4. *Hideous Minos stands snarling at the entrance*: In Greek mythology Minos, the offspring of Zeus and Europa, was the king of Crete. Dante follows Virgil (*Aeneid* 6.432–433) in casting Minos as the officiating judge who determines the circle to which the damned will be sent: "Minos, presiding, shakes the dice cup; it's he who calls the court to silence, and demands to know men's lives and crimes" (translated by Singleton, *Inferno*, 2:74).

13. *A many-headed multitude forever stands before him*: Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* (II.iii.13–15):

> *First Citizen*. And to make us no better thought of, a little help
> will serve; for once we stood up about the corn, he himself
> stuck not to call us the many-headed multitude.

36. *Using all the words that censors bleep*: "Bleeping" refers to the use of a short, high-pitched sound (usually 1,000 Hz) to censor words deemed "indecent" during unscripted television and radio broadcasts.

47. *In a line above the rolling level*: Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Windhover":

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air . . .

53–54. *once the queen / Of what was once Assyria*: In *Dante Studies and Researches*, the late British Dantist Paget Toynbee argues that Dante's description of Semiramis, the beautiful mythic founder of Assyria, is taken directly from Paulus Orosius's *Historiarum adversum paganos* [Seven books of history against the pagans].

55. *She legalized unlawful acts of lust*: Semiramis had a reputation for sexual excesses and is reported to have legalized incest. Singleton (2:78) notes that Chaucer borrowed *libito fè licito* ("made lust licit") from Dante and used it in his description of Nero in *The Monk's Tale*.

60. *And took her private kingdom into parts of Egypt*: Commentators vary on whether Dante confused the ancient kingdom of Babylonia, in Assyria, with Babylon, a fortress city on the Nile. Benvenuto suggested that Dante wasn't confused but simply meant to imply that Semiramis extended her kingdom from Assyria into Egypt. Singleton, *Inferno*, 2:79.

61–63. *the one who promised to stay faithful . . . But did not*: Dido married Sichaeus, a man her brother Pygmalion then murdered for his wealth. When her husband's ghost revealed his murderer, Dido fled to Africa and founded Carthage. There she met Aeneas and betrayed her promise to remain faithful to her dead husband. When Aeneas deserted her, she killed herself. Dante places her not in circle seven with the suicides, but in the second circle with those whose lust overcame their reason. Vernon (1:158) points out that no pagans are found in the circle of suicides, since suicide was thought by pagan philosophers to be a noble act as long as it was done for virtuous reasons and the person had lived a moral life.

64. *Next is lustful Cleopatra*: Cleopatra VII Philopater was the last Egyptian pharaoh. She was first Julius Caesar's mistress and later became, upon Caesar's death, the mistress of Mark Antony. She was reputed to be a charming seductress.

64–66. *Helen, / Whose bad-girl behavior set in motion years / Of nonstop mayhem*: Helen, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, was the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta. Her abduction by (or elopement with) Paris of Troy was the cause of the ten-year Trojan War.

66–67. *There's Achilles, who // In the last battle lost to love*: According to medieval Trojan War accounts, Achilles, having fallen in love with Priam's daughter Polyxena, was about to betray his fellow countrymen when Paris lured him to a temple and killed him.

67. *There's Paris, Tristan*: This Paris may be the Trojan who carried Helen off or it may be a character in a medieval chivalric romance. Tristan and Isolde mistakenly drink a love potion on the ship that is bringing Isolde to marry Tristan's uncle, King Mark. After betraying King Mark, the two lovers ultimately die in each other's arms.

73–74. *I wish I could talk to those two / Who are locked in an embrace*: The two are Paolo and Francesca. It's not until line 115 that Francesca is named; Paolo remains unnamed. The story, possibly legend, probably fact, is that Francesca di Rimini, whose hand was promised to Gianciotto, eldest son of the lord of Rimini, instead fell in love with his younger brother, who returned her love. When Gianciotto surprised the two, much to his sorrow, the sword he had drawn to kill his brother accidentally struck and killed Francesca first. The two lovers were buried together in one tomb. Vernon, *Readings*, 1:161–165; Singleton, *Inferno*, 2:83–89.

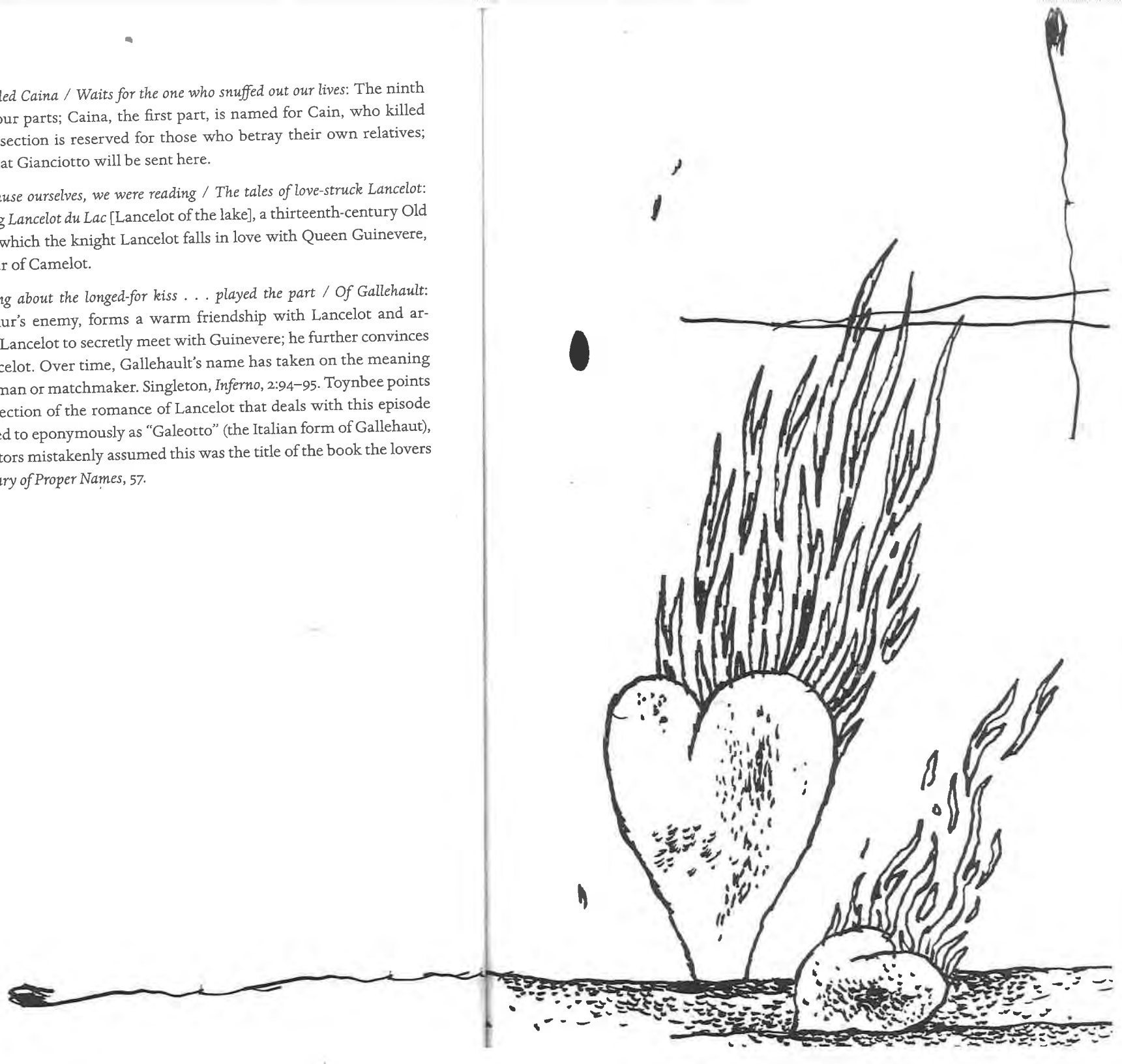
84. *Wings outstretched and steady on*: John Berryman, "Dream Song 20: The Secret of the Wisdom":

> When worst got things, how was you? Steady on?
> Wheedling, or shockt her &
> you have been bad to your friend,
> whom not you writing to. You have not listened.

106–107. *But the area called Caina / Waits for the one who snuffed out our lives*: The ninth circle is divided into four parts; Caina, the first part, is named for Cain, who killed his brother Abel. The section is reserved for those who betray their own relatives; Francesca is hopeful that Gianciotto will be sent here.

127–128. *One day, to amuse ourselves, we were reading / The tales of love-struck Lancelot*: The couple was reading *Lancelot du Lac* [Lancelot of the lake], a thirteenth-century Old French prose poem in which the knight Lancelot falls in love with Queen Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur of Camelot.

133–138. *We were reading about the longed-for kiss . . . played the part / Of Gallehault*: Gallehault, King Arthur's enemy, forms a warm friendship with Lancelot and arranges for the smitten Lancelot to secretly meet with Guinevere; he further convinces Guinevere to kiss Lancelot. Over time, Gallehault's name has taken on the meaning of a procuring middleman or matchmaker. Singleton, *Inferno*, 2:94–95. Toynbee points out that because the section of the romance of Lancelot that deals with this episode was sometimes referred to eponymously as "Galeotto" (the Italian form of Gallehaut), some early commentators mistakenly assumed this was the title of the book the lovers were reading. *Dictionary of Proper Names*, 57.



CANTO VI

When I come to, after fainting
From the intense distress of hearing the story
Of two whom I now knew and felt close to,

I look around and see more torments
And more tormented; on all sides, I see nothing but,
Regardless of where I turn and look.

I'm in the third circle of Hell and under assault by rain—
Cold, heavy, odious, and always.
The continual downpour never varies.

Enormous hailstones, sewer water, and snow
Mix with the soaking rain and add more weight to it.
The ground reeks.

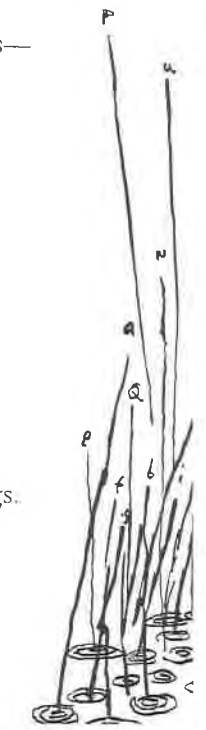
Savage and bestial Cerberus, three-headed freak,
Barks like a Doberman—through each of his three throats—
Over those who are forced to wallow in the slop.

Red eyes, filthy bilious whiskers, swollen belly;
With his claws, he excoriates the ghosts—
Then rips their skin off and quarters them.

The rain makes the poor unfortunates howl like dogs;
They continually turn from side to side,
Uselessly trying to protect themselves from the onslaught.

When Cerberus, that vicious creature, caught sight of us,
He opened his mouths, curled his lips, and showed his fangs.
Every muscle in his body rippled in response.

My teacher reached down several times
And grabbed huge fistfuls of mud and threw them
Into the creature's three ravenous gullets.



Just as any hungry canine will set up a racket until knick
Knack, paddy whack, it gets a doggie bone—then snaps it up
And settles down, totally absorbed, to gnaw it clean—

So Cerberus, his demonic faces contorted with chewing,
Quieted, which gave a few seconds of relief to the ghosts
Who were so undone by his barking they wished they were deaf.

We were walking on the ghosts who were stunned
By the deadening rain. Beneath our feet,
They were bodiless, yet seemed to have dimension.

All of them were lying flat in the muck
Except for one who sat up
As soon as he saw us pass in front of him.

"Excuse me," he said. "You, the one being led through
This Hellhole, do you recognize this face? You were made
Before I was dismantled; you might have seen me."

I said, "No, but maybe your face in pain has taken the place
Of any face I might have remembered.
I don't recognize the face I see right now.

But tell me, who are you that you've been sent here
To this pathetic place to suffer *this*? If there's anything more difficult
It can't be more disgusting."

He said, "The city where you now live and I once did—
In sunnier times—is so full of envy and petty resentment
That every pocket and purse overflows with it.

I used to be called Cartman, sometimes Little Piggy;
The fault that did me in was gluttony. As you can see,
Because of that, I've been ground down by this rain.

And I'm not alone in my misery:
All the others here are under the same sentence,
For the same offense." That was all he said.

I said, "Cartman, I sympathize so much
With your suffering, it makes me want to cry,
But tell me, if you know, what's going to happen

To the people of that divided city?
Are any there above corruption?
How did this rabid fractiousness ever come to be?"

He said, "After years of contentious bickering
There will be a savage battle. The party aligned
With the people will drive the others out for a term.

Then, through the power of one who refuses
To make his motives clear, the first party will fall
And the other will install itself.

The winners will smugly act as if they own the world
And impose a heavy burden on the people of the city.
The losers will mope and hang their heads in shame,

And wonder how it came to be this way.
There are two honest men, but they're not listened to.
Arrogance, greed, and envy—those are the three switches

That start these people's hearts." Then he fell silent.
I said, "You'd be doing me a favor if you'd go on talking
So I can make some sense of this.

Farinata and Tegghiaio, they were once honorable;
Jacopo Rusticucci, Arrigo, and Mosca—
I know they all intended to do good.

Do you know where they are and how they are doing?
Can you say? I'd love to know whether they're suffering
In Hell or being comforted in Heaven."

He said, "Their souls are among the worst. For each,
A different fault dragged him down, each to his own level.
Go down far enough, and you might find them.

Listen, when you go back up to the wonderful world,
Will you remember me to those I left behind?
I've nothing more to say, and no more answers."

Like someone exhausted yet trying hard to see, he squinted,
But no use. His eyes rolled back, his head drooped,
Then he slid down into the muck with the blind others.

Virgil said, "He won't wake again
Until an angel with a trumpet signals the adversarial Judge
Has arrived and the tribunal is about to begin.

At that point, each will find him- or herself in a dismal cell
In human form and human flesh,
Ears tuned to a decree that will last for eternity."

So, we picked our way—slow step by step—through
That filthy mixture of ghosts and gunk, and while we did,
We touched a little on the Second Coming.

Regarding that subject, I asked, "After the Final Judgment,
Will the torture increase, become somewhat less,
Or remain at the same level of intensity?"

He said, "Go back to your science. Remember
Aristotle and Aquinas. The closer a creature is to perfection,
The more it feels, both pleasure and pain.

This ruined crowd can't achieve authentic perfection
But they can expect to get closer to it than they are.
Which means more pain for the truly damned,

Less for the others." We followed the circular road,
Talking of much more than I'm repeating here. Then,
There where the road slopes down,

We met Plutus, humanity's great enemy.

NOTES TO CANTO VI

13–14. *Savage and bestial Cerberus, three-headed freak / Barks like a Doberman*: Cerberus is a hound from Greek mythology who is usually depicted with multiple heads (most often, three), a mane of snakes, and a snake's tail; he guards the gates of Hades and keeps the dead souls from leaving.

28–29. *knick / Knack, paddy whack*: "With a knick knack, paddy whack, give a dog a bone" is part of the refrain from the traditional children's counting song "This Old Man." Roud Folksong Index 3550.

52–53. *I used to be called Cartman, sometimes Little Piggy; / The fault that did me in was gluttony*: Dante assigns this character the name of Ciacco, an abbreviation for the name Giacomo—which, when it is used as a nickname, means "hog" or "glutton." Eric Theodore Cartman is a greedy, selfish character in the animated television show *South Park*, created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. In "The Succubus" episode (1999), the optometrist, Dr. Lott, refers to Cartman as "Little Piggy"; in the "Scott Tenorman Must Die" episode (2001), Cartman is forced to sing a song: "I'm a little piggy, here's my snout; Oink oink oink, oink oink oink."

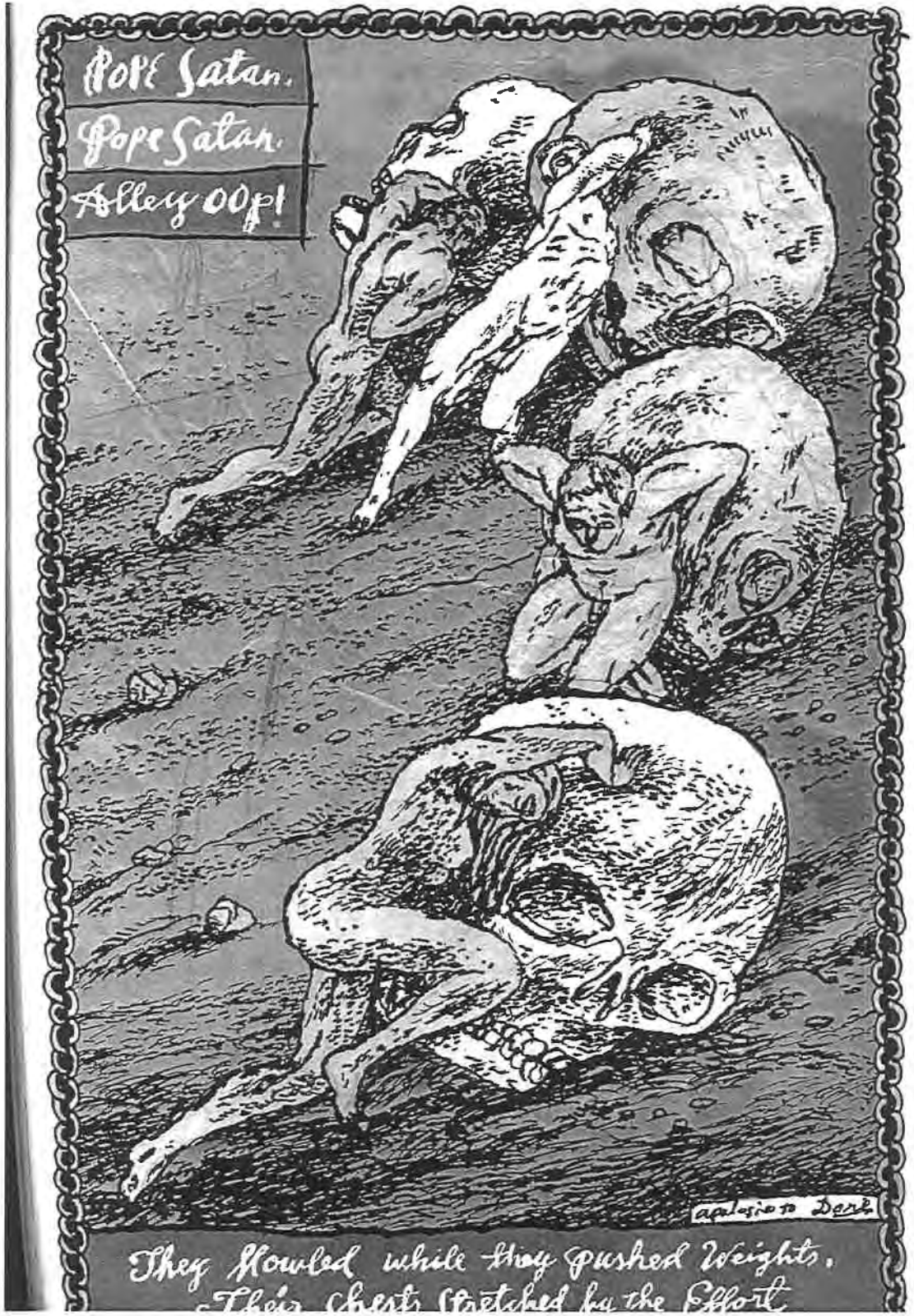
67–69. *Then, through the power of one who refuses / To make his motives clear, the first party will fall / And the other will install itself*: The "one who refuses to make his motives clear" refers to Pope Boniface VIII, about whom Boccaccio writes: "The Florentines use the word *piaggiare* for someone who pretends to desire something which he really does not desire at all, or which he does not want to see happen. Some people claim Pope Boniface did this in the conflict between the Whites and the Blacks of Florence; that is to say, that he deceptively displayed equal concern for both sides." Quoted in Singleton, *Inferno*, 2:102. The reader will hear more about Boniface later, in both Canto XV and Canto XIX.

79–80. *Farinata and Tegghiaio . . . Jacopo Rusticucci, Arrigo, and Mosca*: These men are all Florentines. Dante will encounter Farinata among the heretics in circle six (Canto X); Tegghiaio and Jacopo Rusticucci he'll meet in the seventh circle, where they are possibly being punished for sexual transgressions (Canto XVI); he'll find Mosca in the eighth circle with the schismatics (Canto XXVIII). Arrigo is never mentioned again, a fact that confuses commentators.

95–96. *Until an angel with a trumpet signals the adversarial Judge / Has arrived and the tribunal is about to begin*: According to Revelation 20:12–15, a final worldwide day of judgment by God will follow the Second Coming of Christ. Matthew 24:27–31 mentions that the event will be signaled by an angel's trumpet and 1 Corinthians 15:51–53 states that prior to the event, the dead will be resurrected. The Qur'an also predicts a final Day of Resurrection or Day of Judgment when God will assess all; belief in the event is one of the Six Articles of Faith of Islamic theology.

106–107. *Go back to your science. Remember / Aristotle and Aquinas*: Both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) treat metaphysics as a science. Virgil is using Aristotle to say that the reunited body and soul will be more perfect and more contemplative and therefore more aware of both its good and its sinful aspects. Thomas Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologica*, elaborates on this idea of perfection. Aquinas wrote several respected commentaries on Aristotle's work. See Singleton, *Inferno*, 2:106–107.

115. *We met Plutus, humanity's great enemy*: In Greek mythology Plutus was the god of wealth and a bountiful harvest. Pluto was the god of the underworld. In time, these two divinities both came to represent all types of wealth. Singleton quotes Benvenuto: "Because the earth gives birth to all the opulence of wealth, from which is born avarice, the author represents the universal vice of avarice in general through Pluto, the king of earthly and worldly riches" (2:110). Vernon points out that in Dante's conception of Hell, Plutus is an appropriate choice as entrance guard of the fourth circle, since it contains the avaricious and miserly; similarly, Cerberus was a perfect guard for the third circle, which houses the gluttonous (1:217). In Dante's Hell, Plutus answers to Satan.



Canto VII

"Pope Satan, Pope Satan, Alley Oop!"
Plutus spit this out in his raspy voice,
And Virgil, who knew everything,

Kindly tried to comfort me by saying, "Don't
Let your fear wear you down. Whatever power he has,
He can't keep us from going down this rock."

Then he turned and faced that puffed-up face,
And said, "Shut up, you wicked wolf,
Let your own bitter bile eat you from the inside out.

There's a reason we're making this descent.
Upstairs wants him to go down. Upstairs,
Where Michael reaped vengeance on Satan's rebellion."

As when a mast breaks and the wind-filled sails deflate
And slump in a tangled mass, so the malicious beast
Collapsed in a heap on the ground.

We made our way down to the fourth concavity
Along that sad-making embankment
That encases all the evil in the universe.

Oh divine justice, that heaps on all these drudgeries
And punishments that I witnessed,
Why do our sins so ruin us?

The way one wave rolling over Charybdis crashes
Against another, lashing the stars with spray,
So these people spring forward, then dance back.

I saw more sinners here than anywhere else;
On both sides of me, they howled while they pushed weights,
Their chests stretched by the effort.

They bashed into one another, and then immediately spun
Around, rolling their burdens back, shouting, "Why do *you*
Hang on to everything?" "Why do *you* throw everything away?"

It was always the same: the two opposing sides making
Their way across the dismal circle to reproach one another
Time and again with the same noisy taunts.

Afterward, each group returned, but only to repeat the drill
Until they met their match again at the halfway mark.
Watching this, I felt heartbroken

And said, "Teacher, please explain
Who these are. Were the ones on the left
With the tonsured hair all in the clergy?"

He said, "All of them had minds so glitter-struck
In their first lives they couldn't see
Their own unbridled overreaching.

Their shouts make this clear
When they arrive at the matching points on the circle
Where their sins divide them into two camps.

Those with the missing hair on top, the tonsured group,
Are priests and popes and cardinals.
They were mastered by their desires."

I said, "I can't imagine
I won't recognize a few of the nasty ones
Who have dirt on their hands."

He told me, "You'd think so—but you'd be wrong.
The undistinguished sordid lives they led
`!ake it impossible to distinguish them.

The two sides will forever collide—
They'll even rise up from the grave that way—
Those with tight fists, and those with cropped hair.

Hoarding and wasting kept them out of Heaven
And brought them to this barroom brawl;
I won't try to prettify it with words.

Now you can see, my foster son, the swift and most
Unkind cut Fortune makes when we commit so much
To getting rich and fighting our way up the ladder—

Because none of the riches beneath the moon, neither now
Nor before this moment, could give a second's rest
To even one of these broken souls."

I said, "Keep talking, won't you? This Fortune
Whom you mention, who is she
That she has the good of the world trapped in her grasp?"

"You creatures suffer from such ignorance—
You're so unaware!
Listen while I spoon-feed you some facts.

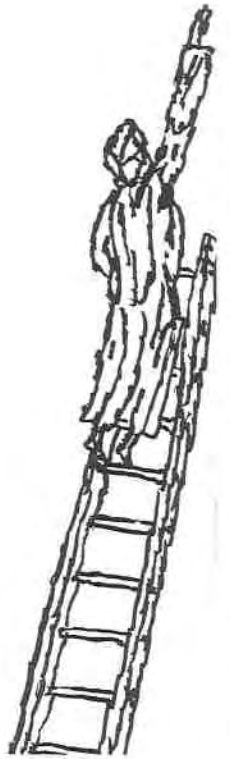
He whose wisdom exceeds all
Set the pale populace of Heaven in place,
Adding to that a set of managing parameters

So the sun and stars would shine down equally on all.
Similarly, for earthly dazzle, He appointed a general
Overseer who would, as time went on, transfer

All the pointless wealth from nation to nation,
From one family to another,
Beyond the interference of human hands.

While one prevails, another weakens
According to her verdict—the grounds of which
Stay hidden like a snake in the grass.

Your wisdom can't rival hers:
She foresees, judges, and rules her kingdom
Just as other deities do theirs.



No truce ever halts her endless revolutions;
Necessity insists she act fast,
Because men trade places quickly.

She's hated even by the ones
You'd think would like her, who should like her;
Even they blame her and insult her in public.

She's blessed with total deafness and stays happy
With the other primal creatures,
Spinning her wheel and enjoying her bliss.

Now we'd better go down farther, where it gets worse.
The few stars I imagined I saw have gone out.
We're not allowed to stay here."

We followed the arc to the other edge
Where below, water bubbles up and is drained off
By way of a gully eroded into the rock.

The water was dark, much darker than paths in the park,
A purplish black. We walked along the edge
Of the trench until we came to a strange sight:

This sad little stream ends
At the foot of the deep-charcoal slope
Where the water becomes the marsh of the Styx.

I was standing there staring
At a swamp full of naked people covered in mud,
All of whom looked as if they were furious.

Not only were they slapping one another, but they were also
Head-butting and kicking and bashing their chests together,
As well as biting off chunks of flesh with their teeth.

My teacher spoke to me, his stand-in son:
"What you're seeing are those who couldn't control
Their tempers. I want you to understand

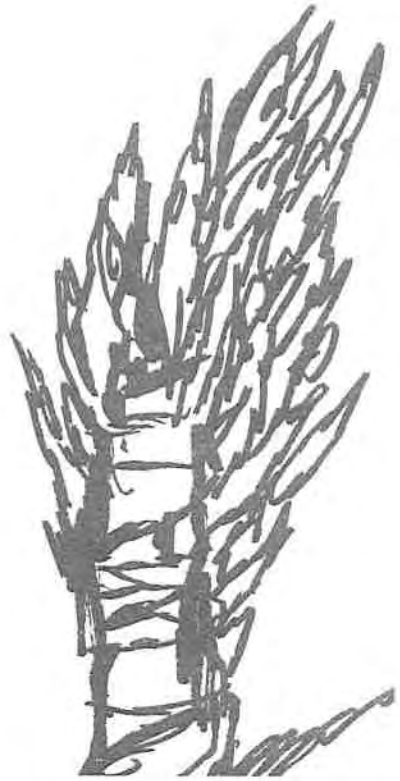
There are others under the water
Whose sighs bubble up to the surface,
As you can see by just looking around.

Bogged down as they are in the slime, they sing,
'We sulked in the sweet sunny air, on a pyre of discontent,
With our hair a mess and clouds in our bowels;

Now we sulk in this black sullen mire.'
This warbles out of their throats, since the mud
In their mouths doesn't allow them to enunciate."

We kept on, around the arc of the area, on the clean edge
Of the soggy part where marsh becomes pond,
Keeping our eyes on those with mud-filled mouths.

Finally we came to the foot of a tower.



1. *"Pope Satan, Pope Satan, Alley Oop!"*: Dante's original "'Pape Satàn, pape Satàn, aleppe!'" has been variously translated, but most commentators agree that it's a warning cry of some kind, probably an expression of Plutus's alarm that a living human has entered an area that is restricted to the dead (Vernon, *Readings*, 1:220–221). Plutus is "puffed up" (line 7) with the pride of wealth—the same pride that stretches the chests of those we'll meet later pushing stones around the circle. The French phrase *allez hop* is a combination of *allez*, meaning "let's go," with an onomatopoeic *hop* (the *h* is silent), to indicate a small jump. The phrase is used as a cue to French gymnasts and trapeze artists. It is also the source of the name of "Alley Oop," a syndicated newspaper comic first developed in 1932 by cartoonist V. T. Hamlin; the title character was a Stone Age traveling salesman from the kingdom of Moo who rode a dinosaur named Dinny.

22–23. *The way one wave rolling over Charybdis crashes / Against another, lashing the stars with spray*: In Greek mythology Charybdis was a sea monster that was positioned on one side of a narrow channel; on the other side was Scylla. She has a huge mouth and greedily gulps down the sea. The phrase "between a rock and a hard place" may have come from the Greek phrase "between Charybdis and Scylla." Virgil (*Aeneid* 3.420–423) describes the spot. Quoted in Singleton, *Inferno*, 2:22:

> Scylla guards the right side; Charybdis, insatiate, the left; and at the bottom
> of her seething chasm thrice she sucks the vast waves into the abyss, and again
> in turn casts them upwards, lashing the stars with spray.

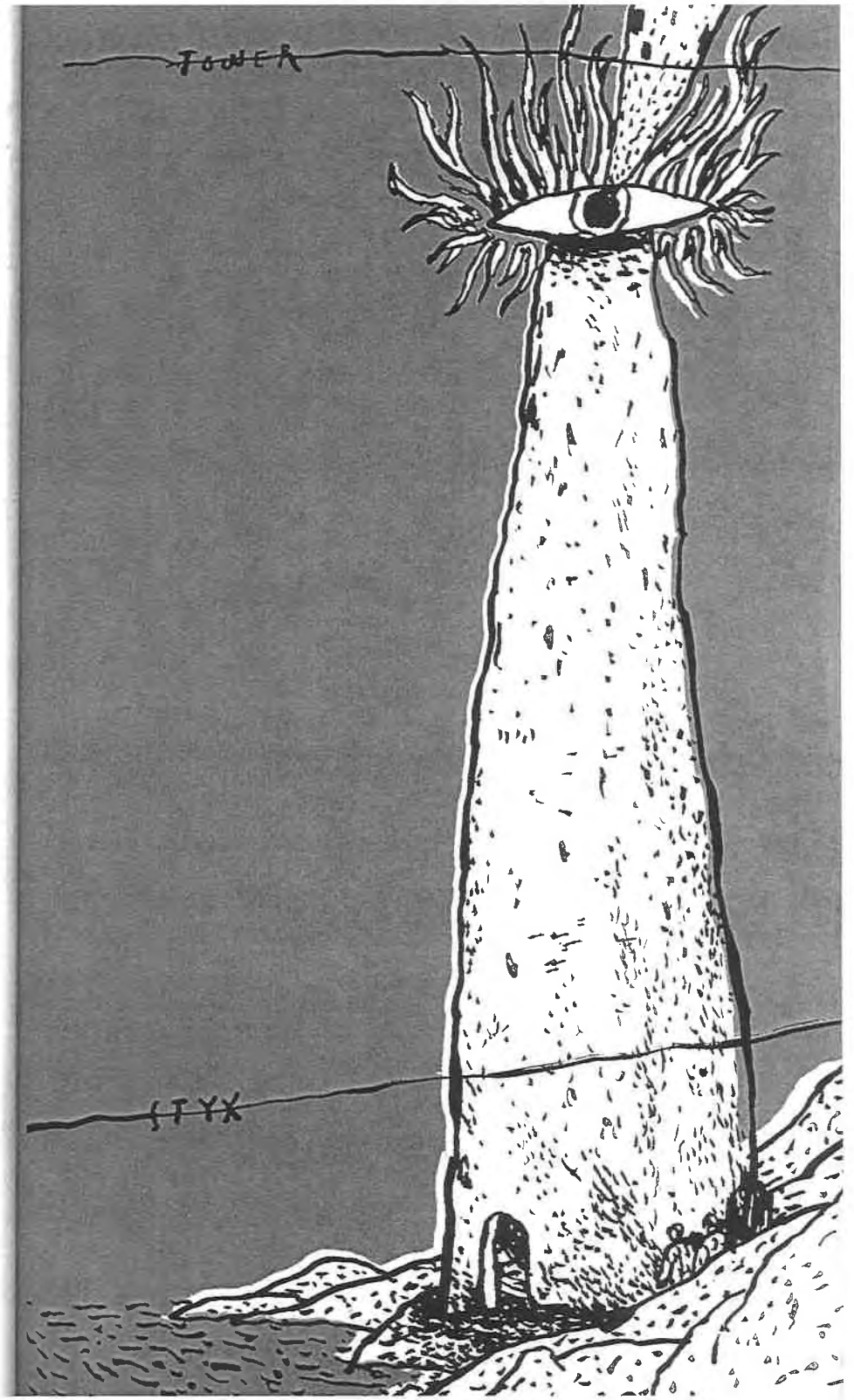
45. *Where their sins divide them into two camps*: The fourth circle is made up of the avaricious: those who are recklessly extravagant on one side, and those who are miserly on the other. Benvenuto argues that the line in the center is moderation, a condition neither side can tolerate for long; each time they reach the midline, they retreat again to their opposing start points and have another go at it. The misers hold on to everything, even what they shouldn't, whereas the prodigals spend lavishly. In both cases, they misuse their wealth. Vernon, *Readings*, 1:226–237.

74. *Set the pale populace of Heaven in place*: Robert Browning, "Balaustion's Adventure":

> 'So sang Euripides,' she said, 'so sang
> The meteoric poet of air and sea,
> Planets and the pale populace of heaven,
> The mind of man, and all that's made to soar!'

103. *The water was dark, much darker than paths in the park*: Alfred Corn, in *The Poem's Heartbeat* (35), uses the following as an example of anapestic trimeter:

> And the forests they roamed in the dark
> Were much darker than paths in the park.



Canto VIII

Picking up from where I left off, I should say
That long before we came to the foot of the high-rise
Watchtower we caught sight of something at the top:

Two klieg lights. A counter signal was being sent
To whoever was controlling them,
But from so far off we could barely make it out.

I turned to that vast ocean of knowing
And said, "What's this about? What's the other lamp
Signaling? And who's sending these midnight messages?"

He said, "If you look across the pond's dirty waves
You should be able to see what they've called over,
Unless the marsh gas is too thick."

An Ultimate Aero couldn't pass through air any faster
Than the little skiff
I suddenly caught sight of

Cutting through the water and coming at us.
It was manned by a single boatman who yelled,
"I've got you now, you cheating no-body."

"Phlegyas, Phlegyas, not this time,"
My guardian said. "You won't get either of us
Longer than it takes to cross this mud puddle."

Like someone galled
To find he's been the patsy
In a pyramid scheme, so Phlegyas fumed.

My teacher got into the skiff, then motioned me to get in.
Only when I was on board
Did the boat appear to carry weight.

As soon as we took our seats and settled in,
The worn prow took off, cutting a deeper wake
Than when it held the weightless others.

As we were fast-forwarding through the dead mill pond
A man surfaced from beneath the mud and said, "Who
Are *you*? And what brings you down here early?"

I said, "I might be here now but that doesn't mean
I'm staying. But you, why do you have to live in this filth?"
"You can see," he said, "I'm someone who's sad and crying."

I told him, "Yeah, keep it up; cry your eyes out.
It's what you deserve. I can see who you are,
You Hell-house ghost, even with your mud mask on."

At that, he reached out with both hands as if to grab the boat
And tip it over. Virgil, ever wary, pushed him off,
Saying, "Get back down with the other dogs."

He then threw an arm around my neck, gave me a peck
On the cheek and said, "Wow! What moral indignation!
Your mother was lucky to have a son like you.

When he was up in the world he was nothing
But pure arrogance. Less than zero good
Is attached to his memory, so now his ghost is enraged.

Earth is full of men and women who act like divas
But who'll later lie in this mire like swine;
They'll be known only as someone who's despised."

I said, "I'd like nothing better
Than to see him sucked under the slimy surface
Of this soup bowl before we get out of this boat."

He said, "You'll have your wish
Before we see the shore.
It's exactly the kind of wish that deserves to be fulfilled."

Minutes later, the mud-covered crowd took after him
To tear him limb from limb, and I still say thanks,
Good God, for letting me see it.

When they began to shout, "Get Filippo Argenti!"
The fractious Florentine turned on himself
And began to gnaw at his own flesh.

We left him there, and that's the end of the story.
It was then that the sound of sobbing struck my ears.
With eyes wide open, I strained to identify the source.

My teacher, pure goodness, said, "Now, *mon fils*,
The city just ahead is called Dis and it's filled
With a vast garrison of grim-faced citizens."

"I can already make out the domed shapes," I said,
"At the margin where the swamp ends and the suburbs begin,
Glowing like coals fresh from a campfire."

He said, "As you can see,
The neverending fire inside the city
Makes them look neon red in this nether-Hell."

We kept on until finally we reached the moats
That defended that Hotel California. The walls, high reaching
To the horrid roof, seemed made of molten iron.

We had to make a huge circle before we came to the place
Where the sullen boatman hollered back to us,
"Get out! This here's the entrance."

Gathered at the gates were some thousand or more angels
Who'd once fallen from Heaven like a hard rain.
The angry mob was shouting, "Who's this

Who's not dead but is cutting through this deadhead
Kingdom Come?" My savvy master made a gesture
That he'd like to talk to them in private.

At that, they quieted slightly, then said,
"Fine, but just you. Let the pompous brat who dared
Breach security go back by himself.

Let him try to retrace his idiot steps.
As if he ever could! You'll have to stay with us
For having brought him across in the dark."

Think about it—my doppelgänger-reader—
After hearing that, wouldn't you too have felt defeated
Like I did? I knew I couldn't find my way back.

"Look, teacher," I said, "countless times
You've restored my confidence
And rescued me from what seemed like certain ruin.

Please don't leave me this way. I can't survive.
If they refuse to let us go on,
Let's quickly go back the way we came."

The one who'd brought me this far looked at me
And said, "Don't worry. No one can say no
To the one who said we could make this trip.

Wait here for me. Your spirit's exhausted;
Tell it to have hope, that things will soon be better.
I'm not about to desert you here in the underworld."

So—there he goes, my gentle Freudian father figure,
And I'm abandoned; I sit and watch while Yes
And No (I will survive, I won't) wage war inside my head.

I couldn't catch a word of what he was saying
But he wasn't there long before the angels, shoving
And elbowing one another, scurried back inside the gates.

Then these, our adversaries, clanged shut the gates
In the face of my teacher, who was left standing outside.
He turned and walked slowly toward me.

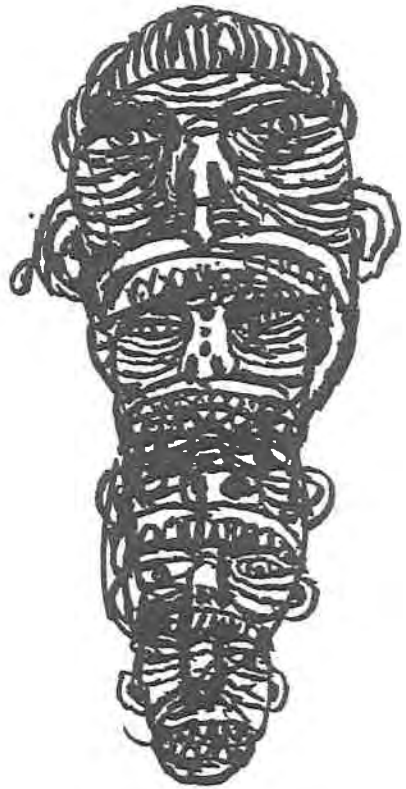
Keeping his eyes on the ground, and with a furrowed brow
That suggested a lack of confidence, he sighed and said,
"Who are they to say I can't enter this theater of grief?

But you mustn't be upset," he said,
"Just because I am. I'll prevail,
Whatever plot they're hatching to try to stop us.

Their hubris is nothing new.
They tried this trick long ago at a less hidden gate
And it's still standing open.

You saw the sign above it, the message to the dead.
Someone is already on his way here, coming down
The embankment, crossing the circles without an escort;

He'll open the city to us."



9. *who's sending these midnight messages?*: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Paul Revere's Ride" was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1861. The poem ends:

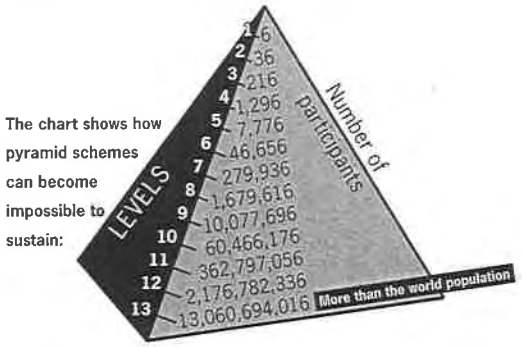
> For borne on the night-wind of the Past,
> Through all our history to the last,
> In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
> The people will waken and listen to hear
> The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
> And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

Longfellow's blank-verse translation of all three volumes of *The Divine Comedy* was first published in 1867; it was the first American translation of the poem.

13. *An Ultimate Aero couldn't pass through air any faster*: The SSC Ultimate Aero is one of the fastest production cars in the world. Its recorded top speed, verified by Guinness World Records, of 257.41 mph equals 377.53 fps (see the website of Shelby SuperCars). Arrows from some contemporary compound bows reach speeds of over 350 fps.

19. *Phlegyas*: In Greek mythology Phlegyas is the son of Ares and Chryse. In a fit of anger, after Apollo raped his daughter Coronis, he set fire to the temple of Apollo at Delphi. He was, in turn, killed by Apollo and sent to Tartarus, the netherworld region reserved for those who sin against the gods.

23–24. *To find he's been the patsy / In a pyramid scheme*: A pyramid scheme is a nonsustainable investment scheme in which the profits are shared among a few at the top layers, but with the same dividends falsely promised to large numbers of new investors.



The unsustainable exponential progression of a classic pyramid scheme (U.S. Government Security and Exchange Commission)

32–33. *A man surfaced from beneath the mud and said, "Who / Are you?"*: Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 61:

> The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice. "Who are *you*?" said the Caterpillar.
>
> This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

"Who Are You" is a song composed by Pete Townshend of the British hard rock band The Who. It was recorded in October 1977 and released in 1978, first as a single and then as the title track on The Who's 1978 *Who Are You*, the last album released before the death of drummer Keith Moon in September 1978. It is currently used as the theme song for the television series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*.

77. *Hotel California*: "Hotel California" is the title song of the 1976 album by the American rock band the Eagles; it was written by Don Felder, Don Henley, and Glenn Frey and released as a single on February 22, 1977. It is ranked 49th on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of "500 Greatest Songs of All Time." Lines in the song echo Minos's warning to Dante: "Don't be fooled by the fact that the door is always open" (Canto V, 20):

> "Relax," said the night man,
> "We are programmed to receive.
> You can check out any time you like,
> But you can never leave!"

77–78. *The walls, high reaching / To the horrid roof, seemed made of molten iron*: John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (2.643–647):

> . . . At last appear
> Hell-bounds, high reaching to the horrid roof,
> And thrice three-fold the gates; three folds were brass,
> Three iron, three of adamantine rock
> Impenetrable, impaled with circling fire,
> Yet unconsumed.

109. *So—there he goes, my gentle Freudian father figure*: Sigmund Freud created a structural model of the unconscious that contained three divisions: the id, the ego, and the superego (*das Über-Ich*—literally, the "upper-I" or "over-I"). According to Freud, men identify with their fathers (and father substitutes) as a means of resolving libidinal jealousies known as the Oedipus complex. The thoroughly integrated superego stands in for the father's authority and ensures the continuation of social order and morality. See Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id."

Canto IX

When my teacher saw that seeing him turn back
Had made my face turn a whiter shade of pale,
He quickly composed his own.

He stood attentive, like a man intently listening—
Since no one's eye can cut a path
Through that thick miasma of black air and dense fog.

"Surely we're meant to win this battle," he began,
"Unless . . . But we were offered help . . .
Look how long it's taking for someone to come!"

I could see how he was completely covering up
The initial words with what came after—
So different was each phrase, each from the other—

As a result, I was more afraid now,
Since I was making meaning out of silence:
What I invented might be worse than what he wasn't saying.

"Does anyone from the first circle,
Where the only penalty is the end of hope,
Ever climb down to this lower level of the awful hollow?"

This was what I asked.
"It's rare, he said, "that anyone from there
Undertakes the trip I'm making.

However, I was down here once before, possessed
And forced into service by the hardhearted sorceress
Erichtho, who liked to bring dead bodies back to life.

I hadn't been out of my flesh that long
When she made me go across the wall
To get her a spirit from the circle of Judas—

That's the lowest level and the darkest,
The farthest from the Heaven that forms a ring
Around us all. I know the way well, so don't worry.

This marsh with its overwhelming stench makes a beltway
Around the city of woe, the door of which we can't enter
For fear of causing an uproar."

He said other things as well but I can't remember what.
My eyes and mind were fixed
On the tall tower where, at its shining summit,

All of a sudden there rose up three
Hell-bent blood-streaked Furies. They stood erect
With the limbs and shape of women but

Their waists were cinched by the brightest green hydras
I'd ever seen. In place of hair, curls of small serpents
And horned vipers framed their terrible faces.

The one who was quite familiar with these servants
Of Pluto's wife, the queen of continuous crying, said to me,
"Take a look at this—it's the ferocious Erinyes!

That's Megaera, there on the left;
The one crying on the right is Alecto; Tisiphone
Is between the two." Then he was quiet.

They were clawing their breasts and screaming,
Then smacking themselves hard with their flattened hands.
Terrified, I pressed against the poet.

They shouted, "Bring Medusa down and we'll turn *this* one
Into a concrete block." They looked straight at me.
"We still rue the day we let Theseus go scot-free."

"Turn your back and keep your eyes shut.
If the Gorgon were to show her face and you even glimpsed it,
There'd be no returning to the world."

While he was still speaking, he turned me around;
Not trusting my hands alone, he took his own
And covered my face until I couldn't see.

(You readers, who are of sound mind and memory,
Pay attention to the lessons woven into the fabric
Of these strange poetic lines.)

And now the marsh rose up in muddy waves
Across which there came a crashing sound
That caused a tremor on both shores.

It sounded like a no-holds-barred El Niño
Where the cold tongue meets the warm
And sets in motion a violent aftermath

That can turn a forest into a shattered landscape
Of broken branches and dust driven forward,
And give rise to a rush of panicked animals and keepers.

He removed his hands and said, "Now take a good look
Across the primordial pond scum—
Over there, where the sulfur fumes are thickest."

Like frogs in the face of their foe (the snake)
Vanish en masse into the water, then
Each roots itself in shock on the bottom—

Just so, I saw more than a thousand ruined souls
Flee in front of someone who walked
Without wetting his shoes on the surface of the Styx.

He was brushing away the foul air from his face,
Feeling his way forward with his left hand;
He seemed to find the task extremely tiresome.

Clearly, he was a Heaven-sent messenger.
I turned to my teacher, who signaled to me
To be quiet and now bow.

How full of disdain he seemed to me to be.
He came to the gate and tapped a small wand—
Presto, it sprung open as if with a smart card.

"Rejects from Heaven, contemptible nobodies,"
He spoke from the horrible threshold, "why
Are you ingrained with arrogance?

Why kick against a will
That will never give up what it wants, and which has,
More than once, made your pain worse?

What good can come of butting against an ordained fate?
Your friend Cerberus, you'll recall, still has scars
Where a chain scraped hair and skin off his neck and chin."

Then he turned to retrace his steps through the filth
Without a word to us, like someone
Who's preoccupied with far more pressing matters

Than the concerns of those in front of him.
We walked toward the city,
Made brazen now by his angelic intervention.

We went in and no one tried to stop us.
Once inside, eager to see for myself
What conditions were inside the fortress,

I looked around here and there
And saw, spreading out from everywhere,
An endless plain of pain and torment.

At Arles, where the Rhône goes stagnant,
And at Pola, near the Gulf of Quarnero,
Which edges Italy and bathes its borders,

Stone coffins dot the field as far as the eye can see.
The same thing here, from one side to the other,
Except that here, their use was much more cruel;

Here and there between the tombs were flames
That made them glow red, head to toe.
They were hotter than metal fresh from the forge.

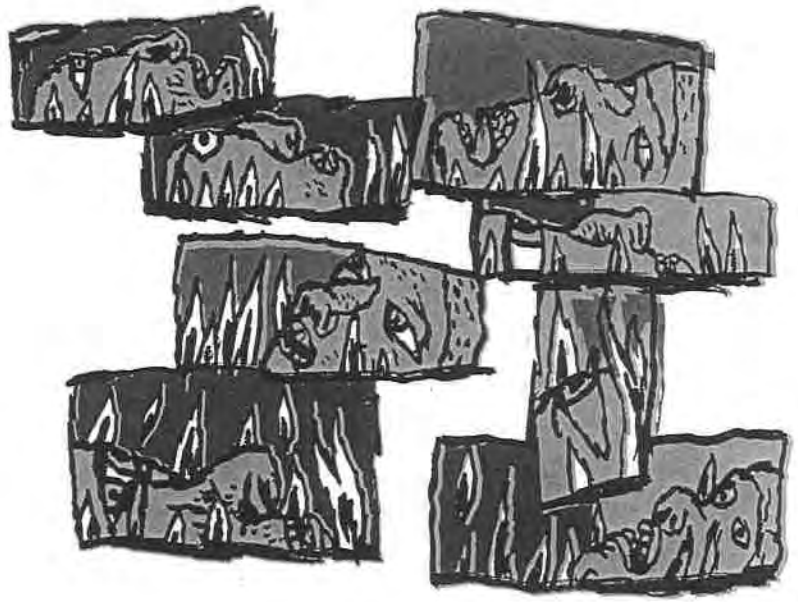
All the lids were tipped above the beds;
Such pathetic cries came from within—
It was obvious the sufferers were in deep distress.

"Who are these people," I asked,
"Buried in these boxes, and whose misery
Is obvious from their agonized groans?"

He said, "These are the arch-heretics
With the acolytes of every sect;
There are more disbelievers in these tombs than you would think.

They're grouped, like with like-minded, by belief;
The degree of heat in the monument matches the offense."
He then turned to the right so we could pass

Between the tombs of torment and the tall stone wall.



2. *a whiter shade of pale*: "A Whiter Shade of Pale," written by Gary Brooker, Matthew Fisher, and Keith Reid, was a 1967 single by the British rock band Procol Harum.

23–24. *the hardhearted sorceress / Erichtho*: The exact source for Dante's use of the sorceress who calls Virgil down to Hell is unknown. While in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Erichtho is a Thessalian witch who is employed to conjure the spirit of a dead soldier, and in the *Aeneid* (6.236–263), Virgil has the Sibyl tell Aeneas that she was shown the underworld by Hecate, Benvenuto says of Dante's story, "Ista est simpliciter fictio nova" ("This is simply a new fiction"). Quoted in Singleton, *Inferno*, 2:135.

45–48. *"Take a look at this—it's the ferocious Erinyes! // That's Megaera, there on the left; / The one crying on the right is Alecto; Tisiphone / Is between the two."*: In Greek mythology the Erinyes, also known as the Eumenides, were the daughters of Acheron and Nox ("night"). They were the personification of anger and punished all transgressors, both the living and the dead.

52–53. *"Bring Medusa down and we'll turn* this *one / Into a concrete block."*: Medusa is the youngest of three Gorgon sisters. According to Ovid, she was initially a beautiful girl; after she was raped by Poseidon in a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, the goddess transformed her into a monster with snakes for hair. Her face was so horrid that anyone who looked on her was turned to stone (Dante uses the word *smalto*, which means "cement"). Perseus succeeded in cutting off her head and using it as a weapon to turn his enemies to stone.

54. *"We still rue the day we let Theseus go scot-free."*: According to legend, Theseus descended into the underworld with his friend Pirithoüs in order to abduct Proserpina, Pluto's wife (the queen of Hell). He was imprisoned but later released through the efforts of Hercules. The term "scot-free" comes from Old English, meaning "free of tax." Its first known use is in 1528; it currently means "exempt from any injury, punishment, etc., safe, unharmed." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed.

67–69. *It sounded like a no-holds-barred El Niño / Where the cold tongue meets the warm / And sets in motion a violent aftermath*: El Niño ("the boy") is the warming phase of a periodic fluctuation of atmospheric pressure and ocean temperature in the tropical Pacific Ocean; the cold phase is called La Niña ("the girl"). Because this change is perceived in South America near the Christmas season, it is called El Niño after the Christ Child. The complete name of the phenomenon is El Niño–Southern Oscillation, sometimes abbreviated ENSO. The effects of the warming are widespread and include floods, droughts, and storms. Philander, *El Niño, La Niña, and the Southern Oscillation*, 1–4.

90. *it sprung open as if with a smart card*: Smart cards are pocket-sized cards imbedde with digital microprocessor components; the card can be interfaced with a reade connected to an electronic door for smooth hands-free opening.