

DANTE ALIGHIERI, THREE SPEECHES FROM THE DIVINE COMEDY

Translated below are three famous speeches from The Divine Comedy, one each from the Inferno, the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso. In the first, Dante encounters Odysseus, who suffers in the eighth circle of Hell, and relates how he arrived there. In the second passage, Dante's guide, the Roman poet Virgil, bids Dante goodbye after leading him through Hell and Purgatory; as a non-Christian, he can ascend no higher. The third speech consists of the hymn to the Virgin Mary that Dante here places in St. Bernard of Clairvaux's mouth as he begs her assistance in leading Dante to the great climax of the epic: the vision of God. All of the music of Dante's language is lost in translation, but here are my best efforts.

INFERNO 26.90-142

When I finally left Circe, who had held me, beguiled, for more than a year near Gaeta (before it was styled as such by Aeneas), neither love for my child nor pity for my father-then bent with age nor my love for Penelope-the source of her joy-could overcome my longing for another stage where I could experience the richness of life and learn all I could of a world that was rife with the vices and virtues of men.

That is why I set out for the open sea with only one ship and a small company of those by whom I never deserted would be. From one shore to the next, I went as far as Espana, and the land of Morocco, and the isle of Sardinia, and all the other islands that are bathed by the sea. I and my comrades had already grown old and slow when we finally reached the place where Hercules set up his guard of stone to block anyone from venturing beyond.

On our right was Seville; on our left was Ceuta, but I sailed on. "O brothers!" I shouted, "You have seen already many dangers, a hundred thousand of them, so you're no strangers to risk as you've come here, the far west. You must not now deny yourselves the challenge of going yet further west, and range beyond the sun, and explore the unpeopled world.

Remember your lineage, the seed that gave you birth! You were not made to live here on Earth like brutes. You must pursue knowledge and true worth!" I so inspired my comrades with this little speech to continue our journey; they pushed forward with a screech, and it took all my strength to hold them back within reach.

So, turning our ship, with the stem towards morning, we pulled on our oars; it was as though they were wings, and we flew, always somewhat to the left inclining. In the sky at night, I beheld the strange stars of the South Pole. The familiar stars, the ones that were ours, had fallen from the sky and lay below the horizon.

Five times did the light from the moon come down, brighten, and fail after we had left the familiar ground and bound to that hard passage, we ourselves had bound, when suddenly a mountain, distant and dark, rose before us, high over our bark—the highest mountain I'd ever seen, grim and stark.

We were glad at first, but our joy turned to sorrow when a fierce whirlwind blew from that place, hammering at our ship and crushing the prow. Three times, the whirlwind whipped us around, and then a fourth time, the cyclone wound and flipped us, stem skyward, our prow pointing down. And as though Someone desired it, the ship sank, and we drowned.

PURGATOR/0 27.115-142

"Today your hungering will be put to peaceful rest through the sweet fruit that all mortals seek among life's branches." Thus did Virgil speak, and to his solemn words, nothing ever spoken to me before could compare to the delight they offered.

Urge upon the urge to climb ever higher came upon me, and with every new step, I felt the strength of wings lifting me up. When the whole staircase lay beneath us and we stood at last on the highest step; Virgil fixed his eyes on me and said: "My son, you have now seen the passing and the eternal fires and have reached the place beyond which I cannot go.

I have brought you to this point through wit and art, but now let joyfulness be your guide. You have passed steeps and narrows. Now, the other side!

Behold the sun that shines upon your brow! See there! Grasses, flowers, and shrubs that the Earth produces all on its own. You can rest here now or stroll a while until you behold the glad and lovely eyes that once, full of tears, sent me to your side. Expect no other word or signal from me. Your will is now strong and healthy and free; to act against it would be a mistake. I crown and miter you, lord of yourself."

PARADISO 33,1-21

Oh Virgin Mother, daughter of your own son, most humble and exalted of all creatures, fixed goal of all in God's eternal plan, it was you who so ennobled human nature so greatly that He Who created us did not disdain to make Himself man, one with His creation. Within your womb was rekindled the love that provided the warmth needed for this flower to come to bloom within this everlasting peace. For all here in Paradise, you are the noon-time torch of charity-and down on earth, for mortal men, you are the living spring of hope.

Lady, you are so great and so powerful that anyone who seeks grace without turning to you is like one wishing to fly without wings. Not only does your loving kindness race to anyone who asks for it, but it often flows freely even before the asking.

In you is compassion, in you is pity, and in you generosity- in you is brought together everything that is good in creation. Here is a man who, from the lowest depth of the universe up to this high place has witnessed, one by one, the lives of souls. He begs you to grant him through your grace the power to lift his vision higher still and witness the goal of salvation. And I, who never burned for my own vision more than I burn for his, offer you all my prayers and I pray they are enough you, through your own prayers, may disperse the cloud of his mortality, that he might have the Sum of All Joy revealed to his eyes.

I pray you also, O Queen, who can achieve whatever you wish, keep his affections sound once he has had his vision and returns. May you protect him from the stirrings of the flesh. Behold! -Beatrice, with all the saints, clasp their hands in prayer to win your assent!"

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What vision of the cosmos is conveyed by these three speeches?
2. Why is Odysseus condemned to the inferno? What does Virgil represent? Why can he not ascend any higher than Purgatory? How is Bernard of Clairvaux's hymn to the Virgin representative of the cult of Mary?