

Dante's *Divine Comedy* 1



USA and USSR 1965
mark 700 years of
Dante

Inferno: Canto I

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!

Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai,
dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.

Io non so ben ridir com'i' v'intrai,
tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai.

Inferno: Canto I

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

So bitter is it, death is little more;
But of the good to treat, which there I found,
Speak will I of the other things I saw there.

I cannot well repeat how there I entered,
So full was I of slumber at the moment
In which I had abandoned the true way.



Left the opening
verses as translated
by H.W.Longfellow
(1807-82) seen here
on USA 1940 and
Bulgaria 1957.

The opening verses of the
Divine Comedy (printed
above) as they appear in
three famous editions are
illustrated on Italy 1972



The popular
American poet
produced a 3-volume
edition of Dante's
work (1865-7).

The Divine Comedy was written by Florentine poet Dante Alighieri (1265 –1321) as his *magnum opus* in the last fifteen years of his life and is regarded 700+ years later as “one of the towering imaginative achievements of the Middle Ages”.*

The inspiration for the poem was Dante's exalted and frustrated love of the late Beatrice (Portinari) and the stimulus to begin it his permanent exile from Florence for political reasons. In the poem Dante sees himself on a quest to find spiritual fulfilment, increasingly aware of his mortality. To do this he must descend into Hell (Inferno) before rising through Purgatory to Paradise. In the detail of the poem he provides for us an understanding of the medieval concept of these states which many people then believed to be as physically real as today we would understand that, for example, Australia or Antarctica are, though we had not been there. In taking on that journey in an immense intellectual *tour de force* Dante alludes to several hundred famous (as well as now obscure and long forgotten) historical and mythical figures whom his persona encounters and comments upon, often cuttingly.

At the start of the poem Dante confesses he has lost his way—he cannot find his true course (*diritta via*) - and is extremely troubled and confused.

Before Dante, as he stands in a dark wood, suggesting he walk towards it is a mountain bathed in sunlight but his way is barred by three fierce animals—a leopard, a lion and a wolf (*as seen on Vatican 1965*). As he seeks immediate escape from these perils he meets a wise old man who introduces himself as the famous Roman poet Virgil, writer of the *Aeneid* and *Georgics*, who (sent by Beatrice as it transpires) will be the first of Dante's three guardians or helpmeets on his perilous journey.

(The poem is heavily influenced by the sacred number three, for example each stanza having three verses in it, and each of the three parts having 33 cantos (+ a prologue)).

Virgil explains to Dante that he must seek a new direction, trying to escape from the monster of his ego and that to ascend he first must go down—into a miasma of horror—and witness the manifold chambers of Hell.



* Christopher Booker in *The Seven Basic Plots* (page 628)

Dante and Virgil first pass by a group of souls of the feckless and self-interested “Uncommitted” who slouch around the shores of the River Acheron being forever pestered by stinging and biting insects. This group includes Pontius Pilate, (seen here on Russia 2000).



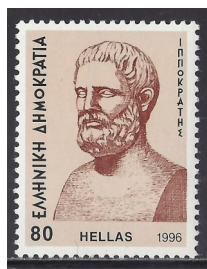
The pair now draw near the portal to Hell associated for ever with the words “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here”, as seen on Italy 1965 left and approach the landing stage where Charon the ferryman will take them across the river to Hell proper.

The drama of Charon’s approach is wonderfully portrayed in a woodcut by the French artist Gustav Doré (1832-83) whose work is seen as the definitive artistic portrayal of the main scenes in the *Commedia* and is employed here on San Marino 1965.



Virgil explains that there are three parts, in a series of nine concentric circles, to the descent into Hell with the sinners on each descending level being of a more wicked nature than the ones above and on every level the punishment is seen to fit the crime. Each of these three parts is defended by the wild beasts Dante encountered earlier with the Leopard associated with self-indulgence and arrogance, the Lion — violence and the Wolf maliciousness and fraud.

In the **First Circle** (Limbo) Dante sees many deniers of Christ, who are nevertheless quite virtuous—the atheistic or ignorant pagans, now literally stranded and hopeless. Here there are green fields and a castle of the seven virtues where live the wisest men of the past, albeit unbaptized. These include Persian scholar Avicenna (*E. Germany* 1952), Roman poet Horace (*Italy* 1993) and the first doctor Hippocrates (*Greece* 1996) amongst a host of famous others.



The **Second Circle** contains those dead souls who were consumed by lust and became victims of their carnal desires, the first true victims of Hell—no green fields and castles for these sinners, amongst whom Dante sees Achilles (*Greece* 1983),

Cleopatra (Mali 1994) and Tristan (Germany 1933).



Upper Hell

The Leopard of Arrogance (*Monaco* 1965) presides over Circles 1-5 (Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed and Anger)



When Dante and Virgil descend to the **Third Circle** they encounter the blind and obese Gluttons lying in foul frozen slush, eternally provided by incessant icy rain. They are attended by a former adversary of Heracles—Cerberus, the vicious three-headed dog, seen on Monaco 1968



The **Fourth Circle** is for the Greedy, which according to Dante (who seems to be enjoying settling scores) includes “clergymen, popes and cardinals” and the



Fifth is for the Wrathful, who as portrayed on Monaco 1965 struggle and dispute with each other without rest in the water of the River Styx, a tributary of Acheron.

Lower Hell—in which active (as opposed to passive) sinners are punished— now approaches, all within the City of Dis, which is guarded by fallen angels and surrounded by the Stygian marsh.

In the **Sixth Circle** lie the Heretics, commentary upon whom affords Dante a few more opportunities for political point scoring. And then there is a very steep descent in order to cross to the **Seventh Circle** which incarcerates the Violent and whose three rings are guarded by the Minotaur (*Greece* 2009).





Dante pauses
before crossing to
the Seventh Circle

(Monaco 1965)

In the outer ring of the seventh circle lie those who have assaulted others and damaged property. Amongst others here, Dante observes Alexander the Great, *seen on Great Britain 2003*. The centaur Nessus (*Greece 1970 below left*) guides the poets on their way.



Any of these sinners who try to escape are shot at with arrows by patrolling centaurs. (*France Air 1946*). In the middle ring are those who were violent to themselves—

suicides metamorphosed into thorn bearing foliage, a figurative image for the mental torment of those who kill themselves.

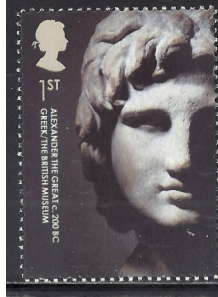
Within the inner ring Dante encounters the blasphemers, usurers and sodomites existing in a fiery desert with ash continuously falling from the skies.

The last two circles, accessed by descending a further steep cliff face are for those who committed fraud or betrayed someone. Dante and Virgil make this journey on the back of the winged monster Geryon, who is fraud incarnate. Geryon



is also a former adversary of Heracles and shown here on Monaco 1985, though Gustav Dore's representation of the monster is different, showing the monster to have a kindly human face but with a sting in the tail, *as above right*.

Within this circle are ten stone ducts or *bolgie* crossed by small bridges and these separate different classes of fraudsters, such as seducers, flatterers, committers of simony (giving bribes for religious office), false prophets, corrupt politicians, hypocrites, thieves, fraudulent advisers, (including Ulysses for his deception via the Trojan Horse and for pretending to love Circe), and sowers of discord, whose bodies are torn apart, heal and are torn again in perpetual process. This group includes Mohammed, the founder of



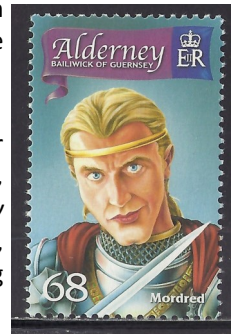
Islam, which Dante sees as an offshoot of Christianity. (No images of Mohammed on stamps, of course !!!!). In the tenth *bolgia*, Dante sees a variety of cheats like alchemists and counterfeiters.



The giants Typhon (fighting Zeus, left) and Antaeus (wrestling with Heracles) are shown on Greece 1973 and 1970

The **Ninth Circle of Hell** is surrounded by giants from mythology, including Nimrod, Typhon and Antaeus who finally lowers Dante into the lowest pit of Hell.

Within the lowest pit of Hell are four rings of traitors suffering in an icy lake, including Cain, Mordred (*Alderney 2006, right*) and Judas Iscariot, betrayers respectively of Abel, King Arthur and Jesus Christ.



At the very centre of Hell of course lies Satan, who as Lucifer betrayed God. He has three faces, red, black and yellow and in each terrible mouth he chews away at the worst traitors of all, according to Dante—Brutus, Cassius and Judas—a perverse trinity.



Winged Satan lies waist deep in ice, for ever weeping and trying to raise himself to escape, as portrayed quite awesomely in Dore's woodcut above.

The poets climb down Satan's body and as they progress they discover to their amazement that they are beginning to climb upwards towards the second phase of the journey — Purgatory, wherein are to be found those who have sinned but who before death prayed for forgiveness

Dante's *Divine Comedy* 2

Purgatorio

In the second part of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante is guided by Virgil most of the way up the Mount of Purgatory which lies in the sea at exactly the opposite point of the globe from which he had begun to climb into Hell. This mountain contains a number of ascending terraces on each of which a different sin is exemplified again with some still well-known but many now obscure references to malefactors. As well as providing examples of sin and sinners each level shows aspects of the opposite virtue, so we learn about pride *and* humility, anger *and* peace, lust *and* chastity and so on.



Dante and Virgil leave Hell and its rivers behind : Vatican 1965

As he begins to describe his journey to the penitent Christian summit in Canto 1, Dante invokes the Muses (seen here on Czech Republic 2001) for inspiration.



Standing in the water which laps at the base of the mountain the poets meet excommunicated persons and late repentants, who will be permitted to rise but have to qualify by remaining at the base for as long as they lived on earth. They learn from

a troubadour called Sordello that progress up the mountain is possible only in daylight, meaning allegorically only in the presence of sunlight (or God), so Dante sleeps and when he awakens he realises that he has been carried by an angel to the gates of Purgatory (San Marino 1965). This passage of unconsciousness parallels what had happened to the poet when moved into Hell as



he had fainted when taken on board Charon's boat to cross the Acheron.

At the gates an angel inscribes the letter P (for *peccatum*, the Latin for "Sin") on Dante's forehead and as he progresses up the terraces and comprehends each of the Seven Deadly Sins one of these "P"s is erased as evidence of his learning. Using two keys (silver for remorse and gold for reconciliation) to open the gates, an angel ushers the poets into the next stage of the journey. These Keys of Heaven given to St Peter by Christ form the coat of Arms of the Vatican City (as seen on this 1958 issue).



Souls on each terrace of Purgatory may depart having expunged that sin only when they have freed themselves from the perverted form of love that caused that sinful action within themselves originally, by fully acknowledging both sides of it—the vice and the corresponding virtue.

On the **First Terrace** Dante learns about Pride, with Humility exemplified firstly by a statue devoted to the gracious acceptance by The Virgin Mary of her astonishing honour, conveyed to her by the Angel Gabriel in The Annunciation, a particularly strong philatelic topic because of the large number of Christmas stamps issued internationally. (The example here

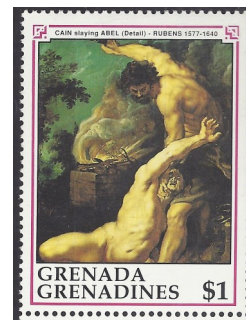


is from San Marino in 2005).

Other statues showing Pride include those of Lucifer and of the building of the Tower of Babel, (shown on Belgium 1982) built by the people of Babylon to glory man not God.



The **Second Terrace** deals with Envy (and Generosity). All terraces feature a statute showing an episode from the life of the Virgin Mary and this one features her joy at The Wedding at Cana, (seen here on Vatican 1998) which encouraged Christ to perform his first miracle. A second Bible allusion to generosity is Christ's invocation in the Sermon on the Mount to "Love your enemies" (Vatican 2001 below right).



A Biblical example of envy is that of Cain which led him to slay his own brother Abel, as shown on Grenada Grenadines 1991.

The **Third Terrace** deals with the sin of Anger and also treats Meekness. The Virgin Mary is shown discovering but not scolding the twelve year old child Jesus in The Temple, amongst the Doctors, (as seen on Vatican 1995) after he had been missing for three days.





Haman, who set out to kill all the Jews in Persia and was foiled by Esther represents Anger. *On Israel 1976* Haman is shown leading away the horse belonging to Mordecai who he intends to kill because he refused to bow before him. Haman's wickedness was foiled by Queen Esther.

Before progressing further Virgil explains to Dante that all sin is born out of love: the first three cornices in Purgatory have shown perverted love when promoted negative feelings and now examples of negligent or misguided love are to be explained.

The **Fourth Terrace** is inhabited by the Slothful. Whilst alive such individuals did little, so now in Purgatory they are for ever on the go. Examples of Zeal, as the counter to their sin are displayed such as the Virgin Mary going in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth and the admirable and energetic actions of military commanders like Aeneas and Julius Caesar.



Above left Aeneas lands in Italy to pursue his destiny (*Eritrea 1930*) and right Caesar Crosses the Rubicon in a definitive moment of his career in 49 BC (*Belgium 1967*).



The top three terraces are inhabited by those who sinned through loving things too much. On the **Fifth Terrace** the Covetous lie prostrated and paralysed face down on the ground. Dante encounters Pope Adrian V who desired power and prestige excessively and French nobleman Hugh the Great who sought material possessions beyond all things and whose successors were particularly avaricious. Acceptance as the connected virtue is represented by the birth of Christ the King in the most humble of circumstances. (*Nativity scene on W. Germany 1986*).



Dante and Virgil are then joined by a new companion the Roman poet Statius who is about to leave the circle having done his time and who as a Christian (Virgil was not) will be able to explain the remainder of Purgatory to Dante.

Gluttons, indulgent in food, drink and comfort inhabit the **Sixth Terrace**, where they are forever deprived of a cornucopia of food just out of reach. Examples of the opposite virtue of temperance are the Virgin Mary sharing her gifts at the Wedding in Cana and of John the Baptist who as described in Chapter 3 of the Gospel according to St Matthew lived only on locusts and honey. John is seen in a painting by



John the Baptist baptises Christ on Vatican City 2001

Perugino of the Baptism of Christ on Vatican City 2001 above.

Entrance to the **Seventh Terrace** where live the Lustful is via a huge wall of flame, which Dante, Virgil and Statius approach in awe, as seen on *Italy 1965*. Through this flame souls



repenting of an excess of sexual desire pass declaiming the sins of those, for example, who lived and lusted in Sodom and Gomorrah and of Pasiphaë who was guilty of bestiality with a bull. The obverse of these sins is captured in a portrait of the devout and chaste Virgin Mary.



Dante agrees to pass through the flames when reminded by Virgil that his love Beatrice can be found in the Earthly Paradise beyond it. *Paraguay 1966* depicts the first meeting of Dante and Beatrice on the banks of the River Arno. But first Dante must sleep and when he does he dreams of symbols of contemplative Christian lives like Rachel and Leah in the Bible.



When he awakes Dante moves towards **The Earthly Paradise**—the Garden of Eden, as



shown here on *Vatican 1994*. This Paradise represents that state of innocence before Adam and Eve fell from grace through eating the Forbidden Fruit. Dante now meets Matilda who will prepare him for his reconciliation with Beatrice, to whom he has dedicated his poetry and who symbolises his path to God. Before Matilda and Dante now pass a glorious pageant of symbols of Goodness in the Bible including a chariot, pulled by a griffin (*shown on Poland 1919*) an especially wonderful and powerful creature, and symbol of divine power— in which sits the beloved Beatrice.



Virgil now drops back, leaving the rest of Dante's purging in the hands of Beatrice.

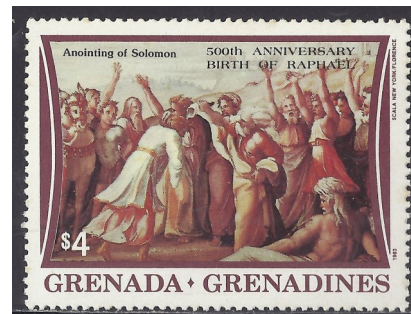
Dante passes through the river Lethe and has memories of sins he has committed erased from his memory. Before beginning his third journey which will now take him to Heaven, to be described in the Paradiso, Dante drinks from the river Eunoë which restores his good memories.

Paradiso

The part of the allegory which is *The Divine Comedy* tells of Dante's journey through Heaven with his beloved Beatrice now pointing him to the right way (shown on Vatican 1965). Paradise is portrayed as a series of concentric spheres with the Earth at its centre and the then known celestial bodies orbiting it: this is of course sympathetic to the geocentric view of the universe which held until challenged by Copernicus and Galileo three hundred and more years later. Dante's journey after speaking with a series of blessed souls will end at the abode of God, the Empyrean.



intellectual giants such as Thomas Aquinas (Italy 1974) and Albertus Magnus (W. Germany 1980) and Solomon (Grenada Grenadines 1983) who dance around Dante and Beatrice as twelve sparkling lights.



The **Fifth Sphere** is for Mars: Warriors of the Faith or those who gave their lives for God. Millions of sparks of light are reflected on the surface of the planet, each one a life sacrificed for his Maker.



Warriors of the Faith seen by Dante include Joshua (Israel 1982), Judas Maccabeus (Israel 1961) and Charlemagne (France 1966).



In the **Sixth Sphere**, which belongs to Jupiter: The Just Rulers, whose names spell out in Latin "Love Justice, ye that judge the earth" Dante notes King David (Israel 1969, left) and the Roman Emperor Trajan, a Christian convert (on Argentina 1961).



The **Seventh Sphere** is devoted to Saturn: the Contemplative (GB 1999). Here Dante meets Peter Damian, cardinal to Pope Gregory VII and discusses some important religious issues with him.

The **First Sphere** is that of the Inconstant Moon—"inconstant" because of its waxing and waning and therefore associated with souls who abandoned their vows or their pacts with God and examples of those have done this are given. So doing is pardonable only if honouring the vow creates a greater evil.



The **Second Sphere** is devoted to Mercury the "ambitious" (Albania 1964) a difficult planet to see because of its closeness to the Sun, and so representing those souls who have done good only out of a desire for fame and whose glory pales beside that of the Sun. Dante meets the Emperor Justinian (shown on 2006 Kosovo stamp) who gives him an account of the glories of the Roman Empire, comparing it with the then degraded state of Italy.



The **Third Sphere** is for Venus: The Lovers, but those who were intemperate in their passion.



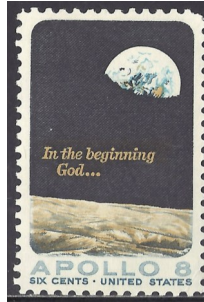
The Sun (the Wise) owns the **Fourth Sphere** within whose ambit Dante meets some of the greatest examples of prudence the earth has yet known—



As these considerations progress Beatrice who is a symbol of theology becomes exceedingly beautiful, reflecting Dante's growing proximity to a full understanding of God.



The **Eighth Sphere** is for the Fixed Stars: Faith Hope and Love. (Canada 2009) In Dante's time astronomers and astrologers saw the stars above as all equidistant from Earth forming an immutable canopy, a dome over the planet which was the centre of everything in the Universe. This is the sphere of the Church Triumphant and from here Dante looks back on the seven spheres he has traversed and down to the Earth (USA 1969).



He sees the Virgin Mary surrounded by all the Saints (*San Marino 1965*) and is tested by St Peter (*on France 1963*) on the nature of faith and if Dante truly now possesses it which he is able to show he does. Other questions follow from St James and St John on hope and on love, respectively.



The **Ninth Sphere** is "The Primum Mobile : The Angels" under control of God and it governs the movement of all the other concentric spheres, indeed everything in the universe. God is seen as a bright light surrounded by nine rings of his angels. Beatrice explains how the universe came to be and roles played by the angels in its governance.



Finally, Dante moves beyond physical existence to a state called **The Empyrean** and being himself enveloped in light he is able to see God. Beatrice (theology) becomes the essence of beauty and goodness.

Dante sees a huge rose representing the Love of God and in its petals sit the souls of the faithful, all of whom he has met in his journey of which this is the climax. Angels fly in and out of these petals pollinating them with peace and love. St Bernard (*as on Monaco 1965*) a mystical contemplative takes over the explanations from Beatrice and explains the doctrine of Predestination.



St Bernard provides exegesis for Dante and Beatrice

Bernard prays to the Virgin (Belgium 1967) on behalf of Dante and after his long quest he is finally admitted to the presence and love of God who appears as a trinity of circles.



Within the circles Dante sees Christ as a man and he tries to understand the complexity of the Trinity but admits it is quite beyond him.



Then miraculously he does understand and his soul becomes filled with the Love of God.



The Divine Comedy ??

You have probably asked yourself by now, why "comedy", as there are not many laughs in this story. I consulted Christopher Booker, who responded thus...

I suspect Dante's underlying inspiration was the idea that the comedy plot in its deepest sense centres on a story which comes to a happy, life-affirming ending in which everyone is gathered together in a state of love and reconciliation. Dante would have been familiar with the classical idea of comedy, as described by Aristotle, and as opposed to tragedy, which shows its central figure stepping over the bounds and plunging to death,

In that sense La Divina Commedia is arguably the most profound 'comedy' ever written.