



Inferno (Modern Library Classics)

By Dante

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An extraordinary new verse translation of Dante's masterpiece, by poet, scholar, and lauded translator Anthony Esolen

Of the great poets, Dante is one of the most elusive and therefore one of the most difficult to adequately render into English verse. In the *Inferno*, Dante not only judges sin but strives to understand it so that the reader can as well. With this major new translation, Anthony Esolen has succeeded brilliantly in marrying sense with sound, poetry with meaning, capturing both the poem's line-by-line vigor and its allegorically and philosophically exacting structure, yielding an *Inferno* that will be as popular with general readers as with teachers and students. For, as Dante insists, without a trace of sentimentality or intellectual compromise, even Hell is a work of divine art.

Esolen also provides a critical Introduction and endnotes, plus appendices containing Dante's most important sources—from Virgil to Saint Thomas Aquinas and other Catholic theologians—that deftly illuminate the religious universe the poet inhabited.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Dante’s conversations with his mentor Virgil and the doomed shades are by turns assertive and abashed, irritated and pitying and inquisitive, and Anthony Esolen’s new translation renders them so sensitively that they seem to take place in the same room with us. It follows Dante through all his spectacular range, commanding where he is commanding, wrestling, as he does, with the density and darkness in language and in the soul. This *Inferno* gives us Dante’s vivid drama and his verbal inventiveness. It is living writing.”

—**James Richardson**, Princeton University

“Professor Esolen’s translation of Dante’s *Inferno* is the best one I have seen, for two reasons. His decision to use unrhymed blank verse allows him to come nearly as close to the meaning of the original as any prose reading could do, and allows him also to avoid the harrowing sacrifices that the demand for rhyme imposes on any translator. And his endnotes and other additions provoke answers to almost any question that could arise about the work.” —**A. Kent Hieatt**, professor emeritus, University of Western Ontario

“Esolen’s brilliant translation captures the power and the spirit of a poem that does not easily give up its secrets. The notes and appendices provide exactly the kind of help that most readers will need.” —**Robert Royal**, president, Faith and Reason Institute

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

The Modern Library has played a significant role in American cultural life for the better part of a century. The series was founded in 1917 by the publishers Boni and Liveright and eight years later acquired by Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer. It provided the foundation for their next publishing venture, Random House. The Modern Library has been a staple of the American book trade, providing readers with affordable hardbound editions of important works of literature and thought. For the Modern Library’s seventy-fifth anniversary, Random House redesigned the series, restoring as its emblem the running torch-bearer created by Lucian Bernhard in 1925 and refurbishing jackets, bindings, and type, as well as inaugurating a new program of selecting titles. The Modern Library continues to provide the world’s best books, at the best prices.

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Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,

che la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura⁴

esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte

che nel pensier rinova la paura!

Tant' è amara che poco è più morte;7

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,10

tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto

che la verace via abbandonai.

Ma poi ch'i' fui al piè d'un colle giunto,13

là dove terminava quella valle

che m'avea di paura il cor compunto,

guardai in alto e vidi le sue spalle16

vestite già de' raggi del pianeta

che mena dritto altrui per ogne calle.

Allor fu la paura un poco queta,19

che nel lago del cor m'era durata

la notte ch'i' passai con tanta pieta.

E come quei che con lena affannata,22

uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,

si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,

Canto One

Lost in a dark wood and threatened by three beasts, Dante is rescued by Virgil, who proposes a journey to the other world.

Midway upon the journey of our life

I found myself in a dark wilderness,

for I had wandered from the straight and true.

How hard a thing it is to tell about,4

that wilderness so savage, dense, and harsh,
even to think of it renews my fear!

It is so bitter, death is hardly more-7

but to reveal the good that came to me,

I shall relate the other things I saw.

How I had entered, I can't bring to mind,10

I was so full of sleep just at that point

when I first left the way of truth behind.

But when I reached the foot of a high hill,13

right where the valley opened to its end-

the valley that had pierced my heart with fear-

I raised my eyes and saw its shoulders robed16

with the rays of that wandering light of Heaven^o

that leads all men aright on every road.

That quieted a bit the dread that stirred19

trembling within the waters of my heart

all through that night of misery I endured.

And as a man with labored breathing drags22

his legs out of the water and, ashore,

fixes his eyes upon the dangerous sea,

^o that wandering light of Heaven: Italian pianeta, "planet." It is the sun, considered a planet, or wandering light, revolving about the earth.

così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,25

si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo

che non lasciò già mai persona viva.

Poi ch'èi posato un poco il corpo lasso,28

ripresi via per la spiaggia diserta,

sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso.

Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar de l'erta,31

una lonza leggera e presta molto,

che di pel macolato era coverta;

e non mi si partia dinanzi al volto,34

anzi 'mpediva tanto il mio cammino,

ch'i' fui per ritornar più volte vòlto.

Temp' era dal principio del mattino,37

e 'l sol montava 'n sù con quelle stelle

ch'eran con lui quando l'amor divino

mosse di prima quelle cose belle;40

sì ch'a bene sperar m'era cagione

di quella fiera a la gaetta pelle

l'ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;43

ma non sì che paura non mi desse

la vista che m'apparve d'un leone.

Questi pareva che contra me venisse46

con la test' alta e con rabbiosa fame,

sì che pareva che l'aere ne tremesse.

Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame49

sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza,

e molte genti fé già viver grame,

questa mi porse tanto di gravezza52

con la paura ch'uscìa di sua vista,

ch'io perdei la speranza de l'altezza.

E qual è quei che volontieri acquista,⁵⁵

e giugne 'l tempo che perder lo face,

che 'n tutti suoi pensier piange e s'attrista;

tal mi fece la bestia senza pace,⁵⁸

che, venendomi 'ncontro, a poco a poco

mi ripigneva là dove 'l sol tace. So too my mind, while still a fugitive,²⁵

turned back to gaze again upon that pass

which never let a man escape alive.

When I had given my weary body rest,²⁸

I struck again over the desert slope,

ever the firmer foot the one below,

And look! just where the steeper rise began,³¹

a leopard light of foot and quick to lunge,

all covered in a pelt of flecks and spots,

Who stood before my face and would not leave,³⁴

but did so check me in the path I trod,

I often turned to go the way I came.

The hour was morning at the break of dawn;³⁷

the sun was mounting higher with those stars^o

that shone beside him when the Love Divine

In the beginning made their beauty move,⁴⁰

and so they were a cause of hope for me

to get free of that beast of flashy hide-

The waking hour and that sweet time of year;43

but hope was not so strong that I could stand
bold when a lion stepped before my eyes!

This one seemed to be coming straight for me,46

his head held high, his hunger hot with wrath-
seemed to strike tremors in the very air!

Then a she-wolf, whose scrawniness seemed stuffed49

with all men's cravings, sluggish with desires,
who had made many live in wretchedness-

So heavily she weighed my spirit down,52

pressing me by the terror of her glance,
I lost all hope to gain the mountaintop.

And as a gambler, winning with a will,55

happening on the time when he must lose,
turns all his thoughts to weeping and despair,

So I by that relentless beast, who came58

against me step by step, and drove me back
to where the sun is silent evermore.

those stars: the constellation Aries. It is the springtime of the year, recalling the springtime of the universe;
see notes. Mentre ch'i' rovinava in basso loco,61

dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto
chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco.

Quando vidi costui nel gran deserto,64

«Miserere di me», gridai a lui,
«qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!».

Rispuosemi: «Non omo, omo già fui,67

e li parenti miei furon lombardi,
mantoani per patria ambedui.

Nacqui sub Iulio, ancor che fosse tardi,70

e vissi a Roma sotto 'l buono Augusto
nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi.

Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto73

figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia,
poi che 'l superbo Ilíon fu combusto.

Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?76

perché non sali il diletto monte
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?».

«Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte79

che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?»,
rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.

«O de li altri poeti onore e lume,82

vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,85

tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.

Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi;88

aiutami da lei, famoso saggio,
ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi».

«A te convien tenere altro viaggio»,91

rispuose, poi che lagrimar mi vide,

«se vuo' campar d'esto loco selvaggio;

ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,⁹⁴

non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,

ma tanto lo 'mpedisce che l'uccide;

Now while I stumbled to the deepest wood,⁶¹

before my eyes appeared the form of one

who seemed hoarse, having held his words so long.

And when I saw him in that endless waste,⁶⁴

"Mercy upon me, mercy!" I cried out,

"whatever you are, a shade, or man in truth!"

He answered me: "No man; I was a man,⁶⁷

and both my parents came from Lombardy,

and Mantua they called their native land.

In the last days of Julius I was born,⁷⁰

and lived in Rome under the good Augustus

in the time of the false and cheating gods.

I was a poet, and I sang of how⁷³

that just son of Anchises^o came from Troy

when her proud towers and walls were burnt to dust.

But you, why do you turn back to such pain?⁷⁶

Why don't you climb that hill that brings delight,

the origin and cause of every joy?"

"Then are you-are you Virgil? And that spring⁷⁹

swelling into so rich a stream of verse?"

I answered him, my forehead full of shame.

"Honor and light of every poet, may⁸²

my long study avail me, and the love

that made me search the volume of your work.

You are my teacher, my authority;⁸⁵

you alone are the one from whom I took

the style whose loveliness has honored me.

See there the beast that makes me turn aside.⁸⁸

Save me from her, O man renowned and wise!

She sets the pulses trembling in my veins!"

"It is another journey you must take,"⁹¹

replied the poet when he saw me weep,

"if you wish to escape this savage place,

Because this beast that makes you cry for help⁹⁴

never lets any pass along her way,

but checks his path until she takes his life.

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Neil Myers:

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