Dante Alighieri was born into the minor nobility of Florence in May or June of 1265. He claims to have been just nine years old when he first set eyes on his beloved Beatrice, who in various guises would inspire a lifetime of literary creation. As a young boy Dante probably studied with a local grammar master to gain the basics of Latin language and letters, the gateway to higher study. He later spent time in the schools of Florence that were attached to the great churches of the new monastic orders (the Franciscans and/or the Dominicans) and spent a brief period in Bologna, site of the first European university. Dante began writing courtly love lyrics in the Italian vernacular as a teenager, becoming part of an elite group of philosophically minded Tuscan poets who would elevate the genre to a dolce stil nuovo, or “sweet new style” (see Stil Novo Poetry, also in WLAIT 7: Italian Literature and Its Times). When Dante was about 20, he married a woman named Gemma Donati, with whom he had at least four children. Several years later, in the 1290s, he collected many of his poems and surrounded them with prose commentary to form his first book, the Vita nuova or “New Life,” a first-person account of his youthful love for Beatrice. The work recounts the shattering effect of Beatrice’s young death and the poet’s difficult contemplation of human mortality, ending with Dante’s vow not to write again of Beatrice until he can do so in a manner worthy of her now quasi-divine status. This last statement is often taken to announce the Divine Comedy, in which the poet will narrate his journey back to Beatrice in paradise. During this same period, Dante began his participation as sometime soldier and government official in Florence, which was on its way to becoming the most wealthy and powerful of those Tuscan cities that had grown into states. Dante’s career as public servant culminated in the summer of 1300 with a two-month term as one of six priors; forming the city’s highest executive body, they struggled to reign in factional violence between powerful Florentine families. The years 1300-02 found Dante on the losing side of the battle between the White Guelphs (his party) and Black Guelphs: at age 35, he was exiled from Florence, never to return. Little is known with certainty about his whereabouts during the exile that
The Divine Comedy would define his last 20 years of life. He was the guest of various princes of Tuscany and northern Italy, including Guido da Polenta in Ravenna, where he succumbed to a malarial fever in 1321. His tomb remains there to this day. Cut off from active participation in Florence, a place he dearly cherished, Dante's poetic and scholarly creativity intensified. He produced two other important minor works in exile: the incomplete Convivio (Banquet) an encyclopedia of sorts based on several of Dante's own poems and De vulgari eloquentia (On Eloquence in the Vernacular). Written in Latin, this last work surveys the history of human language from Adam and Eve to the many dialects and poets of Italy in Dante's day. The work also defends the new Italian vernacular as a scientific and poetic language that is as viable as Latin. Dante also composed a Latin treatise on government, De Monarchia, which advocates strict separation of church and state. He began work on the Comedy shortly after going into exile and labored on it through the end of his life. Written in three parts and in the vernacular, the poem engages all of ancient and medieval culture to reflect one man's experiences at a troubled time in history.

Events in History at the Time of the Poem

Grandeur and greed in Dante's Florence. After the year 1000, the cities of northern Italy—never entirely expunged since Roman times—began to witness a gradual rebirth. Only now the cities included a new middle class of workers, artisans and bankers. By the time Dante was born, the towns of the Tuscany region were swelling with new people and activity; during his lifetime, Florence would grow from one of a handful of prominent urban centers (Lucca, Siena, Pisa) to the wealthiest, most populous and culturally prestigious city in the region. Wool-working was the Florentines' major industry, but they had already minted the first gold florin more than a decade before Dante's birth and were destined to become the bankers of Europe during the fourteenth century. The streets in and around Dante's boyhood home were abuzz with new construction. Many of the monuments admired today—the churches of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, the Duomo cathedral of Florence, Giotto's bell tower—were beginning to rise during the years leading up to his exile. We can appreciate Dante's rage at some of his fellow citizens for casting him out unjustly from an ebullient hub that must have felt in many ways like the center of a new world.

The Florentines were industrious in devising systems of governance for the new social and economic reality that was their city. In this endeavor, they strove to keep peace among themselves and to ward off undue interference from outsiders, particularly from the contending medieval powers of the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor (whose imperial realm included present-day Germany, Prussia, Hungary, Bohemia, Switzerland, and Italy). Though ultimately the Florentines failed to either keep the peace or ward off outsiders, they forged some truly innovative experiments in popular government. Central to their popular government were the trade guilds, or arti. An ordinance of 1293 prohibited anyone not enrolled in one of these guilds from participating in government, and around this time Dante himself joined the Guild of Doctors and Apothecaries.

Yet Dante's Florence was anything but a picture of social harmony. Wealth and power inspired bitter rivalries and a complex system of alliances among the city's leading families. They, in turn, sought support and legitimacy from an external power, the pope in Rome or the Germanic Holy Roman Emperor. Fighting between Guelphs (party of the pope) and Ghibellines (party of the emperor) had plagued the streets of Florence since early in the century; shortly after Dante's birth, however, the Florentine Ghibellines were routed for good, after which the
city was solidly Guelph. This did not prevent local hostilities from reemerging in battles between White Guelphs (who wanted to keep Florence independent) and Black Guelphs (who wanted to align it with Dante's great nemesis, Pope Boniface VIII). These tensions came to a head during the summer of 1300, when Dante served as prior. In cahoots with the French king Charles of Valois, Boniface's designs on Florence became increasingly apparent. Dante was probably on his way back from Rome, having made a diplomatic attempt to appease Boniface there, when he learned that Charles and his troops had taken Florence (in late 1301). As was the custom, the triumphant Black Guelphs banished leading Whites from the city and confiscated or destroyed their property. Dante was initially sentenced to two years in exile and a heavy fine (the official charge was graft), later converted to perpetual exile on pain of death (the official charge was graft). He personally felt that the rule of a single just emperor, such as Augustus in ancient Rome, would constitute the ideal political system, and he blamed the political misfortune of Italy (and consequently Florence and himself) on the lack of such a ruler. Around 1310 he pinned his hopes for political redemption on the newly elected Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VII of Luxembourg. Henry intended to leave Luxembourg and to rule his empire from Italy, but he never quite made it to Florence, and after he died suddenly in 1313, Dante appears to have given up on the dream of returning home to Florence, at least in the literal sense.

The world and the afterlife: medieval thought and belief. Medieval Christians believed that the human being was made up of a mortal body and an immortal soul. The soul survived bodily death and lived on eternally. The state of an individual soul through eternity depended on the type of life that person had led: 1) virtuous individuals gained the timeless joy of heavenly paradise; 2) those committed to a life of vice or sin suffered eternal damnation and torment in hell; 3) sinners who repented spent time in purgatory, a makeshift middle kingdom for those in a temporary holding pattern of penance and preparation for heaven. Dante's poem leads us through these realms, focusing on the state of many different human souls after death in order to teach us something about life in the here and now. His purpose, aside from flexing his powers of imagination and creative writing, is to help humans out of misery and towards happiness in this life on earth, as he writes in a famous letter to his patron Cangrande della Scala, to whom the third part of the Comedy is dedicated. (Although scholars still debate the authenticity of this letter, it in any case provides a valuable key to understanding the poem.)

Other Christians before Dante had written accounts of experience in the world beyond death (St. Patrick's Purgatory, for example, or St. Bonaventure's Itinerarium mentis in deum). It is unclear if or how any of these works influenced Dante. They tend to be either popular in inspiration or highly conceptual and impressionistic; none comes close to matching the elaborate scope and realistic detail of Dante's vision. Significantly, Dante's most important predecessor in describing the world beyond the grave remains the ancient writer Virgil in his epic Aeneid. In book 6, the hero Aeneas, with the Sybil as his guide, ventures to the classical underworld in search of his dead father. Although Virgil (70-19 B.C.E.) lived and died before Christ, the ancient poet uses a moral standard. He invokes pagan notions of vice and virtue to invent a clear moral topography in his afterlife, with categories of human shades or spirits: those who died for love, those who took their own lives, and so forth. Virgil even designates an area where those who led wicked lives suffer unspeakable torments, as well as a zone of light and beauty where dignified souls enjoy serenity.

Dante developed intimate familiarity with the Aeneid and dozens of other classical and Christian texts through a combination of intense private study, instruction in the Florentine schools, and perhaps attendance at medieval universities. Certainly he was well-versed in the sorts of learning taking place at the universities of his day. Late medieval university culture was generally obsessed with new Latin translations, interpretations, and elaborate commentary on the works of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.). For much of his natural science, ethics, and the moral organization of hell, Dante relies on Aristotle and on medieval versions of Aristotle. The universities of Paris reigned supreme for the study of philosophy and theology in the thirteenth century, and Dante was well acquainted with the work and thought of Paris's most famous professor, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), a fellow Italian (Aquino is a small town in the mountainous interior of southern Italy). Thomas wrote a multivolume work in Latin (Summa theologica) that uses Aristotle's methods of logical deduction to reconcile Christian belief with Aristotelian
The Divine Comedy

ideas on topics ranging from the definition of body and soul to the structure of the universe. For centuries, Thomas's Summa would become the definitive reference for details of Christian doctrine.

Medieval intellectuals of the time were less directly acquainted with the other great Greek philosopher, Aristotle's teacher Plato (428-328 B.C.E.). But Dante certainly knew of and shared Plato's commitment to an invisible, unchanging realm of ideal forms and Plato's conviction that our life here on Earth is a mere and temporary shadow of these forms. Study and interpretation of Plato's concepts had continued virtually uninterrupted since ancient times in a movement known as Neoplatonism. Important Christian Neoplatonists included Saint Paul (3-64 C.E.), Saint Augustine (354-430 C.E.), and medieval mystics like Saint Bernard (1090-1153 C.E.), the final guide in upper paradise in Dante's Comedy. Though fiercely intellectual, these writers tended to favor intuitive vision over logical thought and to stress the futility of material achievement or human glory in this life. They thought of earthly life as dwarfed to insignificance by the eternal: the human lifespan was conceived of as a pilgrimage, a momentary detachment from the eternal that will ideally return to its origins in divine totality and goodness.

Though Dante's learning was vast, he was first and foremost a poet, because only poetry afforded him the liberty to mix and match many theological, literary, and philosophical perspectives. It may be difficult today to appreciate the supreme power of poetry in Dante's worldview. Much like their fellow citizen artisans, Dante and his colleagues were craftsmen; they plied their trade in language and thought. But for Dante, the poet or writer was uniquely charged with an additional serious moral responsibility: to ensure that his or her creations be both beautiful and instructive. In the liberal arts curriculum, poetry was included in the broad category of rhetoric, the advanced language course that taught how to shape words to dazzling effect and, most crucially, to persuade people to your cause. Ancient society had identified rhetoric mostly with public speaking, but as time passed the public forum shifted to writing, including the writing of poetry. More than philosophy or theology, poetry was rhetorical; it persuaded through beautiful artifice, speaking directly to human hearts. Poems could affect human will and thought, and so could change behavior and history in ways that philosophy, directed at the intellect, could never hope to do. Thus, poetry was a noble calling and a grave responsibility. Dante writes the Comedy to present a compelling vision of the universe, to convince his fellow humans of the goodness of life and the real benefits of faith, hope, and love. His poem aims to lead (as stated plainly in the vexed letter to Cangrande) human beings out of despair and into happiness.

The Poem in Focus

Contents summary. Inferno 1 and 2 serve as a prologue to the entire Divine Comedy. At the start Dante writes of finding himself lost in a dark wood halfway along the path of "our life," beginning already to present himself as a character at once unique and representative of all humanity (Dante, The Divine Comedy, Inferno, canto 1, line 1). He is about to embark on an extraordinary voyage, but then again so are we, since he has decided to take his readers along for the ride. He is one among us, "in the middle" of human experience, as he puts it (Inferno 1.1). At the same time, the "middle" refers to his own existence. Given the average human lifespan (according to Scripture) of 70 years, the character Dante is 35, which makes it the year 1300, a time of harsh political and personal turmoil in the poet's own life. Thus, the opening lines plunge us right into the thick of adventure and a midlife crisis for both humanity and a man named Dante. The poet tells us he wants to go back and re-live the experience, as he puts it (Inferno 1.2). Given the average human lifespan (according to Scripture) of 70 years, the character Dante is 35, which makes it the year 1300, a time of harsh political and personal turmoil in the poet's own life. Thus, the opening lines plunge us right into the thick of adventure and a midlife crisis for both humanity and a man named Dante. The poet tells us he wants to go back and re-live the journey with us, so from the very start, we must keep in mind the poem's two Dantes: the poet Dante who uses memory to recall a past journey he claims to have taken, and the character Dante that the poet creates, the main protagonist of the poem's present action.

The first canto projects a dramatic landscape of hope and despair, the dual moral poles of the entire poem. Dante has barely escaped with his life from a night in the low, dark forest. He emerges onto a plane that slopes upward into a hill bathed in sunlight from above. The sight of the sun and the spring morning revives his spirit as he moves instinctually up the slope. But a fierce spotted leopard intervenes to block his progress, then a lion, and finally a ravenous wolf. The beasts succeed in beating him back to the edge of the wood, that is, to despair and near death. The faint shade of Virgil appears at this moment and Dante cries out for help. Virgil presents himself as a fellow Italian, a pagan, and poet of the story of ancient Rome. Dante is awestruck before his hero, whom he calls "master" and whose Aeneid he professes to know by heart. Vir-
gil gently chastises Dante for succumbing to the beasts and focuses on the wolf's insatiable appetite for material gain in terms that condemn the current political chaos of Italy. He mysteriously prophesizes (one of several political prophecies in the poem) the advent of "a greyhound," a savior for Italy. Identified with wisdom, love, and virtue, this savior will chase the wolf of envy back to hell. After the prophecy, Virgil returns to the present moment. Dante cannot, Virgil explains,
simply climb the hill before him. If willing, Dante must follow Virgil on another journey: through the desperate screams of hell (Inferno), up a mountain of souls happy in their torments (Purgatorio), and then, with another guide more worthy than he, through the realms of the blessed (Paradiso). Dante agrees and the two men set out.

In Inferno 2, Dante is beset by doubt and questions his personal qualifications for such an unusual voyage. He invokes two important human predecessors who have glimpsed the world beyond death—one pagan, the other Christian. Virgil's hero Aeneas was chosen to descend to the underworld (Aeneid 6) in order to facilitate his historical mission to establish Rome. Likewise St. Paul was carried up into heaven for a blinds

instant on the road to Damascus (II Corinthians 12:4) in order to spread the message of Christianity to the entire world. Now Dante is to follow a similar path but he feels unworthy. To restore his confidence, Virgil explains that his voyage is ordained from on high. His decision to rescue Dante in the dark wood was prompted by a visit from Dante's love, Beatrice, who came down from paradise at the insistence of St. Lucy and the Virgin Mary. Dante's courage is thus renewed and the voyage begins. Between them, Inferno 1 and 2 have set the itinerary for the entire poem, have suggested that Dante's journey is divinely sanctioned and of historical magnitude, and have let us know that for Dante the man the journey to heaven is at the same time a journey back to Beatrice.

Inferno—the bowels of the earth. The trip begins in earnest with Inferno 3, whose opening verses relay a now-famous inscription on the gate of hell. The dramatic last line—"Abandon all hope you who enter here"—underscores Dante's view of hell as a state of despair (The Divine Comedy, Inferno 3.9). Dante's Inferno is an inverted cone that extends below the earth's northern hemisphere (for him, the only hemisphere with land and people) to the center of the earth, which was also considered the center of the universe in Dante's day. Here lodged in ice is monstrous Lucifer, the fallen angel, source of all sin and suffering. We soon learn that this underworld unfolds in a series of nine, ever-narrower concentric circles, each with a specific class of sinners and punishment. As Dante and Virgil descend, the sins worsen and so do the punishments until the pair reaches Lucifer at the very bottom.

The first group of sinners that Dante and his guide meet are the neutrals, souls who in life refused to take sides for or against good and thought only of themselves. They are herded into groups that are constantly being stung by large wasps, and they chase eternally after banners of various sorts. We are not yet in the first circle of hell but rather in a kind of ill-defined antechamber or vestibule. Neither heaven nor hell really wants these sinners, who were unwilling to commit to one side or the other in life. Just as the neutrals chose passive self-interest and refused to take a side in life, so in eternity they are stimulated into unceasing group action, forever chasing a partisan banner of the sort carried into battle in medieval warfare. Thus, before even entering hell proper, Dante instructs the reader in an important principle of divine justice (Dantean divine justice, that is). It is a principle about the relationship between sins and punishments, which he later calls "counter-suffering" or contrapasso. The reader needs always, then, to pay attention to the sometimes obvious, often subtle relationship between the sin and the punishment the poem invents for it, which can reveal much about the poet's intent in a given circle.

Circle one is Limbo, a rather special case. Christian theologians had created a marginal zone (limbo just means "edge" in Latin) for babies who died before receiving the ritual cleansing of baptism, thought to remove the original sin of Adam and Eve that stains all human souls by default. We find unbaptized babies in the poem's Limbo, but Dante uses the space for a much grander purpose as well: to contain virtuous pagans, morally great individuals born before Christ or outside Christ's geographical reach and so ineligible for paradise. Scores of esteemed pagan thinkers (like Plato and Aristotle) and characters from classical history and literature fill this circle. In it, there is no gruesome physical torment or thick black air, but relative light and calm, interrupted by sighs of unfulfilled longing. The pagan Virgil normally sits in this circle with an elite school of great epic poets, who momentar

ly invite Dante to join their club (no false modesty here!).

Dante and Virgil continue through upper hell. In circle two, a pair of famous adulterers named Paolo and Francesca are blown about in an eternal wind with other lustful sinners of their sort. Francesca claims she was an innocent victim of the inexorable god of Love as portrayed in the pages of medieval romance. Dante the character swoons in romantic sympathy as Dante the poet slyly condemns romance literature and reasserts the writer's moral responsibility. A putrid acid rain drenches the gluttons of circle three in etern-
nal suffering. In circle four, the greedy and wasteful push huge stone weights. The angry and the sullen slap and tear at one another in the foul slime of the river Styx in circle five.

Dante and Virgil are ferried across the Styx to the great stone battlements of the city of lower hell, also called Dis. The monstrous female Furies and the infernal female Medusa (hair entwined with snakes and eyes glaring) temporarily impede their path. Relief comes from a Christ-like heavenly messenger, who descends to scatter the demons and shatter the gates with a touch of her wand: now Dante and Virgil are in lower hell.

Red-hot tombs with suspended lids cause unending misery for the heretics of circle six, those who in life stubbornly insisted that the soul dies with the body. Here we encounter the great Ghibelline general Farinata, a picture of personal majesty and misguided political obsession, who spars verbally with Dante the character from the opposing political camp, the Guelphs. Dante and Virgil spend the last two-thirds of Inferno moving through the bottom three circles (seven, eight, and nine), which are divided and subdivided in complex ways unlike the top six circles. Various categories of sinners who committed violence are punished in the three rounds of circle seven: 1) murderers, tyrants, bandits — those who wronged others — stew in a river of boiling blood guarded by Centaurs with bow and arrow; 2) suicides — those who committed violence against themselves — are implanted in gnarled trees fed upon by Harpies; 3) blasphemers, userers, and sodomites — those who practiced violence against God and Nature — suffer skin-scorching rain on a plain of burning sand. To get down to the next circle, Dante and Virgil take an amazing flight on the back of a terrifying winged beast with a scorpion's tail called Geryon. Circle eight consists of an inwardly sloping amphitheater named Malebolge (“Pouches of Evil”); here no fewer than ten separate varieties of fraud are punished in ten concentric mini-circles connected by spoke-like bridges, over which Dante and Virgil must pass. Pimps, flatterers, lying popes, fortune-tellers, corrupt politicians, hypocrites, thieves, con men, instigators, and counterfeiters come alive for readers in an awesome display of twisted human potential. In Malebolge, Dante and Virgil are granted an audience with the great Greek epic hero Odysseus — the Romans called him Ulysses — who suffers among the con men or false counselors of the eighth pouch. While today's world knows Odysseus from Homer's famous poem The Odyssey, Dante had barely encountered Homer's works and so decided to invent a Ulysses all his own: a super-human adventurer who used his considerable intellect and rhetorical skill to convince his crew to sail beyond the proper limits of human experience into the forbidden southern hemisphere. This brazen attempt to capture, what for a medieval Christian must remain, divine knowledge necessarily ended in doom.

A great, dumb giant lowers Dante and Virgil to the icy floor of hell in the palm of his hand. Encrusted to various degrees in the rock-hard ice of circle nine are traitors, for Dante a special category of fraud. Traitors deceive people who have exceptional reason to trust them: family members, fellow citizens, guests, benefactors. In the last famous episode of Inferno, Ugolino, a prominent citizen of Pisa, feeds on the bloodied nape of the archbishop Ruggieri, his one-time political ally. Ugolino tells the dreadful tale of how the archbishop Ruggieri turned on Ugolino and had him locked in a tower with his little children to die of starvation. Overcome by hunger, Ugolino suggests he may have eaten the bodies of his dead offspring before succumbing to death by hunger himself. He bites into Ruggieri's neck in an act of cannibalistic revenge and blind rage.

Dante and Virgil escape hell's darkness by climbing down Lucifer's haunch through the earth's center and then up through a natural grotto to emerge at the base of a mountain in the middle of the southern hemisphere.

**Purgatorio** — the mountain of hope. The word purgatory simply describes a place to clean oneself; it came to designate the medieval Christian notion of a middle realm where souls prepared to enter paradise. Not hardened in their sinful ways and thus not condemned to eternal hell, purgatorial souls nonetheless possess significant sinful dispositions that need to be purged before the souls can go to heaven. Purgatory is a happy place because, though they suffer punishments like those in Inferno, the souls here are filled with hope: they will enter paradise after fulfilling their period of penance. Time is thus a major theme of purgatory — the only of Dante's three realms to exist in time, as life does on Earth (and the only of the three realms actually on earth, in the middle of the uninhabited southern hemisphere surrounded by ocean). At the end of history and time, the poem suggests, there will be just the damned and the saved, Inferno and Paradiso.

On the shore, Dante and Virgil meet the guardian of purgatory, Cato of Utica, from ancient Rome, who chose death rather than life under Caesar's
tyranny. A symbol of personal liberty, Cato underscores purgatory's other great theme as Virgil informs him that Dante too is seeking liberty from all the sin that has weighed him down. Cato instructs them to cleanse themselves of Inferno's grime in the waves that lap the shore. Dante and Virgil go on to spend the first third of this part before the city of Dis, so Purgatorio has an antepurged cone. Just as Inferno has an upper hell itself, purgatory has an antepurged cone. When Dante and Virgil reach the gate of purgatory proper, a guardian angel inscribes Dante's forehead with seven P's (probably for the Latin "peccatum" or "sin"). The mountain rises in a series of seven concentric terraces, each of which purges one of what medieval Christians knew as the seven deadly sins. Just as hell descends from the least to the most serious sins, so purgatory rises terrace by terrace in the opposite moral direction, from the most to the least serious sin: 1) Pride, 2) Envy, 3) Wrath, 4) Sloth, 5) Avarice, 6) Gluttony, 7) Lust.

On each terrace, Dante encounters souls suffering some penance aimed at purging their particular vice: the proud, for instance, are bowed low under great slabs of rock. Each terrace also contains artistic representations of that vice along with scenes of the opposite virtue (on the first terrace, humility is praised). Especially in purgatory the poem focuses on the meaning of art and artistic representation since it is only in time and on Earth that art can be useful to represent eternity and give humans some idea of the right direction. On the upper terraces, Dante meets a series of poets, provides a history of vernacular lyric poetry in his day, and offers his understanding of the origin and function of true poetry. At the end of each terrace, an angel erases one of the P's from Dante's forehead until he is utterly free of sin at the top of the mountain.

Dante the poet chooses to place earthly paradise—the very Garden of Eden from which Adam and Eve were banished due to original sin at the beginning of human history—at the top of his mountain of purgatory. Dante the character is initially hesitant to pass through the wall of fire that separates him from paradise until Virgil informs him that Beatrice is waiting inside. The last part of Purgatorio takes place inside earthly paradise, where Dante witnesses an elaborate pageant that symbolizes all of history as defined by Christian scripture. At the very center of this parade of human history is a mythical griffon (half eagle, half lion) meant to signify Christ (God and man); the creature pulls a chariot on which Beatrice—Dante's own personal savior—stands triumphant. Dante is overcome with emotion as a stern Beatrice berates him like a little child for his moral wandering. Virgil has disappeared. Dante swoons. When he comes to, he is being bathed and purified in two Edenic rivers. He then stands ready with Beatrice at his side to ascend to the heavens.

Paradiso—light and joy. The character Dante is at first confused when he finds himself soaring heavenward with Beatrice. But Beatrice soon explains that it would be unnatural for Dante not to ascend now that he has been freed of all earthly vice. All elements in the universe possess a sort of innate moral gravity. Just as in Aristotle's physical universe heavy objects fall to earth and fire rises, so in Dante's moral universe individual souls fall or rise to their appropriate place. All human souls naturally harbor an inherent desire to return to their origins in divine truth, though some lose sight of this while on earth. Weighed down and waylaid by earthly concerns or attractions, they fall to infernal damnation.

Dante's Paradiso reflects the perpetual joy of those reunited and continually reuniting with divine light. Around the planet Earth revolves a series of translucent spheres at differing speeds. The first seven spheres, or heavens, carry the orbiting bodies for which they are named: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. The eighth heaven holds the Fixed Stars, including the zodiacal schemes and other stars against whose backdrop the remaining heavenly bodies revolve. The ninth heaven is the Primum Mobile or Prime Mover, the invisible motor for all the rest. Finally, God in his essence resides in a motionless tenth heaven of perfect superabundant light and repose that Dante calls "Empyrean." The rest of the heavens all spin—each one faster than the previous heaven—as a sign of their appetite for this ultimate fulfillment, reunion with divine essence.

In the opening cantos of Paradiso, Beatrice offers Dante and the reader a number of difficult doctrinal lessons to explain some basic truths.
about light and vision in heaven and about God's creation generally. Dante finds her staring directly at the sun and he follows suit. But his human sight cannot sustain this direct solar gaze for long and soon he averts his glance to Beatrice herself as she reflects the sunlight. Embodied humans, it seems, cannot experience divine light directly, but can sense divinity indirectly through reflections and accommodations to their inferior vision. (To Dante's mind, the whole visible universe is one such accommodation, a reflection or shadow of divine unity that points to God; also right-minded literature is a rhetorical invention that reflects divine truth in ways humans can understand.) Apparently each individual element of creation has a unique capacity to absorb and reflect divine light—some more, some less. There is immense individual diversity within perfect unity in this joyous part of the universe. Yet all can completely satisfy their separate appetites for perfect fulfillment. The divine light is shared but unlike a physical substance, whose amount diminishes when shared, divine light-energy increases when reflected to others. Beatrice explains that in its essence heavenly paradise is complete light and silence, all souls at one with God in the Empyrean. But the souls have, as it were, condescended to the limitations of human vision and understanding in a display of the nine heavens to allow Dante the character (and the readers) to experience paradise within the confines of their abilities.

To this end, Dante the poet creates for Paradiso categories of blessedness and a structure of graded blessedness comparable to the circles and terraces of sin in the previous two books. The first three heavens contain souls whose undeniable virtue was in some small measure marred by human defect. In the heaven of the Moon, Dante meets Piccarda Donati, sister of his great Florentine political opponent Corso Donati, and Constance of Normandy, mother of the emperor Frederick II. Both were virtuous women who entered a convent but then broke their vows due to difficult circumstances. In the heaven of Mercury are souls like the sixth-century Roman emperor Justinian, whose great service to humanity was slightly sullied by ambition for worldly fame. The lovers in the heaven of Venus were a force for good in the world, but their love was not always 100 percent pure—the biblical Rahab, whore of Babylon for a time, is but one example. Only with the fourth heaven of the Sun do we leave the shadow of earthly defect entirely behind to meet souls of total virtue. So Paradiso too has a less perfect subrealm, like Inferno's upper hell and Purgatorio's antepurgatory.

Dante populates the heaven of the sun with his intellectual heroes, ancient wise men and medieval theologians like Saint Thomas Aquinas. Unlike the shadowy bodies of hell and purgatory, souls in paradise appear as brilliant points of light who form dynamic configurations in a concert of luminosity. Souls of the wise men configure themselves into two circular crowns that dance around Dante and Beatrice at their center. In the fifth heaven of Mars are the courageous warriors for Christ arrayed in a Greek cross. Dante here meets his great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida, who confirms Dante's historical destiny as prophet and poet. In the sixth heaven of Jupiter, just rulers spell out words of light that enjoin all rulers on earth to love justice, in many ways the theme of the entire Divine Comedy. One of the letters transforms into an eagle, symbol of the emperor and reminder of Dante's political convictions even at this great height. In the seventh heaven of Saturn, thinkers and mystics form a ladder reaching to the very top of paradise. In the heaven of the Fixed Stars, Dante meets the apostle-saints Peter, James, and John, who grill Dante on the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, his entrance exam to upper paradise. There Dante also sees Adam, the first man, and does some intense questioning of his own about the nature and origin of human language.

Dante's experience of the uppermost reaches of heaven is a metaphorical flood of overwhelming light, first a flowing river that he drinks in, then a celestial rose reflected off the convex surface of the Primum Mobile. In this rose, which quickly becomes a sort of immense amphitheatre, all of the blessed souls have their seats. Beatrice quietly takes her place among these blessed souls as the poem returns to the point promised way back at the beginning of Inferno.

Dante becomes aware of another presence beside him, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who urges him to look up and at long last to take in the source of all love and light, that is, to face God directly. Words, says the poet, fail to describe what he saw: a flashing point of light that was at the same time the image of a human face and three circles (suggesting the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the central mystery of Christianity). The poet knows only that at that enraptured moment of complete joy and satisfaction, he was one with all creation, an integral piece of the divine love that moves the sun and all the stars.
**History and allegory.** Critics still debate the nature of the allegory in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. His medieval world used the term *allegory* to describe a text or image that contained an additional meaning beyond what was immediately apparent, what today might be called symbolism. Most common was a type called poetic allegory (or personification allegory). In poetic allegory, a person or animal simply represented an abstract category: a female figure, for example, might be called Patience or Pride. In this rather crude form of allegory, the actual person has little or no substance, but functions as a mere cipher for the concept. Dante's poem sometimes flirts with poetic allegory of this sort. The three beasts of *Inferno* 1 seem to represent three large categories of sin. But one does not know for sure. Dante the poet rarely links his elements to one clear meaning, preferring instead to leave his verse open to a range of possible meanings.

---

**WHY "COMEDY?"**

*Dante* called his poem a "comedy" in accordance with ancient definitions of comedy and tragedy ("divine" was added later by an early commentator). Tragedies used elevated language to treat upper-class characters in a plot that begins in great fortune and ends unhappily. By contrast, comedies treated a broader social spectrum of society (including servants and peasants), often in popular language. Like Dante’s poem, they typically began in confusion and ended in happiness.

Yet Dante clearly wants his reader to take his poem as history—the literal story of a man who journeyed to a very real place beyond death. His exhaustive attention to details of every sort, the dramatic flair of his characters’ encounters with real people, and the psychological complexity of his portraits persuade the reader of the poem’s realism. Meanwhile, the poem’s many episodes allow Dante the poet to offer instruction for living a happy life and on the good and bad effects of various mental attitudes. Dante also conveys a very specific theory of history, according to which the events of the Hebrew Bible and the ancient classical world unfolded in preparation for the coming of Christ, who gives meaning to everything before and after. Virgil came before and so is relegated to Limbo in hell, yet he is chosen as a main guide because Virgil is the poet who captures an important segment of history for Dante, the history of the founding and destiny of Rome. Virgil neatly represents the story of the world right up to the birth of Christ, and of the limit of human virtue before this birth. Then Dante takes this story up to his own day, translating official history into very individual terms (and inviting us to do the same): hundreds of years after Christ, Dante enjoyed a personal savior named Beatrice who informed his life with meaning and led him to divine truth. The allegory can be understood on a personal level too. Whether or not one is Christian or believes in an afterlife, the *Inferno* can be understood to represent despair, an attitude the poet, in unhappy exile, finally rejects. To have no hope that life has direction or meaning is to be in hell. In the same vein, *Purgatorio* is challenge and suffering gladdened by hope. *Paradiso* affirms that human longing can end in fulfillment.

**Sources and literary context.** *The Divine Comedy* reflects Dante’s wide acquaintance with, indeed passion for, ancient and medieval learning and literature of many kinds. Two books stand out for the sheer degree of their presence in his mind and thus in the text of the *Comedy*. The first is the Bible in the medieval Latin translation by Saint Jerome (c. 340–420), commonly known as the Vulgate. The second is Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the great Latin epic that tells of the founding of Rome.

Also influential was the popular vernacular literature and Dante’s contact with other Italian writers. Old French romances about the military exploits and torturous loves of knights and ladies at court like Lancelot and Guinevere circulated widely in many versions. Picking up on various traditions, Dante wrote in the vernacular and included episodes that recalled, for example, romance as well as other forms of literature. Dante’s past experience as a man of letters was with fellow Italian poets like Guido Guinizelli and Guido Cavalcanti (Dante’s one-time best friend), who themselves were indebted to earlier versifiers in Provence and Sicily. Dante the character meets many of these predecessors in the *Comedy*, while Dante the poet is keen within its confines to share his assessment of the romance tradition, the new vernacular poetry, his fellow practitioners, and his own (superior) place among them.

For his construction of a reality beyond death, Dante may have been influenced by other Christian poems on the afterlife, though none can rival Virgil’s *Aeneid* as a source for concrete detail. In a broad sense, Dante was surely influenced by
the Christian Neoplatonists, for whom all human
desire pointed to an unchanging, invisible unity
beyond our understanding. This is Saint August-
ine's insistent message in his Confessions, a med-
itation on individual human consciousness in
time and the crucial role of rhetoric in moving
human hearts. For Dante's understanding and or-
dering of sins in Inferno, Aristotle's Ethics is fun-
damental. His Purgatorio relies on long-held
notions of the seven deadly sins as well as Chris-
tian mythology of the Garden of Eden. His
scheme in Paradiso draws on ancient and me-
dieval astronomy along with established mysti-
cal notions of the angelic hierarchies.

Reception. Dante's Comedy was an enormous
success from the moment it first circulated in
manuscript. A tradition of interpretation and
meticulous line-by-line reading of the text began
immediately and has continued virtually uninterr-
upted to the present day. The Divine Comedy has
generated a body of commentary second perhaps
only to the Bible. The Florentines soon regretted
the shabby way they had treated the now famous
Dante; in the late fourteenth century, the
community commissioned an aging Boccaccio, write-
er of the Decameron, to deliver public lectures on
what was regarded as Dante's glorious poem (also
in WLAIT 7: Italian Literature and Its Times).

The poem's architectural structure captured
the imagination of illustrators and artists from the
very start. While Dante's original appears to have
vanished, dozens of manuscript versions—some
illuminated with brilliant images of tormented
sinners, mischievous demons, and radiant an-
gels—have transmitted Dante's text, which was
also among the most popular choices for early
printers. The best-known illustrators include the
painter Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) in the Re-
naisance, much later in the nineteenth century,
the English poet and engraver William Blake
(1757-1827) and the French engraver Gustave
Doré (1832-1883). A testament to Dante's pow-
ers of persuasion, Renaissance mathematicians
began the tradition of calculating the exact size
and shape of Dante's realms and mapping his hell,
purgatory, and paradise with professional preci-
sion. The heirs to these early maps can be found
in the visual supplements that accompany today's
many printed and online editions of the poem.

Dante's importance for other poets and writ-
ers the world over has endured for centuries. His
presence can be felt throughout the English and
American tradition in the poetry of Geoffrey
Chaucer, Alfred Tennyson, William Blake, and
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (an important
early translator) to the verse of a modernist like
Ezra Pound or, in our own day, the Irish poet
Seamus Heaney. Another modernist poet, T. S.
Eliot, spelled out Dante's stature in no uncertain
terms: "Dante and Shakespeare divide the mod-
ern world between them; there is no third" (Eliot,
p. 225). Across seven centuries the Divine Com-
edy has inspired lines of human thought and crea-
tivity, from commentary, to mapmaking,