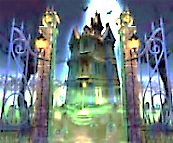
***\* Dante \****

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/machaut_kyrie.mp3)

♫

***Master of the Revelations***

**[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/bach_toccata.mp3)*The Dream of the Haunted Mansion***

♫

1.

I fell asleep beneath a tree

And dreamed that I was in a great

House, and the hour was very late,

And a great cold came over me.

Down the dark cavernous halls I walked

Past tapestries and many a painting,

When at a strange sound almost fainting

I knew that I was being stalked.



I know he’s here. I can *sense* him.

It is so dark! What if I bump a knee

Against a ghoul? Ah, monstrous company!

Why must the candles burn so dim?

**WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY HOUSE**

**OF MANY MANSIONS, FIEND? GET OUT!**

Echo the words. I look about…

The House is haunted. I arouse

The territorial aggression

Of the ghost of the one who built

This Comedy. Mine is the guilt

Of trespass; that is my transgression.

Hmm. Should I offer to pay rent?

Charm him with my companionship?

The silence, tense as a tight lip,

Suggests he’d like to make a dent

Deep in my skull with some heirloom

Or other he’s got lying round here.

Mace? Axe? I’m sure they can be found here.

It might be wise to leave this room.

**THE POWER OF CHRIST COMPELS THEE, HENCE!**

And a huge suit of armour falls

Crashing in front of me, the halls

Ring with the clangour, and I sense

I am not wholly welcome here.

Like mists that gather to a cloud

He manifests himself: that proud,

Implacable face! Something like fear

Comes over me, which I dismiss.

What can he do to me that I

Have not done to myself? Then why

Be scared by this wraith-wrath of his,

This hard, high-mediaeval dudgeon?

His house is public property

Given to his posterity

In trust. He is the grim curmudgeon

Who lingers on in his creation

Like an old duke who haunts the estate

Long-since donated to the State,

An august tourist destination.

******2.

*Scusi, I show discourtesy.*

*Sometimes I grow so weary of being*

*The Master, and all that, of seeing*

*The poets use my Comedy*

*Not as a temple in which to pray,*

*But as a template, crude and rough,*

*To impose upon the chaos of*

*Their thoughts, knowing no better way*

*To order their unkempt infinity*

*Of images and metaphors—*

*A swamp that seeks a river’s course—*

*Than to pervert the Holy Trinity*

*Into a numerological*

*Prosthesis, or a cripple’s crutch,*

*And dress up ego’s creaky hutch*

*As the High Altar of the All.*

*Yours is no Comedy, but farce*

*Stuffed with allusions for mere sport.*

*You serve the Host up like a torte*

*Topped with a sprinkling of stars!*

*He is working himself up into a state*

*of high dudgeon again. I discreetly exit.*

***From the Reading Notebook***

***The Dream of the Terrace of Pride***

*Dante has heaved the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments at me. They narrowly*

*miss my head (the head of my astral body, or in Gnostic-Neo-Platonic terms, my* ochema,

*Aristotle’s* proton organon). *So, among the Proud on Mt Purgatory I am to stagger about*

*the ledge beneath this burden? I think not. (Boccaccio says even women and children feared*

*the Tuscan might throw stones at them if he believed they had insulted his principles.)*

The Ten Commandments? All agog

Am I to read them through again.

Thank you. One *does* need, now and then,

A hefty dose of Decalogue.

I thought that there were twenty! *You*

*Will read them by their weight upon*

*Your back. To understand them, one*

*Must under*-walk *them through and through.*

I note that *you* are stooping under

A stone. For your pride are you groaning?

Why not for wrath in smoke atoning?

Not yet for you the heavenly thunder. *Announcing a soul’s ascension from*

*Purgatory into Heaven.—*[Mr V]

*True, I am still in Purgatory.*

*But I will not be here much longer.*

Good. You are not getting any younger. *I jest, I jest.*

*I am shielded by my allegory*

*Dante doesn’t spend* all *his time staggering under a rock. There are pauses for meals, and his evenings are generally free. He reads a great deal, keeps abreast of trends, that sort of thing. He has secretly turned into something of an aesthete, surprisingly enough. He is currently reading Hegel on Shakespeare (towards the latter of whom he naturally harbours intense feelings of rivalry). He longs for the light touch and ennobled eroticism of his beloved Troubadours, who so influenced him in his youth. But don’t let on that you know all this, Dears, or he WILL throw stones at you, beginning with the one on his back!*

*Whose sense, and intellect, is Love.*

*Soon will a mighty organ note*

*Signal my rising, like a mote*

*In sunshine, to my God above.*

So glad to hear it. Congratulations.

*The fool himself fools, when he mocks.*

*Salvation lies beneath the rocks.*

*Get under them. Be strong. Have patience!*

*You know who I am: I am your Master.*

*Mind your Hic Labor Est, your Hoc*

*Opus.*  *Many a jagged rock*

*Awaits your climb. Come, faster, faster!*

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/liszt_totentanz.mp3)***The Refractory Bolgia***

♫

[*I relate an incident that took place some time ago, in ‘Sweet Worm-*

*wood’. Dante in golf tweeds threatens me with a huge putting iron.*

*A reminder of my mendacity in claiming to be on golf outings to*

*deceive Constance as to my whereabouts and sodomitical doings?*]

1.

But what apocalyptic round

Of golf is this, sir? Would you putt me

Into a pocket, Eagle, shut me

In a hole in unholy ground?

*You are a Midas in reverse,*

*Debasing everything you touch.*

*Foul sodomite, get in this pouch!*

*****The jostle of clubs shall be your curse.*

Really now, Dante, that is quite

Enough! It is uncouth, this show

Of violence every time you grow

Annoyed. You gave me quite a fright!

Who knows what fiery verbal fork

Will dart from that Hell-mouth of yours?

By rubbing salt into my sores

You cure me like a side of pork!

2.

Something in us, despite our lateness,

Still relishes Ruggieri’s head,

Your bloodlust for the damnèd dead,

Your gruesome and atrocious greatness. *So Goethe characterised it.*

You are the biblical Jehovah,

Old-Testament, uncanny, testy:

  One dares not move a muscle, lest He

With Uzzah-lightning knock one over,

This God who tries to kill his Moses,

 And leaves him with a Promised Land’s

Pisgah-view, yet with His own hands

Buries him! I suspect psychosis.

One moment you attempt to spill me

Into a ditch, the next you make

A Covenant. For goodness’ sake

Make up your mind and simply kill me!

For after all, my fitful guide,

You dwell in Purgatory, too,

As Virgil in Limbo. *It is true.*

*For wrath, for wrath! And ah, for pride!*

*Dante appears to colour a little.*

*Have I indeed shamed him, then?*

4.

You transformed Christianity

Simply by representing it

So boldly, with such infinite

Attention to detail. We see

The Word grow fleshly. Once you placed

Yourself inside the allegory,

Theology became a story,

And now its casuistry was faced

With characters, and characters

Were given faces, made to speak

As della Vigna, in a weak

And bleeding voice, speaks deathless verse.

Hamlet, the Wife of Bath, Falstaff

Gestate as in a magic womb

In Farinata’s fiery tomb.

This giant figure is but half-

Sepulchred in his sin: the immortal

Vitality of your portraiture

Gives him a life that shall endure.

Even over the Inferno’s portal

I read the word *Whim* faintly traced,

Graffito of a prophecy

That Art and Personality

Will overwrite and leave effaced

Hope and abandonment together.

Yet hope lies in abandonment:

Of certainties that quell dissent

(Dogmas that turn Thought’s vital weather

Into a frozen climate of

Opinion, fixed and masked as truth);

Of truth to art, of age to youth,

Of self to its temptations, love

To all its many innocent,

*I am pleased to report that, since the events related in this chapter, Dante has finally achieved ascension from Purgatory into Heaven, where he is indeed reunited (he writes to me on a postcard) with his*

*Beatrice. They are expecting a blessèd*

*event in the spring. I will be sure to drop*

*a card on them, if I am ever in the vicinity.*

Natural and unnatural

Perversities. What you would call

Sin we will call experiment.

Though of its own self-contradictions

Your doctrine died ah, centuries past!

Poetic Genius can outlast

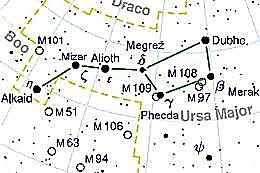
All antiquated science fictions.

*Our* angels ride inmotor cars.

Heaven is but a rocket-trip

Away. How deep the Dippers dip

Into the dark between the stars!



***A Conversation with Dante***

1.

Dante, you are my ancestor

Upon my mother’s side, or so

She told me: my great-great-great-oh-

How-great grandfather! Ah, before

There came the great Renascence, space

And time were of your architecture,

Souls shaped by you inside the picture,

Sometimes with a distorted face.

You live, you burn at times within

The features of *my* face, I sense

Your presence in presentiments.

You are my sickness and my sin.

2.

*A double exile, I: from Florence,*

*And the world I imagined, hoped for,*

*A world no longer even groped for*

*By your Age—ah, my soul’s abhorrence!*

*You settle for such a degree*

*Of blindness and of blandness in*

*Religious matters! It is SIN.*

*And what has come of Italy*

*These days save stylish shoes and portly*

*Tenors and Carlo Pellegrini? Alias ‘Ape’, society cartoonist. .*

*(Though I admire noble Mazzini.) And let us not forget Leopardi!*

*And ah, the love that we called ‘courtly’,*

*Whose finest, mystic flower was*

*My Beatrice, lives only in*

*Pre-Raphaelite paintings (thin*

*And wan she looks). I have some cause*

*To speak authoritatively*

*Of exile, tears, and alienation.*

*In mutual excommunication*

*Stand I and your modernity.*

******3.

In my *Ravenna* I spoke half

To you and half to Byron, caught

Between two exiled Kings of Thought.

Florence is its own cenotaph,

Or lives, your thankless mother city,

More fully in your eloquence

Than in its fading monuments.

Sorrow you knew, but no self-pity.

4. *Dante*

*I looked down on no sodomite.*

*We are all fallen, under a curse.*

*To try to lift it makes it worse.*

*Brunetto was to me a light.*

*To see the place they left him in*

*Tortured my heart. He was my friend.*

*So fine a soul, and such an end!*

*I almost wished it weren’t a sin.*

*But ‘tis a sin to wish it weren’t,*

*Impious carping at God’s laws,*

*Quibbling with codicil and clause.*

*For lesser things are sinners burnt*

*At the stake, yes, and rightly so!*

Dante, with due respect, that is

Barbaric. In what way is this

Christian, this sadic blow on blow

Of primitive Jehovah justice

Fit for the tribe or for the horde

But by enlightened hearts abhorred?

It is bloodlust, and any lust is

‘Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not *Shakespeare,* Sonnet *129.*

To trust’, nor scapegoat cults to trust *Dante scowls threateningly at*

When they proclaim that they are just. *the citation, he knits his brows,*

Are you evolving toward this thought? *growling softly, Malebronchially.*

**How could you hear the burned cry out

And not think, *What if we are wrong?*

*Have we the right?* Your faith was strong

But you shrank from the strength of doubt.

Why should a tragic suicide

Or whore for hearsay flattery

Be placed in lower pouch than he,

Attila in his murderous pride

And millions-slaughtering arrogance?

You sacrifice to an abstract

Casuistry the whole human fact,

The singular, complex romance.

5. *Ivan Karamazov Out of nowhere, seemingly.*

*And what Redemption can be built*

*On the unexpiated bones*

*Of one small child whose dying groans*

*But added savour to the guilt*

*Of those who persecuted him?*

*They ate pineapple compote while*

*They watched him writhe, and with a smile*

*Saw in his eyes the life grow dim.*

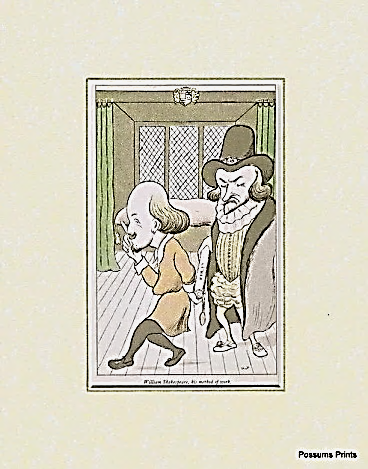
*When I see God, that tortured child*

*I’ll show Him, and demand that He*

*Explain why He lets such things be,*

*Or we shall not be reconciled.*



***********Dante and the Bard***

***Negotiations***

*Dante speaks in italics.*

The Bard:

‘Twas you who opened this Pandora’s

Box, in despite of (and with prescience)

The cloistered, institutional nescience

Of the Church, and the Gothic horrors

With which it threatened those who dared

To read and reason for themselves.

‘Twas you who scoured the study shelves

And would not let yourself be scared

Away by blind Authority

From the great quest to understand

The world, the work of God’s own hand,

And the Word, from Antiquity

To the summation of St Thomas,

Meant by all people to be read,

Not kept a Secret, dark and dread,

By a cold mummy Priesthood from us.

*But the Word points in* one *direction,*

*Not all directions, willy-nilly.*

*(Should I say rather, nilly-Willy?)*

*We can’t choose* this *piece, scorn* that *section,*

*Picking and choosing what best favours*

*A momentary use or mood:*

*That is the very Savage Wood*

*From which the Word alone can save us.*

When all is said and done, to say

‘I do not know’ is not a sin.

*Where knowledge ends, must faith begin.*

*Indeed it must. But my faith may*

Well be another’s heresy,

Should I look through that other’s eyes.

How many must we sacrifice

To feed our lust for certainty?

Life wants to be considered curiously.

Let us ask, with Montaigne: *Que sais-je?*

Those who judge Truth by too-stern measure

See not, because they look too furiously.

*O blind Sceptic! Your form shall be*

*For ever restless and unstable*

*As Fucci’s. You have set the table*

*For Circe and her sorcery!*

The feast is underway, my friend.

We moderns are to restless change

Committed, and the boundless range

Of possibilities. We mend

Our ways as best we can: the sleeve

Of care grows ever looped and ragged.

The troughs are deep, the crests are jagged,

And all we love we all must leave.

For to the puzzling scheme of things

What is the Plot? We live sub-plots,

Wherein to choose is to draw lots.—

*Then Heaven help your reckonings,*

*Or you will choose yourself a Hell*.—

To be or not to be was ever

A riddle hardest to the clever.

Means guess their ends. May all end well!

*You find a thousand ways to say*

*You do not know, when what is asked*

*Is that you do believe. Unmasked*

*Will all you revellers be, one day!*

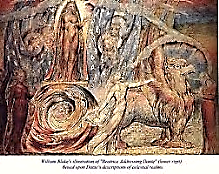
*Dante storms from the room followed*

*by his advisors. The next day spokesmen*

*for both parties characterise the talks*

*as ‘cordial, wide-ranging, and fruitful’.*

**

*****The Latest Pageant***

*I dream Marcel and I are on the summit of Mount Purgatory,*

*walking in awe through the Garden of the Earthly Paradise.*

1.

How verdant is this Paradise!

*To see this place, who would not die?*

*It has, mon cher, look! its own sky,*

*A bruised white rose flushed pink at rise*

*Of day, blood-red at evenfall.*

*You’d think it was the Tuileries.*

*Everywhere, roses, peonies,*

*Azaleas, daffodils, and all*



*So fragrant! Listen: that sublime*

*Passage in the Vinteul Septet!*

*To recall we must first forget.*

*This is the ambiguous gift of time.*

*Even for Dante, Paradise*

*Is the regaining of the past:*

*Fully remembered, cosmic, vast,*

*It lives in Beatrice’s eyes.*

2. *The Pageant*

*Regard, mon cher!* It comes. ‘Tis nigh!

The Pageant! It seems barely a moment

Ago that we were passing comment

On the last Pageant that went by.

*The Chariot comes to a halt.*

[Dante Narrates:]

*The monstrous Boor of Germany,*

*That cowled and costive, choleric*

*Old Antichrist and Heretic,*

*Attacks the chariot and tears free*

*The rear half, and with a strong push*

*Rolls it into a savage wood*

*Where muskets bark and men of blood*

*Lurk behind every tree and bush…*

3. *A Snide Aside*

And next comes antique Allegory,

Dishevelled now, no longer nimble,

Her features vague, scumbled by Symbol,

Disoriented, weak and hoary.

In her right hand she holds a sword,

In her left is an hourglass.

She is a melancholy lass.

She gazes down at a chessboard

On which great birds of prey, the black

And white, are tactically deployed.

She looks down at the sword, annoyed

And puzzled: She thinks back, thinks back

But cannot quite remember where

She got it, what it is, or why

‘Tis in her hand. A tapestry,

Cobwebbed, is floating in the air.

On it are pictures dim and grey,

Images of things dreadfully

Important, one takes them to be,

But what they are one can’t quite say,

They are so dim. But on a table

An astrolabe allays one’s doubt,

It seems so definitely *about*

Something definite, one’s unable



To say exactly what that is,

But one likes how exact it looks.

And there are pentagrams and books,

Flowers, and skulls, and compasses**…**

Can someone help her, please? Relieve

Her of those objects in her hands,

Whose meaning no one understands,

Or knows too well to well-believe.

*Dante’s voice breaks out like thunder overhead.*

**WHAT, OSCAR, DO YOU THINK ME DEAF?**

**I HEAR YOUR JESTS. I’VE HALF AN URGE**

**TO SEND YOU BACK TO SING YOUR DIRGE**

**DEEP IN THE PITCHY PIT’S BASS CLEF.**

**(So testy is he, of his art!)

Why, my dear Alighieri, so

Put out by a tall man you know

Is but a foolish child at heart?

Accept what lesser says to Greater:

*‘Scusi, senor, la colpa mia,*

*Uomo della diritta via!*

*Sono smarrito, gran’ poeta!’*

O Highest Meaning of it All,

Which in the eyes of, *is* the bliss

It is to *be* a Beatrice!

But all of this begins to pall.

*Sudden scene change. We are seated in*

*the library of my Tite Street home. Brandy*

*is served. Attired in a smoking jacket,*

*Dante is casually leafing through*

The Importance of Being Earnest.

4. *Surprised by Dante*

*A great bitch-goddess, Lady Bracknell,*

*An old grotesque raised out of time*

*By shrewdly marrying the Sublime,*

*Muffling the funeral bells’ black knell. How flattering, and unexpected:*

*he has read my play, and likes it!*

*You should be punished, not seeing how*

*Much better is* The Importance of

Being Earnest *than the one you love,*

******An Ideal Husband*, which is now,*

*Well, something of a period-piece,*

*Despite its wit, yes, in a way*

*A middling sort of well-made play,*

*Whence* Ernest *is divine Release.*

(The Tuscan a theatre critic

Exhorting me, for reasons purely

Aesthetic, to judge more maturely

My own work? He is *so* acidic,

Yet not unkindly, his advice.)

Perhaps you’re right*. Its lightness is*

*A decorously zany bliss.*

*An irresponsible Paradise!*

*I take down a beautiful edition*

*de luxe of the* Divine Comedy*,*

Perhaps you’d care to have a look

At the engravings of Doré?

*They do add something, I must say.*

*It is a very handsome book.*