
Ying Zheng**Out of the Ante-Inferno**

After Gustave Doré's *Charon, the Ferryman of Hell*

*Fear not the wrath of God!
Those who are beckoned here
Know better than to comply.*

Below the sullen skies,
Where stars hardly survive,
Stand pale precipices

Guarding the dim muzzle
Of a deadly, sodden
Passage, and listening

To it ceaselessly burp,
Bellow, bawl, and belch
Out a whirl of white spume.

Forward! Forward! The oar
That no one can wrench free
From his grip grunts and gasps,

Guiding him firmly through
The chasm that divides the worlds
Of pang and timeless pain.

With a wriggle, he'll go
Beyond the claws of those
Breakers that have burrowed

Their heads into a habitat
That has devoted its life
To hoarding the hopes of

The assembly hoping,
In hopeless times, against
Hope that Hope, like waves,

Will come crashing to where
They huddle together -
The shoreline of Acheron /



The first river born of
The endless tears tumbled
Down the solid gold face

Of the Old Man of Crete;
The river where water
Is not smudged with mud,

Blood, ice, or magical mead.
*Whoa there! You're making too
Loud a noise! I'm here to help!*

God gave him strong sinews
To make him stand upright
And sway his soulless body

In time with the craft that
Will carry them all up
-river to a second

life that knows not mirth, but
Only howls and snarls,
Scowls and slouches.

*Mind you don't push and shove!
Don't stagger or shuffle!
Stand still! I'm here to help!*

Before his voice echoes
Back, the prow veers sharply,
To the right, throwing the hull

Headlong into the jet-black
Chops of Hell. Grizzled hair,
partly falling in curls

To the left side of his
Twisted body, partly
hurtling backwards.

Eyes, finding it hard not
To gush shock at the sight
Of the bank seething again.

Cheekbones, rising higher
Than the sun-clad mountain
Ravaged by three savage beasts.

The gaping mouth, through which
A torrent of words is
Slicing as he comes closer.

*Fear not the wrath of God!
This is the rallying cry
Of those who dared rebel.*

*Minos decides where you
Belong, but who is the final
Arbiter of your fate?*

*If fearless, how can you
Be driven by desires
To dive into the dark dungeon?*

*God, as light, has wide arms
To embrace those who dare
Choose whichever path they like.*

*With infinite mercy,
He gives us all the right
To not always side with him.*

*If not choosing is a sin,
Choosing is believing.
Take not what turns to you!*

*The gate through which the poet
(I see him swiveling
His oar and pointing at me.)*

*Came is the only gate
Through which you can escape
A fate grimmer than that*

*Of both the blind angels
And the flag-chasing shades
Who once chose to stand*

On either side of the divide.
(Outside the secular
World where I got lost)

*Don't let these words of mine
Sing past your ear! Catch them,
Follow me, turn and run.*

Inferno

After Domenico di Michelino's *Dante Illuminating Florence with his Poem*

An outstretched hand overhangs
a steady stream of naked,
banner-chasers. They wobble,

arms flailing, down the deep
sunken spiral staircase
into the sanctuary

for a galaxy
of scoundrels gobbled up
by stains that had settled

in the seat of their smelly soul.
Hope stripped bare,
they, standing huddled, swear.

Michelino, why did you hide
what you have heard
in that helical hell?

Babies cry,
saints sigh.
They have nothing to abide by.

Michelino, why did you hide
what you have seen
in this sin-splattered sphere?

Satan stands cool
at the midpoint of the rule.
He has the skill to string us along as his fool.



Dante and Beatrice

After Henry Holiday's *Dante and Beatrice*

Amore mio unico, why do you
hastily betake yourself to a path
too perilous for a pure soul to tread
alone? Stay a while, I beseech you!
Slightly turn to your left side, look at me,
listen to me, and let an aching heart
clear my name right here on the bridge
of Santa Trinità, for it bears witness
to my innocence and passion for you.
Beneath the light, airy cream long dress
your slender legs move alternately
pretty sharpish, in a direction that
might otherwise keep us separate
forever. Stay a while, I beseech you!
For the sake of the single flower you clasp
firmly in your left hand and hold high
to your rattling chest, amore mio,
turn right and look at your erotic self
as she leans backwards, right arm akimbo,
and glances sideways, over your shoulder,
at my steady gaze that is kept fixed on you.
Desires, even though repressed, never stop
fiddling, flirting, and flicking across a heart.
A daredevil, amore mio, you can't hide!
Or turn back to face your melancholy self,
still with your frigid stare, as she moves
sluggishly while dumbly casting an agonized
look at a figure that feels himself falling
at any time without grasping the stone bridge
with the only hand that is not used to
hide an aching heart with blood trickling down.
Amore mio unico, as you
walk swiftly, past my side, away from the bridge,
I dare to say, in the name of Santa Trinità,
that you, both three and one, won't let a heart,
as crumpled as the creases on my black gown,
as pure as yours, be adorned with thick thorns.
How many souls have been trapped in a sham
marriage? Can't you hear the groans coming
from the pigeonholes flanking the River Arno?
Don't dilly-dally, amore mio,

just stay and look at me, I beseech you!



Ying with *Dante and Beatrice* in 2019