

*\* Dante \**



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*Master of the Revelations*

## *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

2



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 am shielded by my allegory*

*I jest, I jest.*

*Whose sense, and intellect, is Love.*  
*Soon will a mighty organ note*  
*Signal my rising, like a mote*  
*In sunshine, to my God above.*

*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!*

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!*

## *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!*

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

*Dante appears to colour a little.  
Have I indeed shamed him, then?*

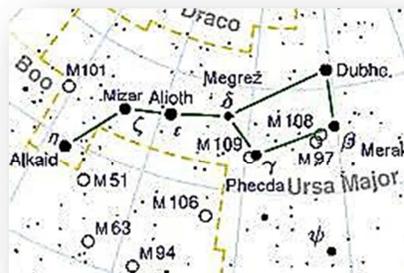


To all its many innocent,  
Natural and unnatural  
Perversities. What you would call  
Sin we will call experiment.

Though of its own self-contradictions  
Your doctrine died ah, centuries past!  
Poetic Genius can outlast  
All antiquated science fictions.

Our angels ride in motor cars.  
Heaven is but a rocket-trip  
Away. How deep the Dippers dip  
Into the dark between the stars!

*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 blessed event in the spring. I will be sure to drop a card on them, if I am ever in the vicinity.*



## *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 Renaissance, 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?  
(Though I admire noble Mazzini.)  
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.*



*Alias 'Ape', society cartoonist.  
And let us not forget Leopardi!*

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  
To trust', nor scapegoat cults to trust  
When they proclaim that they are just.  
Are you evolving toward this thought?*



*Shakespeare, Sonnet 129.  
Dante scowls threateningly at  
the citation, he knits his brows,  
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 Vinteuil 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.*

[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.

**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.**



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

(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.

#### 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.*

*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!*

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.*



*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.*

*How flattering, and unexpected:  
he has read my play, and likes it!*



*I take down a beautiful edition  
de luxe of the Divine Comedy,*