

Guido Cavalcanti

Thirty-Six Selected Poems **including 'Donna me prega'**

'conosco i segni dell'antica fiamma'

Dante: Purgatorio XXX 48

Translated by A. S. Kline ©2007 All Rights Reserved
This work may be freely reproduced, stored, and transmitted, electronically
or otherwise, for any non-commercial purpose.

Contents

‘Fresca rosa novella’	7
Fresh new rose	7
‘Avete ’n vo’ li fior’ e la verdura’	9
You have, in you, the leaves and flowers	9
‘Biltà di donna e di saccente core’	10
A woman’s charms, her perceptive heart.....	10
‘Chi è questa che vèn, ch’ogn’om la mira’	11
Who is this that comes and all admire her,	11
‘Li mie’ foll’ occhi, che prima guardaro’	12
My lovesick eyes that first gazed.....	12
‘Deh, spiriti miei, quando mi vedete’	13
Ah, my spirit, when you see me.....	13
‘L’anima mia vilment’ è sbigotita’	14
My spirit is so vilely distressed.....	14
‘Tu m’hai sì piena di dolor la mente’	15
You have filled my mind with such distress.....	15
‘Perché non fuoro a me gli occhi dispentì’	16
Why were my eyes not quenched,	16
‘Se Mercé fosse amica a’ miei disiri’	17
If Mercy were the friend of my desires,.....	17
‘A me stesso di me pietate vène’	18
Pity for myself, from my self again,	18
‘S’io prego questa donna che Pietate’	19
If I should beg this lady that true pity.....	19
‘O tu, che porti nelli occhi sovente’	20
O you who often bear Love in your eyes.....	20
‘O donna mia, non vedestù colui’	21
O, my lady, have you not seen One	21
‘Io vidi li occhi dove Amor si mise’	22
I saw the eyes where Love resides,.....	22
‘Un amoroso sguardo spiritale’	23
A spiritual, a loving gaze moreover,.....	23
‘Voi che per li occhi mi passaste ‘l core’	24

You who reach my heart through the eyes	24
‘O donna mia, non vedestù colui’	25
O my lady do you not see	25
‘Una giovane donna di Tolosa’	26
In Toulouse a young lady.....	26
‘Pegli occhi fere un spirito sottile’	27
A subtle spirit strikes through the eyes,.....	27
‘Veder poteste, quando v'inscontrai’	28
You, when you look at me, may see	28
‘Vedeste, al mio parere, onne valore’	29
You saw, it seems to me, every worth	29
I’ vegno ‘l giorno a te ‘nfinite volte	30
I visit you daily, and endlessly.....	30
‘Certe mie rime a te mandar vogliendo’	31
Wishing to send you certain of my rhymes	31
‘S’io fosse quelli che d’amor fu degno’	32
If I were one still worthy of love,	32
‘Dante, un sospiro messagger del core’	33
Dante, a sigh from the heart’s core risen	33
‘Io temo che la mia disaventura’	34
My deep misfortune makes me fearful	34
‘Una figura della Donna mia’	35
They worship a statue of my lady	35
‘La bella donna dove Amor si mostra’	36
The lovely lady who is Love for certain,.....	36
‘Ciascuna fresca e dolce fontanella’	37
Every fresh and sweet little fountain,	37
‘Se vedi Amore, assai ti priego, Dante’	38
Dante, I pray you, if you see Amor.....	38
‘Poi che di doglia cor conven ch’i’ porti’	39
Since my heart must bear its weight of grief	39
‘Veggio negli occhi de la donna mia’	40
I see a light in my lady’s eyes.....	40
‘Era in penser d’amor quand’ I’ trovai’	41
Deep in thoughts of love, I came	41
‘Perch’i’ no spero di tornar giammai’	43
As I’ve no hope of returning ever,.....	43

Donna me prega, - per ch'eo voglio dire..... 45
A lady asks me – I speak for such reason..... 45

'cortese e ardito, ma sdegnoso e solitario e intento allo studio'
'courteous and daring, but haughty and solitary and intent on study'

Guido according to Dino Compagni: Cronica I:xx

'Fresca rosa novella'

Fresh new rose
Delighting Spring,
By field and stream,
Singing gaily,
I declare your rarity - to the flowers.

Let your rare gifts be
Freshly sung
By old men and young
On every journey:
And, each in its own tongue,
Let the songbirds sing
Evening and morning
The green leaves among.
Now the time has come
Let the whole world sing
As is most fitting
Of your high merit:
Who are angelic – among creatures.

Lady, in you there sits
An angel's likeness:
Lord, how blessed
My desire is!
Your look so joyous
That goes beyond
Nature and custom's
A thing so wondrous.
The women among us
Call you a living goddess:
And I cannot express
How favoured you seem:
For who can dream – beyond Nature?

Beyond mortal nature
God made your pure beauty
So that you might be
The queen of all here:
So let your gaze from me
Not stray too far away,
And your sweet kindness
Be not cruel to me.
And if you think it wrong
That I should love you,
Don't hold me guilty too:
Love drives me, against whose course
Strength has no force – nor Measure.

‘Avete ’n vo’ li fior’ e la verdura’

You have, in you, the leaves and flowers
All that shines and all that’s sweet to see:
Greater than the sun your face in splendour,
Who sees you not can never worthy be.
In this world there is no creature
So pleasing or so full of beauty:
And he is led, who holds love in terror,
By your face, to desire such inwardly.

Each woman who is with you pleases me,
Through the love you show towards her:
And I pray to her, of her courtesy,
She who can do so best does you most honour.
And shows great care for your sovereignty,
For you are queen of all those who are there.

Note: See Dante, Vita Nuova, XXIV. ‘And the name of this lady was Giovanna, except that because of her beauty, as others believe, she was also named Primavera (*Spring, the first greenness*): and called so’

'Biltà di donna e di saccente core'

A woman's charms, her perceptive heart
Men-at-arms filled with courtesy;
The song of birds, love's reasoning art;
Ships ploughing through a swelling sea;

A gentle breeze in the dawn hours
A windless fall of whitest snow;
A flowing river, meadows all of flowers;
Jewels, silver, lazuli and gold:

Are outweighed in beauty and in worth
By my lady, and her sweet bravery,
That none would be deceived to see her;

And greater than the heavens exceed the earth,
Her heart's knowledge does exceed the many.
So virtue is drawn to what is like in nature.

'Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogn'om la mira'

Who is this that comes and all admire her,
And makes the air tremble with her brightness,
Brings Love with her, so that none who sees her
Has the power to speak, but each man sighs?
Oh, how she seems as she looks all about her,
Let Love himself tell. How can I describe her?
She seems a lady of such gentle aspect,
That all compared to her seem full of pride.

For her sweetness there is no description,
Every gentle virtue bows towards her,
And Beauty makes her its divinity.
Our minds can never soar so high,
Nor have we grace enough inside,
For us to ever know her perfectly.

'Li mie' foll' occhi, che prima guardaro'

My lovesick eyes that first gazed
On your form with virtue fraught,
Were those, Lady, by which I was accused,
In that harsh place where Love holds court,

And there they revealed the proof
That I was rendered your true slave,
So I'm oppressed by sighs and grief,
Seeing that fear my heart engraved.

They dragged me off, gave no respite,
And took me there, where those I saw
Were deeply grieved by love, every one,

Who, on seeing me, cried at the sight:
'Now are you servant of such a lord
From whom is hope for death alone.'

Note: This image of Love's sad kingdom is echoed
in Dante's Inferno – See the Paolo and Francesca
episode.

'Deh, spiriti miei, quando mi vedete'

Ah, my spirit, when you see me
In such pain, why do you not send
Words from the mind, adorned then
With weeping, and distress and grief?

Ah, you see how my heart is wounded
By her glance, her charms, her meekness:
Ah, ease, I pray you, its deep distress,
Heart from which virtue has departed.

To it a spirit has appeared, I see,
Noble and courteous, of that ilk
So that from it all its powers flee,

Ah, I pray you will deign to greet
The sad soul, who in grief speaks still,
Of what Love does to her and will.

'L'anima mia vilment' è sbigotita'

My spirit is so vilely distressed
By the war raging in my heart:
It dies if it feels Love's slightest start
Touch more than usually: apart,

Powerless it exists, void of art,
Shut from the heart by fearfulness;
And he who saw its flight would, yes,
Declare: 'It lacks the living breath.'

Through the eye war entered me,
That beat down all defences so
The mind was shattered by its blow.

Whoever shall see my spirit go,
One who might live more happily,
Might weep for me, with pity.

'Tu m'hai sì piena di dolor la mente'

You have filled my mind with such distress
That my spirit is minded to depart,
And my weary eyes display no less
The sighs that rise from the grieving heart.

Love knowing your great nobility
Says: 'I am saddened you must die
Of this proud lady, she who hears only
What shows you pity with its sigh.'

I am like a man who leaves this life,
And, to those who gaze at him, is found
As if made of bronze or wood or stone,

Who in his heart bears a wound
That by its sole mastery is grown
To be of heart's-death an open sign.

'Perché non fuoro a me gli occhi dispentì'

Why were my eyes not quenched,
Or stolen, so that from my seeing
Nothing came to my mind saying:
'Listen, do you feel me in your heart?'

Fear of new torments' beginning,
Filled me then, so sharp, cruel a blade,
The spirit cried: 'Lady, now bring aid,
So my eyes and I are not left grieving.

You have left them: so Love may start
Weeping, concerning them, so piteously,
That there is heard a much deeper voice

Saying: 'Who knows what pain may be,
Gaze on this man and view his heart,
Death bears in its hand, cut like a cross.

'Se Mercé fosse amica a' miei disiri'

If Mercy were the friend of my desires,
And its movement found a source
In that sweet lady's heart, its force
Dealt the virtue that my pain requires;

All my sighs of anguished delight,
Born of the mind where Love is seated
That of grief, alone, go speaking
And find no one to welcome them aright,

Would return to the eyes with force again,
Such that harsh and bitter tears would charm
Transmuted into happiness and joy.

But grief on the heart does such ill employ,
And does the sad spirit so much harm
That of disdain no one will greet them.

'A me stesso di me pietate vène'

Pity for myself, from my self again,
Arises for the fierce anguish I admit
In myself, great weakness when I sit,
Feeling my spirit so racked with pain,

All consumes me, it is my true belief
My health grows worse with such anguish;
This new lady whose mercy I wish
Maintains the battleground of grief,

For when I merely gaze towards her
Her eyes turn to me with disdain,
So harshly, that my heart is broken.

Then all power departs from there,
And the heart serves for a clear sign
That Love's cruelty has spoken.

'S'io prego questa donna che Pietate'

If I should beg this lady that true pity
Might be no enemy to her gentle heart,
She'd call me foolish and vile my art,
And desperate and filled with vanity.

Where do you find these cruelties afresh?
To him who looks, you still seem humble,
Wise and adorned, cautious and subtle,
Fashioned in all the ways of sweetness!

My fearful and grieving spirit
Weeps with the sighs found in the heart,
That drowned in tears now will fly.

Then through the mind there flows apart,
The image of a lady, full of thought,
Come here to see that same heart die.

'O tu, che porti nelli occhi sovente'

O you who often bear Love in your eyes
Carrying three arrows in his hand,
In this, my thought come from afar
Commends to you a grieving spirit,

Already twice wounded in the mind
By the arrows of the Syrian archer;
A third time bends his bow so lightly,
He touches me not you being present:

Because of which my soul is saved
Almost sunk in every member, dead
Of two arrows dealing triple wounds:

The first is one of disquieting pleasure,
The second of desire filled with longing
For the great joy that the third wound brings.

'O donna mia, non vedestù colui'

O, my lady, have you not seen One
Who laid his hand on my heart, when
I answered you so softly, tamely,
Because I feared his blows?

He was Love, that one who found us,
Come from far, but standing by me,
In a Syrian bowman's likeness,
Solely set to conquer others.

Drawing sighs from out your eyes,
He fired them deep into my heart,
So I was forced to flee in terror,

Till swiftly Death revealed himself
Surrounded by those sufferings
Which drown all men with sorrow.

'Io vidi li occhi dove Amor si mise'

I saw the eyes where Love resides,
When he filled me with fearfulness,
Gazing at me as if I caused distress:
Then I say the heart was torn inside;

And were it not that my lady smiled,
I would speak in such a grievous wise
That Love himself would be crucified
Who made the form by which I am beguiled.

A spirit from Heaven flew to take my part
The instant she deigned to gaze at me,
And came to stand within my mind;

That all Love's truth I might find,
And all his powers seem visible to me
As though I'd reached to his very heart.

'Un amoroso sguardo spiritale'

A spiritual, a loving gaze moreover,
Revived Love in me so joyously
That he assails me more than ever
And drives me on in thought pleasantly

Towards my lady, for whom never
The mercy, pity, torment I feel aid me,
Who overwhelms me, makes me suffer,
So that my heart senses life but barely.

But when I feel her sweet glance
Pass through the eyes to the heart
Setting there a spirit of joy

Then to her I readily give thanks
She was begged to do so by Love's art
That a little pity might not bring annoy.

'Voi che per li occhi mi passaste 'l core'

You who reach my heart through the eyes
And wake my mind's dormant light,
Take notice of the anguish of my life,
That Love himself destroys with sighs,

And lays about him now so bravely
That my weakened spirits start to flee.
Only the head remains of the target
And a fractured voice to tell of grief.

This power of Love that has undone me
Came to me swiftly from your eyes.
He hurled the dart that caused me pain.

So fierce the blow arrived, and instantly,
Fearful the spirit shrank back in surprise
Seeing the heart within its left side slain.

'O donna mia, non vedestù colui'

O my lady do you not see
Him who has set his hand on my heart
When I reply to you softly, faintly,
For fear of the blows he deals with art?

It was Love that coming from afar
To meet with us, now dwells with me,
In Syrian guise, swift in archery
Whose only joy is his skill in war.

And drawing sighs from your eyes,
Pierces my heart with them so sorely,
That I depart in dismay, fleeing.

Then Death drives me from safety,
Accompanied by such tormented cries,
That are wont to mask all other weeping.

'Una giovane donna di Tolosa'

In Toulouse a young lady
Gentle and lovely, of sweet modesty,
Is within her eyes exactly
So akin to my own lady

She has roused in the heart a spirit
Of longing, that now strays from it
And goes to her but all fearfully
For it cannot say who is its lady.

She gazes at it with that sweet art
That made Love himself rejoice
Because his true lady lives within.

Then back to the heart with sighs it goes
Wounded to death by that sharp dart
This lady casts as she's departing.

'Pegli occhi fere un spirito sottile'

A subtle spirit strikes through the eyes,
That rouses a spirit in the mind,
From which a spirit of love will rise,
Makes other spirits nobly inclined.

No base spirit can comprehend him,
How much power he brings with him:
He is the breath that makes men tremble,
The breath that makes women humble.

Yet from this spirit another flows
Another sweet and gentle spirit,
That a little breath of mercy follows:

From which breath, spirits rain free
That hold the key to every spirit,
By virtue of one that sees all these.

Note: This is closely related to the scenario
depicted in *Donna me prega*.

'Veder poteste, quando v'inscontrai'

You, when you look at me, may see
That fearful spirit of Love that ever
Appears when a man is facing death
And never in any other manner.

It pressed me so close, I thought
It would slay the heart grieving so,
My sad mind this dead colour sought
That suits the will that's drawn to woe.

Yet he drew back when he saw a light
Of mercy that issued from your eyes,
That brought the heart new sweetness,

And then the subtle spirit of sight
Rescued the rest, who looked to die,
Burdened with misery and anguish.

'Vedeste, al mio parere, onne valore'

(To Dante, in answer to the first sonnet of the Vita Nuova.)

You saw, it seems to me, every worth
And every joy and good a man may feel
If in the power of that brave lord indeed
Who rules in honour over all the Earth,

Yet lives in a place where vileness fades,
Employing reason in the mind's deep;
Reaching people so softly in their sleep,
He takes their hearts without their feeling pain.

Love took the heart from you, knowing
That Death was calling for your lady,
And fed her with the heart, in fear of it,

And when it seemed to you he left so sadly
Then was the dream sweet at its ending,
Yielding victory to its opposite.

Note: See Dante: Vita Nuova III. 'I decided to shape a *sonetto*, in which I would greet all those faithful to Amor: and begging them to interpret my vision, I wrote for them what I had seen in my sleep. And then I began this *sonetto*, that which begins: *A ciascun'alma presa e gentil core*. There were replies from many to this sonnet and of differing interpretation: among those who replied was one whom I call the foremost of my friends, and he wrote then a sonnet, that which begins: '*Vedeste, al mio parere, onne valore*: You saw, it seems to me, every worth.'.... And this was virtually the beginning of the friendship between him and myself, when he knew that it was I who had made the request of him. The true meaning of that dream was not then seen by anyone, but now it is clear to the most unknowing.'

I' vegno 'l giorno a te 'nfinite volte

*(To Dante, rebuking him for his way of life
after the death of Beatrice.)*

I visit you daily, and endlessly
And you, forever, in base thoughts I find:
It grieves me so that from your noble mind
Much of the power is stripped it seems.

Lightly scornful of many minds;
Always fleeing the people's harm;
Speaking of me so from the heart,
I would welcome your every rhyme.

Now I dare not, your life being so vile,
Give any proof that your words please me
Nor come to you, that you might see me,

Yet if you read this sonnet frequently,
The evil spirit that pursues you closely
Summoned will vanish from your soul.

'Certe mie rime a te mandar vogliendo'

Wishing to send you certain of my rhymes
Showing the grievous state of my heart
Love in the shape of Death appeared apart
And spoke: 'Send not, lest I scorn your lines,

Since if your friend is the one I know
His mind has not the power I bring,
To hear of every sad and joyless thing
That you withstand while burning so,

He has not undergone such deep dismay
That he might hear your thoughts anew
Without the life departing from his heart.

And you know I am Love; who by my art
Leave this likeness of me here with you
And bear your every thought far away.'

Note: This identification of Love with Death
bears on *Donna me prega* once more.

'S'io fosse quelli che d'amor fu degno'

(A reply to Dante's: 'Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io')

If I were one still worthy of love,
Of whom I now only own remembrance,
And if the lady had another likeness,
The thing might please me well enough.

Yet you who from love's domain return
Where mercy gives birth to hopefulness,
See my spirit weighed with heaviness:
For a swift archer makes of it a target

And draws the bow Love strings
So lightly, you'd say by his face
He treated his lordship as a jest.

Now hear the wonder I express:
The wounded spirit pardons him
Knowing it is his power destroys it.

'Dante, un sospiro messenger del core'

Dante, a sigh from the heart's core risen
Assailed me suddenly while I was sleeping,
So that I then woke, in fear and trembling,
Lest it came with Love as its companion.

Then I turned, seeing the attendant
Of Monna Lagia who stood there saying:
'Aid me, Pity' so that with weeping
So much in me of mercy's power entered,

That I knew Love, whetting javelins.
And then I asked of him his torments,
And then he answered in this guise:

'Say to the servant that the lady's won,
And I reserve her for his enjoyment;
If he'd believe, let him gaze in her eyes.'

Note: Monna Lagia was loved by Lapo Gianni.

'Io temo che la mia disventura'

My deep misfortune makes me fearful
Of lacking the power to say: 'I despair',
Yet I feel a thought in my heart here
That makes the mind with fear tremble,

Saying: 'Love grants you no ease
Of manner, that you might lightly tell
Your lady the truth of all your ill
Lest Death cloak you in his reality.'

With the great grief the spirit feels
A sigh issues from the heart of me,
That goes saying: 'Spirits, flee!'

Then oh for a man who knows pity,
Who might comfort my grieving soul
Saying to them: 'Spirits, do not go!'

'Una figura della Donna mia'

(To Guido Orlandi: of a statue resembling his Lady)

They worship a statue of my lady
At San Michele in Orto, my Guido,
And in that image humble, pious, lovely,
Sinners find sanctuary and safe harbour.

Whoever kneels to her with devotion,
The worse they are, the more they're comforted,
The ill are cured, and rid of inner demons,
And squinting eyes set perfect in the head.

She heals great sickness in that public place;
The people bow before her reverently;
And two bright candles are lit for her.

Her voice reaches out to distant ways,
Though Franciscans cry idolatry,
Out of envy that she's none of theirs.

'La bella donna dove Amor si mostra'

The lovely lady who is Love for certain,
Amor, full of valour and adorned,
Draws the heart out of your very person:
Takes your life away with her new-born,

Since her cloister's guarded so sweetly
As every unicorn of India knows,
And virtue arms it for the fierce tourney;
Every fault receives its counter-blow,

For she is surely of so great a value,
That she lacks no aspect of the good,
Except that Nature made her mortal.

Yet Providence is present in this too:
In that in her your understanding should,
Through knowledge, what is like to it recall.

'Ciascuna fresca e dolce fontanella'

*(A reply to a sonnet of Bernardo da Bologna
commending Bernardo's lady Pinella who reacted
to a sigh of Guido's on seeing him)*

Every fresh and sweet little fountain,
In Galicia, gains clarity and virtue
Bernardo my friend, from her alone,
Who in your keen rhyme replies to you:

So in that place where Amor discourses
Of every single beauty he has viewed,
He says this grace, loveliest of sources
Has gathered to herself all graces new.

So that the grief I own is more grave;
With that sigh I gave, that from me lit
That burning heart in a troubled ship,

I send to Pinella now a tide that's full
Of hosts of mermaids, served by slaves
Nobly dressed, adorned, and beautiful.

'Se vedi Amore, assai ti priego, Dante'

Dante, I pray you, if you see Amor
In any place where our Lapo's present
If it gives your mind no trouble, send
And tell me whether he is named a lover,

And if the lady seems to approve him,
And whether he seems rightly overcome;
For, by custom, often that sort of man,
Will only display a semblance of loving.

You know that in the royal court of Love
No man can be a servant, if he's vile,
To any woman wandering in that city,

And if a servant's suffering will move,
Even scant knowledge of our *sweet style*
Shows that it bears the marks of pity.

Note: I take this as a reference to the *dolce stil nuova*
of Dante's and Cavalcanti's circle.

'Poi che di doglia cor conven ch'i' porti'

Since my heart must bear its weight of grief
And feel the burning fire now of pleasure,
And fall from virtue to so base a measure,
I'll tell how I've lost all that had value.
And how my spirits wither in the leaf,
How heart knows little life and greater war;
And if Death did not delight me more,
How I'd make Love weep for pity too.
But now the time of folly is upon me,
I change from out my fixed opinion
Into the contrary condition,
So that I show not how I am aggrieved:
There where I am deceived,
How through my heart a lover passed,
And in her passing all I had was lost.

'Veggio negli occhi de la donna mia'

I see a light in my lady's eyes
Filled as it is with the spirit of love
That in my heart makes new delight move
So joyful life issues from there too.

What befalls when I am in her presence,
The intellect alone cannot explain:
I see a lovely lady born again
From her lips, which mind nor sense
Can comprehend, and whence
Another of fresh beauty rises,
Out of whom a star moves and says:
'Your salvation has appeared to you.'

There where this lovely lady appears
A voice is heard that sounds her way
And humbly there it sings her name
So sweet that if I wish to sing, the fear
I feel of her worth makes me quiver;
While sighs, in my soul, that stir
Cry: 'Gaze: if you look on her,
See the ascent to heaven of her virtue.'

'Era in penser d'amor quand' I' trovai'

Deep in thoughts of love, I came
On two young maids,
One sang: 'It rains
On us, the joy of love.'

Their faces were so calm and sweet,
With modesty and courtesy,
I said to them: 'You hold the key
Of all virtue and nobility.
Ah, young maids, do not scorn me
Because of the wound that I carry,
My heart has been dead inside me
Since I left Toulouse.'

They turned their gaze towards me so
They might see how I was wounded
And how a spirit born of sorrow
From my wound's deep centre issued.
When they saw me so destroyed,
One of them smiled and said:
'See how this man is conquered
By the power of love.'

The other filled with mercy, pity,
Made for joy, in Love's likeness,
Said: 'Your heart's wound I see
Came from eyes of such excess,
Such power, they left within, a brightness
I cannot endure:
Tell me if you recall
Those eyes in you.'

To this harsh and fearful question
That the young maid asked of me,
I said: 'In Toulouse I remember
There appeared an elegant lady,
Whom Love called la Mandetta: she
Struck me so fiercely, suddenly
To death, with her eyes, inwardly,
Through and through.'

She who had laughed at me before
Now replied most courteously:
'She, who set herself with Love's power
In your heart, gazed so fixedly
Into and through your eyes, that she
Made Love, himself, appear there.
If it's deeply that you suffer
Turn to Love.'

Go to Toulouse, my little ballad,
Enter the Gilded Church there quietly,
Ask of some lovely lady, clearly,
To take you, out of courtesy,
To her of whom I told you fully:
And if you are received,
Say to her softly: 'See,
For mercy I come to you.'

'Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai'

As I've no hope of returning ever,
Little ballad, lightly, softly,
Go yourself, to Tuscany,
Go straight to my lady,
Who of her great courtesy
Will show you highest honour.

You will bring her news of sighs,
Filled with pain, and great with fear:
But take care to meet no eyes
Hostile to a gentle nature:
My disadvantage then for sure
You'd work, like one opposed,
And be by her reproved,
And so prove pain for me:
So that after my death there'd be,
Weeping and fresh dolour.

Little ballad, you know that death
Grips me so that life deserts me,
Know how my heart with every breath
Beats hard, as the spirits speak inside me.
So much of my Being's now undone,
I can scarcely suffer longer:
So if you would serve me further,
Take my soul along with you,
Fervently I beg of you,
As it leaps from out my heart, here.

O, little ballad, now I yield
This trembling soul to your friendship,
In its sorrow, take it with you,
To the sweet one to whom I send it.
Oh, little ballad, sighing say
To her, when you're presented:
'Your servant comes
To be with you,
He leaves one,
Who was Love's servant'

You, little weak and fearful voice
Issuing from the sad heart weeping,
Go with my soul, and this little song,
And tell her of my mind that's ruined.
You'll find a tender woman there,
Of an intellect so sweet,
That it will be delight complete
For you to leave her never.
And then, my soul, adore her,
Worthy as she is, for ever.

Donna me prega, - per ch'eo voglio dire

A lady asks me – I speak for such reason
Of an effect – that so often – is daring
And so haughty – he's called Amore:
He who denies him – now realise the truth!
I speak – to those present – with knowledge, 5
Owning no expectation – that the base-hearted
Can gain understanding through explanation:
Nor that – without practical demonstration
I have the talent – to prove at will
Where he lives, or who gave him creation, 10
Or what his power is, or what his virtue,
His essence too – and his every movement,
Nor the delight – so that we say 'to love',
Nor whether a man can show him to gazing.

In the place – that memory inhabits 15
He has his station – and takes on form
Like a veil of light – born of that shadow
Which is of Mars – that arrives and remains;
He is created – has sensation – name,
From the soul, manner – from the heart, will. 20
And comes from visible form that takes on,
And embraces – in possible intellect,
As in the subject – location and dwelling.
And yet he has no weight in that state
Since he is not as a quality descending: 25
Shines out – of himself perpetual impression;
Takes no delight – except in awareness;
Nor can scatter his likenesses around.
He is not virtue – but out of that comes
Which is perfection – (so self-established), 30
And through feeling – not rationally, I say;
Beyond balance – yet proclaiming judgement,
That will itself – 'stead of reason – is valid:
Poor in discernment – so vice is his friend.

Oft from his power then death will follow, 35
He's strong – and, virtue opposing him,
Thus runs counter to what brings succour:
Not that he is by nature in conflict;
But twisted awry from true perfection
By fate – no man possessor of life can say 40
That once established – he has no lordship.
Likewise he has power though men forget.

He comes into being – when will is such
That a further measure – of nature's – at play;
Then he will never adorn himself – with rest. 45
Moving – changing colour, laughing through tears,
Contorting – the features – with signatures of fear;
Scarce pausing; – yet you will note of him
He's most often found with people of worth.
His strange quality gives rise to sighing, 50
And makes a man gaze – into formless places
Arousing the passion that stirs a flame,
(No man can imagine him who's not known him)
Unmoving – yet he draws all towards him,
Not turning about – to discover joy: 55
Nor minded to know whether great or small.
From his like he elicits – the complex glance
That makes – the pleasure – appear more certain:
Nor can stay hidden – when he is met with.
Not savage indeed – yet beauty his arrow, 60
So that desire – for fear is – made skilful:
Following all merit – in the piercing spirit.
Nor can be comprehended from the face:
Seen – as blankness fallen among objects;
Listening deep – yet seeing not form itself: 65
But led by what emanates from it.
Far from colour, of separate being,
Seated – in midst of darkness, skirting the light,
Yet far from all deceit – I say, worthy of trust,
So that compassion is born from him alone. 70

Canzone, confidently, now you may go
Wherever you please, I've adorned you so
Your reasoning – will be praised by everyone
Who makes the effort to comprehend you: though
You will reveal no art to other than them.

75

Note: *Donna me prega* expresses a view of Love, Amore, as a darkness born of Mars (17-18) not of Venus, which enters the intellect (21-28), displaces reason, and directs the will towards its likeness (57-66) a process which threatens a fatal (35) confusion. Noble spirits are stirred by it since it has virtues (69-70) but it tends to obscure the light of the intellect (36-56) and twist it awry. The challenge to reason is overcome only by self-control, and love's delights have no ideal meaning. Dante took a fundamentally different position, where love is positive and progressive from physical to intellectual to spiritual realms. Guido's characterisation of Love (64-68) forms a powerful image, and I would relate Guido to Marlowe and Shelley in his possible atheism, his proud individualistic character, and his political involvement, but above all in this sense of the dark chaotic forces which stem from passion, and can initiate the war of the head and the heart.

