



# Dante's *Inferno* References & Notes

Th. Curran ~ October 22 and 24, 2018

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# Commedia of Dante Alighieri, the Florentine

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...*

“Midway upon the journey of our life...”

B. Raffel: "Halfway along the road of this our life..."

- Psalm 90, v10: “The days of our years [are] threescore years and ten...”
- Dante born Florence 1265, died Ravenna in 1321



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Pusillanimous → Magnanimous



## Dante's *Comedy*

A vision that Dante reports from the year 1300 – is an allegory (*allos*) = a story that tells another story; as Dante explains to his patron Can Grande: its purpose is to move the reader from a state of misery to bliss **in this life**.



# “When Israel came out of Egypt” Ps 113/114

Transfer of the corpse from House to Churchyard and Burial

- Sayers *Inferno*
- 1) Letter; Literal = exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt in the days of Moses;
- 2) Allegorical = our redemption wrought in Christ
- 3) Moral Sense = we are shown the conversion of the soul from the grief and wretchedness of sin to the state of grace
- 4) Anagogical = we are shown the departure of the holy soul from the thralldom of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory..
- mystical meanings... in general allegorical, since they differ from the literal and historical.



# Jubilee



Pope Boniface VIII (tenure of office: 1294-1303) declares a Jubilee year on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1300 – pilgrims, who visit Rome, and pay pious honour to Saints Peter and Paul, are promised plenary [“entire, absolute, unqualified”] “pardon of all their sins” [cf. Leviticus 25, vv8-17: “proclaim liberty throughout all the land to its inhabitants”].

## *Paradiso xxv: 55-58: Beatrice:*

“... thus it is granted to him to come from  
Egypt / into Jerusalem that he have vision /  
of it, before his term of warring ends.”

[“Hence, leave to come from Egypt he has  
won,

To see Jerusalem, though many a year

His soldiering on earth has yet to run.”

(tr. by D.L. Sayers)]



*de Monarchia* ~ III.xvi 3ff  
tr. by H.W. Schneider



... man alone of all beings occupies a midway [ *medium* ] between the corruptible and incorruptible. Hence he has been rightly likened by philosophers to the horizon, which is between two hemispheres... Accordingly, if man is a kind of mean between the corruptible and incorruptible, like every mean, he partakes of the nature of the extremes. And since every nature is arranged to seek its proper and final goal, it follows that man exists for a dual purpose...



*Vita Nuova; c. 1293;*  
trans by Mark Musa

Concluding Section: XLII:

"... if it be the pleasure of Him through whom all things live that my life continue for a few more years, I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman."



# Exile

1302 Dante sentenced to death *in absentia*:  
beginning of his (permanent) exile from  
Florence [cf. the prophecy in *Paradiso* xvii.55-  
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“You will leave everything you love most  
dearly... You will learn how salt is the taste of  
other people’s bread, and how hard the way  
going up and down other people’s stairs.” —  
also Ezekiel 24, vv15-18]



# Exile



- January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1302: Dante found guilty of barratry, extortion and resistance to the Pope;
- March 10<sup>th</sup>: Dante permanently banned from returning to Florence under penalty of death.
- During these proceedings, Dante “was on an official Florentine embassy at the papal court in Rome” [G.A. Trone].

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# Scholastic Tag

Distinguish in order to unite



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## Erwin Panofsky:

“synthesize all major motifs/ strands handed down by separate channels...”





# The (Divine) Comedy: Patterns

33 Cantos repeated 3 Times

$3 \times 3 = 9 = \text{Beatrice}$

Leopard, Lion, She-Wolf ... Greyhound

Incontinence, Violence, Fraud ... Redemption



# Romance

- Inferno:

the Lover discovers his unworthiness

- Purgatorio:

the Lover goes on a quest, and is ennobled

- Paradiso:

the Lady deigns to smile upon,  
acknowledge the Lover





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# Aristotle

- Cowardice
- Hopeless
- Carelessness
- Violence



# The Privation, the Erosion of Community:

- Mutuality, Isolation, Mutual Antagonism  
(Inverted Community)
- The Hatred of Neighbour, The Hatred of Self  
... Violence



# Sin

- Sins against God and His Church
- Sins against Nature
- Sin against the Community



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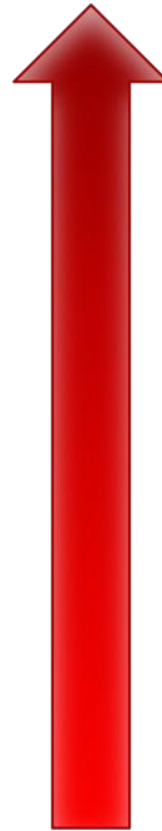
## The 9<sup>th</sup> Circle of the Inferno:

- Kin
- Country
- Guests
- Liege Lords



# 7 Deadly Sins: Ascending

- Lust
- Gluttony
- Avarice
- Sloth
- Wrath
- Envy
- Pride



# Letter to Can Grande



1. Comedy not Tragedy: not a state of nobility to a state of confusion, degeneracy and corruption; but from a state of corruption to nobility
2. Written in the Vernacular: the gravity of Tragedy, against the levity of Romance; Italian, the inheritor of the Troubadour Tradition of Provençal, and “the sweet new style”
3. My *Commedia* belongs to that branch of philosophy called **Ethics**, because its purpose to move the reader from a state of misery to bliss **in this life**.

# Beatrice



Dante explains in *The New Life*, Beatrice Portinari — whom Dante may have met as a youth in Florence [in *Vita Nuova*, Chapter ii, Dante indicates that when he was in his 9<sup>th</sup> year, she who “was called Beatrice” for the first time “appeared before my eyes”], may have, before her untimely early death, married into one of the leading Florentine banking families — is a 9 [nine is the first square of an odd number; it is also the number that indicates “completion” (Dominic J. O’Meara)].

# Beatrice



Chapter xxix: “Now, according to the Arabian way of reckoning time, her most noble soul departed from us in the ninth hour of the ninth day of the month; according to the Syrian method, she died in the ninth month... I say that she herself was this number nine; I mean this as an analogy... The number three is the root of nine, because, independent of any other number, multiplied by itself alone, it makes nine, as we see quite plainly when we say three times three are nine... then this lady was accompanied by the number nine to convey that she was a nine, that is, a miracle, of which the root, that is, of the miracle, in nothing other than the miraculous Trinity itself.” **NB:** According to Christian Scripture, Christ died at Golgotha at the ninth hour; cf. T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (line 68):

“With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.”



# Castaway

Canto i.22:

And just as he who, with exhausted breath  
having escaped from sea to shore, turns back  
to watch the dangerous waters he has quit,  
so did my spirit, still a fugitive,  
turn back to look intently at the pass  
that never has let any man survive.



# Trinity



- 100 Cantos =  $33 \times 3 = 1$ ; Trinity/Life of Christ ... the name of Christ is never rhymed ... **Stelle**
- Each stanza is a Trinitarian Mediation. Father and Son are mediated by the Holy Spirit, which drives the narrative of the epic forward
- The vision begins at the end of Holy Week in the year 1300, and the idea is that Dante accompanies Christ into his journey both to death and Hell on Good Friday, 1300... a year of Jubilee

## *Inferno i.2*

*...mi ritrovai per una selva oscura*

*v. 36: ritornar...*



## *Terza rima: 1.34-42:*

*volto... cammino... vòlto.*

*mattino ... stelle ... divino*

*belle ... cagione ... pelle*

The stop line (and last line) of each *cantica*: **stelle**

The last line in the poem as a whole: a quotation from Aristotle



# Canto 1. 5-9: A Shadowed Forest



... that savage forest, dense and difficult,  
which even in recall renews my fear [*la paura*]:  
so bitter — death is hardly more severe!  
But to retell the good discovered there,  
I'll also tell the other things I saw.  
[*la paura* = 5 times in the first 53 lines]

## i.37: Sunrise

The time was the beginning of the morning

[Good Friday, 1300];

the sun was rising...

ii.1:

The day was now departing; the dark air ...

[Descent into Hell]



## ii.31: Neither Aeneas nor Paul

But why should I go there? Who sanctions it?  
For I am not Aeneas, am not Paul;  
nor I nor others think myself so worthy [of such grace].



## ii.44: Magnanimous Vergil

“the shade of that great soul”

*del magnanimo quell' ombra*

cf. x.73





## Canto 1. 70-75: Vergil

And I was born, though late, *sub Julio*,  
and lived in Rome, under the good Augustus —  
the season of the false and lying gods.

I was a poet, and I sang the righteous  
son of Anchises, who had come from Troy  
when flames destroyed the pride of Ilium.

But why do you return [*ritorni*] to wretchedness?



Mary ~ Lucia ~ Beatrice :  
seated next to Rachel  
ii.76:



“O donna di virtù...”

“O Lady of virtue, the sole reason why  
the human race surpasses all that lies  
beneath the heaven...”

## Virtù 2: 10

- Dante to Vergil:
- “Poet, you who are my guide, see if the **virtù** in me is strong enough...”
- Durling: my **strength**; Ciardi: can I be **worthy**?
- Hollander: my **powers**; Thornton: my **abilities**



## Canto 2: 58-69 [tr. Durling:]



“O courteous Mantuan soul, whose fame still lasts in the world and will last as far as the world will go, my friend, not the friend of fortune, on the deserted shore is so blocked in his journey that he has turned back for fear [*paura*]; ... help him so that I may be consoled.”

## Canto 2: 70-75 [tr. AM:]



“For I am Beatrice who send you on;  
I come from where I most long to return;  
Love [*amor*] prompted me, that Love makes  
me speak.  
When once again I stand before my Lord,  
then I shall often let Him hear your praises.”

## *Paradiso xxxiii.19-20*

St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153): “The Troubadour of Our Lady”

The final Canto of the *Comedy* begins with hymn to the Virgin Mother:

“In you compassion is, in you is pity, in you is generosity...”

[*in te magnificenza*; Hollander: “munificence”]

Munificence = “magnificent generosity”;

synonym for magnanimity; and the opposite of stinginess, mean-spiritedness, small-mindedness, pettiness



# *La tua magnificenza in me*

## *Paradiso xxxi.88-91*

Dante to Beatrice:

“Keep your munificence alive in me, so that my soul, which you have healed ...” This was my prayer.

- “Preserve the great things you have done in me, so that my soul, which you have made whole...” Thus I prayed... [Durling]
- Evan King: Dante is asking that Beatrice’s virtue may keep him from falling back into cowardice; may she enable to keep this vision for the rest of his life.



## *Vita nuova xxxix*



- One day, about the ninth hour, there arose in me ... a powerful vision, in which I seemed to see that glorious Beatrice clothed in those crimson garments with which she first appeared to my eyes...
- xlii: After I wrote this sonnet there came to me a miraculous vision in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this blessed one until I would be capable of writing about her in a nobler way.



## Vestibule: Canto 3: 35-50 [tr. Durling:]



“the miserable souls who lived without infamy and without praise... They have no hope of death... The world permits no fame of them to exist; mercy and justice alike distain them...”

# Henry Carrigan Notes: Northwestern UP; Canto Four

p. 525: Apart from the Bible, Dante quotes Aristotle more than any other source in his poem.



## Carrigan ii: Canto Four

Diogenes (412-323 BC) founded the Cynics ... self-control and asceticism as a path to virtue.

Democritus (460-361 BC) ... material reality was composed of atoms that moved about randomly.

Thales (635-545 BC) ... pre-Socratic Greek philosopher who believed that water was the foundational element of all material reality.

Anaxagoras (550-428 BC) was Euripides' teacher ... he taught there was a spiritual presence within material reality.



## Carrigan iii: Canto Four

Heraclitus (b. 500 BC) believed that material reality was ever-changing and could be perceived best by the senses. He famously said that individuals could not step in the same stream twice.

Zeno is either Zeno of Cyprus (336-264 BC) who founded the Stoic school of philosophy, or Zeno of Elea (490-430 BC) an early mathematician.

Empedocles (5th C BC)... taught that strife between Love and Hate was an essential element in the formation, destruction, and renewal of the universe.



## Summary Canto V

Semiramis, widow of Nisus, legendary Queen of Babylon; her offence: the violation of the code of law.

Dido, Queen of Carthage; committed suicide after the tragedy with Aeneas; vow breaker

Cleopatra; followed the Pharaonic tradition of marrying her brother; last Queen of Egypt, died by her own hand, 30 BCE

Helen, adulterous in her flight from Sparta; Paris (also found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Circle of the Inferno); cause of the Trojan War



## Summary Canto V

Achilles, according to legend, besotted with the daughter (Polyxena) of Priam, the King of Troy; for her sake intended to betray his Greek comrades at arms

Tristan (and Isolde) betrayed King Mark – as his envoy; served as a model for the narratives concerning Lancelot and Guinevere

Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta (the ruling family of Rimini); brother Gianciotto [Lame John], whom Francesca married c. 1275); crime of passion; Francesca's betrothed in Caina



# Diomedes: Carrigan



- King of Argos: “joined in punishment” with Odysseus.
- “Neither Homer nor other ancient sources record this last voyage of Odysseus... purely Dante’s invention...”

## Statius, *Thebaid* xii.427-442



- "...but they ask him, whosoever he be, to admit in peace and mercy one to share his last ashes and mingle their shades. See, once more the brothers...
- The flames gush up divided at the top, flashing two tips in broken light... The very logs shifted their weight and moved a little way apart. The maiden cries in terror: 'We are lost, we have stirred up dead anger. It was his brother... It lives, the monstrous hate, it lives! War has achieved nothing...'



# Ravenna



- The last years of the poet's life were spent at Ravenna, where he was offered asylum by Guido Nevella da Polenta, the nephew of the famous Francesca da Rimini, the only woman sinner who actually speaks in the *Inferno*.
- p. xv (Mark Musa) friendship with Can Grande della Scala

# *Look Back in Anger* John Osborne (1957)



- Act I
- Jimmy Porter:
- The Lady Pusillanimous...
- Pusillanimous. Adjective. Wanting of firmness of mind, **of small courage**, having a little mind, mean spirited, **cowardly, timid of mind**. From the Latin pusillus, very little, and animus, the mind.

# Augustine, *Confessions* VII.xiii.19



- H. Chadwick:
- I no longer wished individual things to be better, because I considered the totality. Superior things are self-evidently better than inferior. Yet **with sounder judgment** I held that all things taken together are better than superior things by themselves.
- I no longer wished for a better world, because I was thinking of the whole of creation, **and in the light of this clearer discernment** I had come to see that though the higher things are better than the lower, the sum of all creation is better than the higher things alone. {Penguin}

# Augustine, *Confessions* VII.xx.26



- “...the difference between **presumption and confession**, between those who see the goal but not the way to it and the Way to our beatific homeland, a homeland to be not merely descried but lived in.”
- [Chadwick:]
- “...the difference between **presumption and confession**, between those who see what the goal is but not how to get there and those who see the way which leads to the home of bliss, not merely as an end to be perceived but as a realm to live in.”

# Augustine, Sermo

- "Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.; do not despair: one of the thieves was saved."



## *Purgatorio xviii: 103-105*



- Purgatorio xviii: 103-105:
- The encouragement of the Slothful:
- “Quick, quick, / lest time be lost through insufficient love; / where urge for good is keen, grace finds new green.”
- [Esolen: “Zeal in well-doing makes grace green again.”]

## Sayers xiii: 133-142:

“No one should ever be too self-assured  
In judgement, like a farmer reckoning  
His gains before the corn-crop is matured,

For I have seen the briar a prickly thing  
And tough the winter through, and on its tip  
Bearing the very rose at close of spring;

And once I saw, her whole long ocean-trip  
Safe done, a vessel wrecked upon the bar,  
And down she went, that swift and stately ship.

Let Jack and Jill not think they see so far  
That, seeing this man pious, that a thief,  
They see them such as in God’s sight they are,

For one may rise, the other come to grief.”



## *Paradiso xx: 133-135:*

“Predestination! what far depths conceal  
From feeble sight, unable to detect  
The First Cause whole, thy root of woe and weal!

And, mortals, keep your judgement straitly checked,  
For here we see God face to face, and still  
We know not all the roll of His elect;

Yet sweet to us appears our lack of skill,  
Since this good doth our good the more refine,  
That what God willeth, that we also will.”

[And, mortals, do take care – judge prudently:  
for we, though we see God, do not yet know  
all those whom He has chosen...]





## Four other translations of the *Inferno* to consider

- Dorothy Sayers (Penguin): 1949: *Hell*: A stunning attempt to reproduce the rhythms of Dante's verse into English; archaising, the "High Anglican" version, supported by exhaustive notes.
- John Ciardi (Mentor): 1954: American poetic version; highly accessible, with useful and adequate notes.
- Robert Pinsky (Farrar, Straus): 1995: *A New Verse Translation*: A stand-alone, and highly acclaimed poetic version; Dante's Italian on facing pages; user-friendly notes by Nicole Pinsky.
- Anthony Esolen (Modern Library): 2003 A rigorously doctrinal version, with an eye to comprehensibility; Dante's Italian on facing pages; minimal notes with maximal summaries and supporting material.



Dante's  
*Inferno*  
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