

Relating to Dante's Inferno



Illustration by Gustave Doré

For the math enthusiasts among you, the good news is that it's possible to read the *Inferno* with an eye for numbers. The number "three" is especially significant and practically everywhere. But there are other significant numbers like ten, seven, and four. You can have observing the numbers and making all the intricate allegorical equations balance neatly, because they do balance—they balance in many dimensions, according to Dante himself, forming a structure that's at least four-dimensional. These three books totaling one hundred cantos of intricate terza rima verse do certainly represent an engineering feat as far as epic structures go. *The Divine Comedy* richly deserves its reputation as the ultimate voice, the masterpiece, of medieval aesthetics, cosmology, politics, and theology. As perfectly as it seems to sum up the late middle ages, it is also a herald of the Renaissance to come. A truly amazing work.

I'm afraid, however, it would be possible to notice these things, to attempt to understand and appreciate them, but to never feel the heat, so to speak, of Dante's achievement. You can make reading *The Divine Comedy* too intellectual an experience and lose the immediacy of the emotion. If we get too pedantic in our academic discourse about this or that neatly structured allegory, this or that philosophical nuance, *on our first reading* we may lose sight of the poem's infinitely great humanity. Even inside the vivid torture chambers of the *Inferno*, it's possible to tune out the meanness of the personal attacks, our hero's battle against pity, the closely observed personalities of all the sinners historical and literary, the sheer audacity of the plot and the individuals who people it—we can miss all of this by erecting instead a spectacular but ultimately static "cathedral of images" (my husband's phrase) that walls out the relevance of the work's meaning for us here and now, today.

I don't want to do that, not on our first reading. Later, if you decide you want to study *The Divine Comedy* in further depth, and I hope you do some day, you can pursue a deeper appreciation of its allegorical, philosophical, and spiritual magnificence. You will find that this is a giant of a book, that it IS the apotheosis of medieval art and philosophy and literature, and literary history, but for now, we want to bring it down to earth, back to its human roots, its ability to move and touch us on a personal level. We want to know *what's happening* and how we feel about what's happening. How does it touch us? This need not be a textbookish poem. It's a poem written for people, in the language of the people, to communicate with people. Dante deliberately wrote this book, not in Latin, so that only

the educated would be able to read it, but in the vernacular—in the Tucson dialect of his hometown, Florence—in other words, in the Italian that people would immediately understand. That was just not done, but Dante did it. And here's the power of literature: the Tucson dialect eventually became THE language for all of Italy, thanks in great part to this poem.

To be sure, we can't overlook that Dante was an extremely well read man—a self-educated man. At a certain point, he deliberately set out to acquire what learning was appropriate for his day. Aside from the Bible, which was a major influence, two sources absolutely essential to an appreciation of Dante's learning would be Virgil and St. Thomas Aquinas. The way I understand it, Dante was not satisfied until he managed to *make* something of all that learning, not just to “show off” but to create a new synthesis, something new and amazing. Virgil was a pagan of the old Roman empire, but he was still recognized as Italy's greatest poet. How to integrate him into the Christian fold? Thomas Aquinas wrote brilliant philosophy that brought Aristotle to the medieval world in a big way, but he was writing in the rational, unemotional language of logical reasoning. Brilliant, but philosophy tills an arid soil. A poet in the courtly love tradition, who'd made a name for himself with an exquisite book of love poems to Beatrice, *La Vita Nuova*, Dante brings the fresh air and cool rain and makes Aquinas bloom. It's no small achievement that Dante is able to synthesize Virgil and Aquinas. But to read the *Comedy* as nothing BUT those influences is to lose sight of how it can appeal to us purely on its own terms.

It's possible to relate to Dante on a more personal level. For me the appeal of his great work is the bare essence of the thing, the fact that here is a man who's writing to save his soul. And to save your soul in the bargain would be fine, would make the poem useful, as Horace instructed. (*Dulce et utile*: pleasure and beauty.) But primarily, the main character, who is called Dante, and who is often referred to as “Dante the Pilgrim,” is on a journey to save his soul—meaning, whatever you will. Dante is writing, it seems to me, to rescue hope, to rescue belief in a meaningful order that seems to be disintegrating. For the author Dante, the world and his place in it must have seemed to be slipping away, losing meaning. His life has literally been turned upside down, inside out. Here he is, one day a man of fame and fortune, successful poet and politician, and the next, on the losing side of a political power play, he's wandering around in exile, dependent on the good will of others, eternally ascending “another man's stairs.” Corruption, dirty politics, double-crossing Popes and deadly serious, bloody family feuds akin to war have run him out of his beloved town, separated him from his wife and children. If he returns to Florence, he's dead. Sentenced to burn alive at the stake. It doesn't get any more despairing than that, does it?

You can't forget (and you never do forget, reading the *Inferno*) that Dante must have come very close to becoming an embittered man, a lost, hardened soul pickling in the withering brine of sour grapes. Yes there was Philosophy, a certain consolation in the life of the mind—and Dante turned to that for a while—but there could be nothing, no consolation, for losing your home, your land, your family. And philosophy must seem a dry mistress, compared to love. You can feel throughout the poem how the fight against bitterness must have been a tough struggle for Dante. How to keep hold of one's humanity, one's dignity, in the face of utter political defeat? (I've asked myself the same question ever since last November.) How to keep from descending into an overwhelming bitterness or despair? You might think one solution would be: don't get mad get even! But it's really not that simple. Dante the Pilgrim is never bloodthirsty, never vengeful. On the contrary, he's depicted as a sensitive, caring individual, fainting away at least twice in the first several cantos as gets his first glimpses of the sufferers in Hell, many of them acquaintances of his. Was this disingenuous of Dante, depicting the Pilgrim this way on the one hand while inflicting (in his vision) horrendous tortures upon his enemies on the other? I don't think so. Although there's plenty of room for differing opinions here, I don't think this is a man sadistically reveling in revenge fantasies.

But some readers and critics are turned off by Dante; they accuse him of “justifying torture.” It's a complicated, sensitive point. We should understand, however, that punishment of the body (for sins of the body) is deeply embedded in the morality and the “criminal justice” system of the middle ages. If anything, I think Dante reconsiders it rather than indiscriminately adopting it. In the beginning the Pilgrim is terrified of the violence he witnesses in the name of justice. He is moved to pity, and

several times he faints (the “strife of pity” theme that runs through poem). The “righteousness” of this kind of justice is something he has to learn—for the salvation of his very soul. Keep in mind that throughout *The Divine Comedy*, and especially the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, it's God's not Humanity's justice we're witnessing. If it's terrible, it's because *God* wants it to be terrible, not Dante—not us.

As children of the Enlightenment, and of Romantic notions which affirm the basic goodness of humanity as opposed to its basic depravity, we may very well reject the morality of the Middle Ages. In fact we do. We claim to believe in a different kind of justice—one that's in favor of tolerance and one that reflects a belief in rehabilitation. But let's face it, that belief is sometimes only lip service and not real conviction; our “rejection” of “punishment of the body,” our abhorrence of “cruel and unusual punishment” is sustained by only a hair. Revenge fantasy breaks out everywhere (does anyone remember *Rambo*?—just to name one very influential popular fantasy that probably inspired the first Gulf War). We split hairs to justify torture, today, at the highest level of our government, even in our highest courts. In the trial of two prison guards accused of torturing Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib, their defense attorney argued that the images shown in the photographs—naked prisoners tethered to leashes; naked, hooded prisoners piled in a pyramid—represented legitimate methods of controlling detainees and did not amount to abuse. Now *that* seems to me a clearer justification of torture than anything Dante, with his fainting pity, provides, as does this statement by the defense: “Don't cheerleaders form pyramids all over the country?” And then he noted that parents sometimes use leashes to keep track of their toddlers. “You've probably been at airports or shopping malls and seen children on leashes. They are not being abused.” No, but with those kinds of justifications of torture, *we are*.

Nevertheless, some readers detect a certain sadistic cruelty in Dante's graphic depiction of the torturous punishments throughout the *Inferno*. (I wonder how much that “sadistic” quality has to do with the translation one happens to be reading!) The concrete, graphic nature of the *Inferno* can't be denied, however—and we wouldn't want to deny it. That is the essence of the book—and no doubt a great part of its appeal. The violence is probably a big draw for some people. But the way I relate to what Dante is doing is with violence is that what he's reaching for is an order to things, a reasonable, rational order. Law and order. Crime and punishment. (Is Dante Nixon or Dostoyevsky in a previous incarnation?) If we understand the sin, we understand its punishment, which is “rationally” suited to the sin. Understanding is the key. Understanding has to occur through reason. Dante the Pilgrim struggles to understand what he sees, just as we do—but we have Virgil, the voice of Reason, to guide us. If we can understand, instead of becoming bitter, maybe we can put the universe, the moral universe, back in order. But what is it that he's supposed to understand?

Dante the Pilgrim, as he tours Hell, learns a number of things that he needed to learn for the salvation of his soul. First, even though he's midway through his life, in his mid-thirties somewhere, he still doesn't have a clear understanding about the nature of evil, in himself or in others. In his trip through Hell, he has to learn the real nature of sin and the various ways it is divinely, poetically, and justly punished. The case is laid out before his eyes (and ours). Here are the sinners, and here is their place in hell. But what is not so easy, what he has to strive to put together and what Virgil has to work to teach him, is that despite his heart's natural tendency, the sinners he sees being painfully punished do NOT deserve his pity.

In the second canto, Dante the Poet, the narrator, tells us that getting ready for the journey means stealing himself for a “double war”—for the harshness of the journey itself, down into the pit, but also for the battle against pity. Why does he have to battle pity? Is it because the punishments are so harsh that the natural thing to do would be to feel sorry for all the people suffering in Hell? Yet that's what Hell is all about, right? If you really want punishment—not rehabilitation but *punishment*—then you have to steal your heart against pity. These souls in Hell are the ones who are completely damned (in Christian theology); they are souls beyond Jesus' helping hand. Which is a pretty hard place to be, considering all they needed to do (when alive) was to simply ask for that hand, to truly regret and repent their sinning ways. But they didn't do that, they never fell out of love with their sin, and here they are in Hell. They are beyond redemption, beyond Christ's reach so to speak, so to pity

them would be to say that you have a bigger heart than Jesus, which of course you couldn't possibly. EVEN SO, *our natural human tendency* is to feel pity for those we see suffering. So how does this battle with pity resolve itself? Read and discover!

The *Inferno* would be a little boring, a little pedantic, a little too didactic if it just dealt with all of these issues abstractly. It's anything but. It's scary to think what kind of movie this would make with the CGI capabilities we have now. Terrifying. The goriness. There's nothing abstract about this poem, and that is a big part of its enduring appeal, I'm sure. There's nothing indefinite about the punishments inflicted in this vision of Hell. This is a torture chamber, make no mistake about it. "ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE." Abandon *all hope*..God is not messing around. No rehabilitation, remember. Pure punishment. The great majority may not agree philosophically with that approach in 2005 (as opposed to 1320), but there's no denying that pure revenge has always been and still is out there as the alternative to rehabilitative punishment: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Let the punishment reflect the crime. Dante pours so much of his creativity into bringing this (to some repulsive) idea to life. The word for it in the *Inferno* is "contrapasso." Sinners are punished in a way that somehow reflects what they did wrong on earth while they were living. Sometimes the punishment is very much like the crime, and sometimes it's a kind of mirror image.

The *Inferno*, and *The Divine Comedy* as a whole, is a torching vision, a tour de force of the imagination. In its sweeping affirmation and faith in divine love and divine justice, it's an attempt to hold onto—or recreate (or create)—whatever meaning still exists—or used to exist—or might exist—in the world. It's a battle cry in the name of faith, a sword to the gut of corruption. The *Inferno* represents a vision in which divine justice exists, sheds meaning, and will ultimately prevail in the face of rampant, unpunished human depravity, dissolution, perversion, and amorality. Even if you disagree with him, I think it's possible to admire how Dante writes to recover meaning, to preserve it, to convince himself (and us) that it (meaning) is still out there—the re IS an order to the universe; love matters. There IS such a thing as divine justice, even if man's justice is hopelessly weak and corrupt.

Superficially the *Inferno* is about an imagined afterlife. But more subtly, it's about our what we have to do to save ourselves, our souls (or be saved, depending on your personal theology) in THIS life. Dante the Pilgrim is alive in his tour through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise (as we're constantly reminded). This is not a poem about being dead, but about being alive. Even the dead souls that people the *Inferno* are filled with a kind of inalienable life. While there's time, Dante the Pilgrim can still recover from the confusion that has led him to become lost in the "dark wood of error." Yes, the poem makes the muscular assertion that there's a paradise, and a horrible place for the world's countless evil people to go. But the more important point, it asserts again and again, is that there are consequences for your actions while you're alive. So don't think for a minute that your life is meaningless, that your actions should be relativist, that this is all just a pleasant little hedonistic stopover on your way to oblivion. There's no such THING as oblivion! God exists. Love exists. Justice exists. Forget oblivion—that most certainly does NOT exist, though you may wish it did. Everything you do in this life MATTERS; it matters crucially, deeply. Whether you have a good heart or a hard one, whether you do good deeds or evil deeds, whether you admit or deny your mistakes, weaknesses, shortcomings, and especially your ugliest sins all MATTER. In Dante's audacious moral world, there is punishment waiting, divine, poetic justice for those who walk the earth arrogantly, violently, negligently. But there is also purgation, and finally, for the worthy, for the graced, for the saved, there's paradise.