

# Spotlight

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## Dante and his Comedy

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## Reviews

### [A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Dante's The Divine Comedy by David Dean Brockman \[Routledge, 9781138206717\]](#)

David Dean Brockman connects spirituality with psychoanalysis throughout this book as he looks at Dante's early writings, his life story and his "polysemous" classical poem The Divine Comedy. Dante wanted to create a document that would educate the common man about his journey from brokenness to growth and a solid integration of body, self, and soul. This book draws the resemblance between Dante's poem and the "journey" that patients experience in psychoanalytic therapy. It will be the first total treatment of Dante's work in general, and The Divine Comedy, using the psychoanalytic method.

This fascinating study of Dante's The Divine Comedy will be of interest to psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists, as well as those still in training. Academics and students of psychology, spirituality, religion, and literature may also be interested in Brockman's in-depth study of Dante's work.

David Dean Brockman open his exploration of Dante by reviewing some of the classic studies of conversion that focus on some of the salient phenomenological, social, psychological, theological, and psychoanalytic issues. An all-inclusive definition of conversion needs to be put-off until further study, but what is now known is considerable. Conversion, as understood now, is a very emotional and cognitive journey from nonbelief or from lukewarm belief into a profound transformation and regeneration of the entire personality involving remodeling of conscious, preconscious and unconscious activities, as well as remodeling of executive ego functions and the superego. There is a more solid, benign superego alongside

integration of moral and ethical values that provides clearer paths for the practice of intimate and group behaviors. The superego is more clarified of archaic destructive contents, relieved of the more gross forms of "sinful propensities," and is seen to be more solidly benevolent. The ego is modified and consolidated into an identity that is visible even to the outsider as a marked change with greater control over sinful selfishness and residues of unconscious aggressive and libidinal conflicts. Continuing mastery of the seven deadly sins (pride, anger, envy, greed, gluttony, sloth, and lust) that parallel the unconscious psychological experiences of narcissism, rage, greed, pathological defenses, resistance to change, shame and guilt, etc., leads to greater ego strengthening and increased humility. Brockman proposes that new capacities for processing and channeling of id contents seem to be accomplished through the conflict-free area of the personality by sublimation and progressive neutralization, and become non-conflicted transformations. Furthermore, these processes of conversion seem to take place in the non-conscious arena as well, since there appears to be a kind of automaticity involved. Furthermore, obsessional neurosis or other psychopathology is not encountered in the great majority of religious converts (as Freud and others have claimed) in the three major faiths. Freud's thesis merely succeeds in making the claim for a "similarity" between religious rituals and obsessions. Nor is religious experience related to our infantile helplessness and disillusionment in the mortal father in favor of the more powerful heavenly father. On the contrary, there seems to be a kind of pacification and regenerative transformation of the entire personality. Converts to the specific faiths studied here have experienced something unique, and that process, whether slow or fast, volitional or self-surrender, encompasses the entire personality.

Brockman attempts to show that the conversion experience, in the main, occurs in a non-pathological but healthy mind and personality. It is an expanding experience enacted in the conflict-free "playful" sphere of the personality. His critique of the thesis that we create God as an internal representation is that it is contrary to the avowed experience of the various clinical observations Brockman has made where the religious experience was a very real transforming spiritual experience as a presence of an internal object relationship with God that is parallel to the profound experience of a religious conversion.

Several notable examples of recent and historically significant conversions are described in some detail to show the how, what, when, and where the conversion process has taken place. The process, as the convert experiences it, is both distinct and remarkably similar in all three major religions—Catholic, Jewish, and Moslem.

In the main part of the study Dante's personal conversion story and spiritual journey is reported in graphic detail in his original hendecasyllabic rhythm and tercet-rimed poem *The Divine Comedy*. He described himself maturing and developing a healthier unselfish personality.

Brockman however reviews Dante's earlier works as reflective of his development as a poet as well as scholarly intellectual excursions into political theory and linguistics. There are hints of a self-cure of his very serious depression

and his selfish sexuality, but these efforts were embryonic, short-lived, and temporary without much solid foundation of spiritual change. Dante had to suffer the "trials and tribulations" of the *Inferno* and *Purgatory* to be cleansed of his seven deadly self-sins and conversion that Brockman compares to a clinical psychoanalytic process.

Dante believed, citing Aristotle's *De Anima* (Book III, xvi), that we are composed of a corruptible part and an incorruptible part, that is the body and soul, and that man has two goals to exercise our powers in: "the earthly paradise" and the happiness in the "heavenly paradise". The first is achieved through philosophic teachings of moral and intellectual virtues while the second is achieved through spiritual teachings and the cardinal virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love. None of these can be accomplished through greed in either the prince or the pontiff.

Dante concludes his *Monarchia* with the assertion he has accomplished his objective to answer the three questions and finally that the prince (Caesar) should show "reverence" toward Peter much like what the first born should show his father "so that illumined by the light of paternal grace, he may the more effectively light up the world over which he has been placed by Him alone who is ruler over all things spiritual and temporal".

*Monarchia* is a forceful argument for a single ruler like Caesar Augustus who was both noble because of his actions and his birth. He was an idealized leader proclaimed to be just and free of greed, envy, anger, avarice, and lust. He was opposed to mob rule and treacherous conniving double-dealing political or religious leaders. Dante's ideal seems to emanate from his unconscious desire for a strong but benign loving temporal father figure in whom he could place his trust, loyalty, and devotion. Since he had lost his paternal father in late adolescence, he spent the major part of the rest of his life seeking a relationship with such a powerful figure. He found it temporarily in the idealized Cangrande and more so late in life in the Duke of Polenta in Ravenna, but they were no comparison to the Heavenly Father even though the temporal leaders gave him shelter and support.

It would be a serious mistake to accuse Dante of unbridled arrogance in his unfinished work since he clearly establishes his credibility with unusual ease and great style. In fact, these early works suggest, is perhaps the earliest introduction to the science of semiotics and linguistics. It represents a process of continuing bursts of intellectual, critical, and emotional creativity that began with *Rime*, *Vita Nuova*, *Il Convivio*, *Monarchia*, and finally achieving the zenith in *The Divine Comedy*. Botterill insists Dante was primarily a "critic" of his own writing, and "to understand his own practice of poetry remains the focal point of both his literary invention and his critical thinking." Most importantly, Botterill claims Dante combines several branches of knowledge that medieval tradition had previously tended to separate: it brings together rhetorical and factual elements drawn from the realms of history, geography, philosophy, biblical exegesis, and political theory as well as the fundamental linguistic matters that are its professed concern.

Similar breakthroughs have occurred in science such as the Wright brothers' creation of a flying machine or

Shakespeare's works in literature. All great works begin as "grandiose" ideas that seem impossible or dreamed of like Leonardo's drawing of a flying machine. Brockman contends that as Dante struggled in his exile with his many losses, immature sexual feelings, rage, shame, guilt, sadness, and severe depression, he found a way out of his problems through his creative writings. But as he struggled with his broiling unconscious energies now in this book to define what vernacular language to use, he created and defined the essential rules and rhyme to compose the best of all poetry of his time if not the whole of literature. These bursts of creativity can be understood as crystallizations, resolutions or re-solutions of internal unconscious conflicts initiated sometimes by major life events such as the loss by death of emotionally significant relationships. Dante did not have available the advantage of psychoanalytic treatment, but in a way, he created a version of self-analysis in his relationships with his mentors (Dante de Maiano, Cino de Pistoia, Guido Guinzella, Guido Cavalcanti, etc.) and his muse-imagined lover Beatrice, his "fathers" (Virgil, Statius, Latinni, Cato, St. Bernard, etc.), all transference figures with whom he carried on a quasi-therapeutic engagement. He did well enough indeed to arrive at a sublimated, idealized, and desexualized relationship with the lost mother, father, and lover. His superego became less harsh and sadistic along with a modified, integrated ego or cohesive self that can make inventive free use of his talents to compose beautiful poetry.

An interesting but brilliant idea that Dante makes explicit is that the vernacular language is organic and evolves over time rather than remaining stagnant like Latin. The vernacular must be cardinal or illustrious, curial or aulic, meaning like pure gold and useful both in the political realm as well as in literature. Vernacular language must be flexible and the right word for the right meaning. In other words, the right word must really fit the meaning parsimoniously that is intended in poetry.

In all of Dante's early works, he is searching for the truth of feminine beauty and love, be it sexual in the troubadour sense or some other quality of love since the age of nine when he "fell in love" with Beatrice. Throughout *Rime*, *Vita Nuova*, *Il Convivio*, *Monarchia*, and *De Vulgari*, Dante seeks the love of truth and beauty in poetry, philosophy, politics, and the vernacular language similar to Freud's love of truth. There are some signs of developmental and maturational growth in both intellectual and emotional apprehension of those truths. The playful excursion into the Provençal style of poetry gave way to a more honest and direct interest in the basic elements of love expressions, nudes, gross incorporation of a beating heart, but always the essential sense of love and sexual love elude him until he begins here and there in *Rime* and *Vita Nuova* to differentiate the former with a new idealized selfless giving to the other. The excursions into philosophy and political theory did not hinder his underlying purposeful quest for the essence of love. A form of love that was denied him in childhood of parental loving care and apparently in young adulthood marital love, as there is no strong evidence of devotion and idealized love for his wife since he abandoned her when he was exiled and presumably never reunited with her except perhaps when he settled in Ravenna late in life. The creative

crystallization grew more fruitful after he started the *Comedy* and ended by his brief examination into the beauty of a perfect concept of a political balance of power in the secular world. The other excursion was into the search for the perfect vernacular language that was spoken clearly, illustriously, and goldenly. He virtually had to invent the rules and structure of the Tuscan language spoken today. It had to be good for everyday discourse as well as in political and legal documents and in literature. He had to work out these problems before he could address the *Comedy*. What really aided him in this quest were his transference figures poetic and personal, mainly Virgil and Beatrice who were his Father and Mother transference figures. They showed him the way partly by example and partly by what he saw and experienced in the *Inferno* and *Purgatory*. When he reaches *Paradise*, he realizes real Love is selfless, self-sacrificing, idealized, giving to the other that allows for healthy self-regard and sexual gratification.

Brockman now offers his detailed examination of each canto to see and interpret Dante's poetry from a psychoanalytic psychological perspective without damaging the beauty of the language translation or detracting from the theological and intellectual meanings. Studious interpretation of Dante's "dreams," "free associations," and especially his "transferences and counter-transferences" like in real psychoanalytic therapy provided Brockman with special tools to describe a unique insightful understanding of Dante's poetical work from a new view.

*A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Dante's The Divine Comedy* is a unique effort to study Dante Alighieri's poetry from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective. Banishment from his hometown Florence and leading to his wanderings from place to place with shifting of support from one patron to another was very disruptive and alienating in addition to his double parent loss. Many less gifted or less adaptable others could not have survived similar dislocation. Nor could they have created the epitome of scholarly contributions like the *Comedy*, or the early poetry and other works was considered that are also presented from a psychoanalytic point of view. Ciardi's interesting comment in his Introduction is that salvation and *Paradise* cannot be so easily reached as running up a hill.

Dante described an imaginary "visual" journey in rich colorful sensory language that is full of mythological, theological, geographical, astronomical data, and literary meanings. Though modeled on masterpieces by Brunetto Latini and Virgil, *The Divine Comedy* surpasses all competition save that of Shakespeare. In Chapter I is a discussion of how religious conversion and the Pilgrim's experiences in the *Comedy* can be understood like a spiritual "journey" that is very similar in many respects to a modern patient's successful psychoanalytic therapy. Dante's therapeutic transference relationships in Chapter III with Beatrice, Virgil, St. Lucy, Cato, Matelda, and St. Bernard can be understood in both positive and negative forms in the classical Freudian sense. Dante's psychological development and "transhumanization" of his personality is believably defined as authentic and accurate in his conversion "journey to *Paradise*." He is really transformed into a more mature adult whose selfless love shines.

The nature of creativity is addressed as a "playful exercise" of inchoate unconscious feelings, energies, ideas, memories, dreams of past experiences, and disparate thoughts that coalesce, aggregate, and crystallize into newly created poetry enriched with myths, theology, geography, astronomy, semiotics, and human wisdom about people and their foibles. The same can be said for palindromic musical compositions with his poetry. It is a surprise that Dante wrote the very first paper on semiotics in his *Eloquentia de Vulgari*, created the *treza rima*, the eleven-syllable hendecasyllabic rhyme plus several new words like "transhumanization" and "malebolge" while introducing the word "modern" into the Italian language.

Dante empathically understood the complexities of inner psychological life of fourteenth- (and twenty-first-) century person in his poetry. For example, he describes souls squirming around in Canto VI of the *Inferno* like animals also do when very embarrassing thoughts arise from the "infernal unconscious." The horrors of the various punishments in the *Inferno* are so emotionally draining and debilitating to the reader, it is a big emotional relief to arrive with the Pilgrim on Purgatory's shore. The horrible, disgusting, and emotionally draining scenes end none too soon for the Pilgrim and the modern Reader as he and his empathic guide finally emerge into an early morning's sky to view the lovely stars still visible.

Dante created three authentic dreams for the middle canticle Purgatory using the preceding day's thoughts and feelings as "associational sources" of the dreams. In *Inferno* (Canto XXX, p. 41), Dante even refers to a dream within a dream. Brockman cites these dreams to show that Dante's ideas preceded Freud's opus by seven hundred years. The same may be said of Freud's ideas of the pleasure-pain principle that originally came from St. Thomas Aquinas's application of Aristotle's philosophy for Christian Theology. When Dante refers to St. John's concept of "The Word" (Christ) in the center of the mind, psychoanalysts would immediately think of Freud's paper on the "Unconscious" where he describes the concept of a "thing presentation" that becomes a "word presentation." The idea here is that when thoughts and feelings are put into words one achieves beginning mastery and with repetition more permanent mastery.

The middle canticle Purgatory can be considered like the "Heart" or *Andante* middle movement of a classical symphony. Dorothy L. Sayers praised Purgatory as Dante's most beautiful creation partly because the Pilgrim (and the Reader) emerges from the horrors of Hell's punishments to sigh with relief from the purging of sins.

In real time, the journey into Hell began on Thursday evening in late March or early April of Easter weekend and lasted twenty-four hours, and the ascent to earth's surface lasted another twenty-four hours, with the entire poem lasting about a week. The first level is an invention of Dante's: Ante-Purgatory where some sinners reside for the same amount of time as they delayed converting to a religious life. Here are some interesting sinners' descriptive stories. But the most fascinating feature in Purgatory is three dreams invented by Dante: The Eagle, The Siren, and the Leah and Rachel dreams. Clearly Freud borrowed Dante's

descriptions of the preceding days' events and thoughts in composing the content of the three dreams. Many people, including Dante, believed that the closer a dream occurs to morning awakening, the more likely the dream is prophetic. Now we know that is not necessarily so. What is interesting though is that Dante placed the dreams in Cantos IX, XIX, and XXVII, corresponding to the three different times he encountered Beatrice at ages nine, nineteen, and twenty-seven.

Throughout the Comedy, Dante refers to the geometry problem of squaring the circle or circling the square. The impossibility of this mathematical problem is symbolically like the problem Dante faced with the brevity or longevity of his sins, then achieving some sense of peace and grace through spirituality. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the same issues apply with similar outcomes as defined by stability and cohesion of the self, integration of the ego, and a healthier, kinder, and less punitive superego.

The third and last canticle of Paradise contains some of the most beautiful and clever poetic similes and metaphors, such as when Beatrice arranges for Dante to a Feast of the Blessed Lamb on top of viewing the Empyrean circle where the Blessed Mother Mary is seated. That serves to somewhat heal his narcissistic wounds for never receiving the laurel wreath, parent loss, and loss of citizenship in Florence. And Dante has had the privilege of discoursing on important theological subject matter with St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Benedict (Church Doctors).

### **Dante: The Story of His Life by Marco Santagata, translated by Richard Dixon [Belknap Press, 978-0674504868]**

To the ranks of the best popular biographies of the great Florentine poet Dante Alighieri...is added Marco Santagata's Dante... [Santagata] tells it with a fiercely learned calm and energy throughout... As with all first-rate author biographies, the book will propel readers straight back to Dante's own works, which is right where they should end up in any case. (Steve Donoghue *Open Letters Monthly* 2016-04-03)

Full of useful information and explanations of a very complicated time, well worth reading for its bold claims and wealth of historical evidence, this book constructs a novel, strong reading of Dante as political actor. (Alison Cornish, *University of Michigan*)

Both specialized readers and the general public will benefit from this account of Dante Alighieri's life as a man of letters and of political action. A welcome addition to the catalogue of intellectual biographies of Dante available in English. (Simone Marchesi, *Princeton University*)

A superb intellectual biography of Dante. (Ian Thomson *The Tablet* 2016-05-05)

This sumptuous volume by Marco Santagata...offers the reader a richly documented and often gripping account of the development, peregrinations, and shifting fortunes of the celebrated poet Durante (Dante) Alighieri. (Diana Glenn *Australian Book Review* 2016-05-01)

Santagata does a thorough and highly engaging job of bringing politics and social pressures of 13th-century Florence to the page in this very readable biography that

doesn't scrimp on scholarly research...Even more fascinating is the way the author reveals Dante's intense interest in political systems, philosophy, and in the makeup of the universe, all shown to be at the very heart of the imposing poetic figure. (Herman Sutter Library Journal (starred review) 2016-04-15)

Santagata has written a book that any reader interested in Dante will find absorbing, richly informative and very thought-provoking...With their well-known fondness for literary biography, [English readers] will surely be grateful for this bold, vigorous and invigorating account of Dante's life and times. (Prue Shaw Times Higher Education 2016-05-12)

It is lively and a pleasure to read. (Simon West The Australian 2016-05-07)

This substantial work incorporates all the most recent Dantean scholarship. There is much to chew upon, since Dante lived at the very center of his city's political life...Santagata, thoroughly steeped in the politics and genealogies of the period, gives the best account I have ever read of Dante in his historical context...You will never read an account clearer than Santagata's. Nor will you read a more convincing description of how Dante changed his mind, quite fundamentally, about the political issues which confronted him (Pope vs Emperor) and the deep religious questions which underpin his work...This is a wonderful book. Even if you have not read Dante you will be gripped by its account of one of the most extraordinary figures in the history of literature, and one of the most dramatic periods of European history. If you are a Dantean, it will be your invaluable companion forever. (A. N. Wilson The Spectator 2016-05-21)

Reading Marco Santagata's fascinating new biography, the reader is soon forced to acknowledge that one of the cornerstones of Western literature [The Divine Comedy], a poem considered sublime and universal, is the product of vicious factionalism and packed with local scandal...It's the biography's evocation of the factional world of the time and the values sustaining it that throws light on the great poem and helps us to read it with fresh awareness...Elegantly translated by Richard Dixon, Santagata's biography avoids the quarrels among critics that sometimes dominate Dante studies. (Tim Parks London Review of Books 2016-07-14)

Santagata...has written an impressive new biography that takes into consideration every bit of reliable and semireliable information available to us about Dante's life, from his birth in Florence in 1265 to his death in Ravenna in 1321...If you are looking for the most thorough, factually based account of Dante's life and times to date, Santagata is your man. (Robert Pogue Harrison New York Review of Books 2016-10-27)

Santagata not only constructs an impressively detailed account of Dante's actual life but uses that account to interpret and make sense of the Comedy...The result is a remarkably innovative probing of his life and work. (Peter Hainsworth Times Literary Supplement 2016-10-14)

This biography will be most useful and enjoyable to those who already have a familiarity with the Comedy and want

a more nuanced view of its place in Italian history...Santagata's book is a catalogue of contingencies, which will both introduce the reader to the political situation of the Italian peninsula in Dante's time and show how that context assists us in reading the poem. (Kyle Skinner New Criterion 2016-09-01)

Marco Santagata's Dante: The Story of His Life deconstructs the great poet with humor, aplomb and deep learning. I have never read any book which makes such complete sense of the vital continuum between Dante the man, and the projected self of the Convivio, Vita Nuova and Commedia...There is much humor in Santagata's exposure of the violent contradictions in Dante's character, all set against the background of his times. If you have a tendency to muddle Guelfs and Ghibellines, look no further than this lucid book. (A. N. Wilson Times Literary Supplement 2016-11-23)

This outstanding book, originally published in Italy in 2012, English translation published in the U.S. in 2016 by Harvard, represents an outstanding synthesis of available source materials about Dante and his life and times. It is a wealth of intelligent discussion and presented in a highly readable translation that will be of benefit both to Dante specialists and general readers. I have not noticed any of the alleged errors mentioned in the one negative review, which I think is inaccurate at best.

Santagata is an accomplished, prolific and popular Dante scholar. Of course it is not easy to present the kind of conventional narrative biography to which many readers are accustomed, simply because there is relatively little material on which to predicate such a narrative. Dante lived more than 700 years ago, after all. Nevertheless, this book is exceptionally well-researched and insightful. That is saying a lot, as the sheer quantity of Dante scholarship, which exists in many languages and collections, is truly daunting. The inferences the author draws from available information are eminently reasonable: he does not indulge in unwarranted speculation or invent conversations as some biographers do even in cases where source material is abundant. He also presents various inferences, including those propounded by other scholars, to provide perspective and locate his approach among the competition. I also found that if there was some minor skipping about from the strictly chronological, it was obvious from the context and the language itself what was going on. The idea that a biography must plod slavishly along in a strictly chronological fashion without regard for such matters as context or background, elucidation or illustration, is simply silly. The one-star review is palpably unreasonable and unfair.

Among the most prominent features of this study is that it demonstrates how closely Dante reflected the events of his life in what he was writing at the time. As an exile with no steady income, he was constantly looking for ways to support himself while also seeking opportunities to influence public affairs and fulfill his artistic and intellectual ambitions. Given the volatile circumstances of life in Italy during those times, he faced constant challenges in meeting these objectives. Santagata offers rich insights into the context that informed Dante's writings. He is not giving us a

conventional introduction to Dante's writings. Santagata and others have dealt elsewhere with those.

The Italian version of this book, which I also have, has some additional materials and is formatted differently from the English version but I understand Santagata has mentioned that he feels the book was actually improved by this translation, which appears to be superb. In short, I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in Dante and his times, or in Italy and its history.

### Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity by Prue Shaw [Liveright, 978-0871407429] paperback

The best and most eloquent introduction to Dante for our time. It offers a genuinely infectious overview to Dante studies. Includes 34 illustrations

Prue Shaw is one of the world's foremost authorities on Dante. Written with the general reader in mind, *Reading Dante* brings her knowledge to bear in an accessible yet expert introduction to his great poem.

This is far more than an exegesis of Dante's three-part *Commedia*. Shaw communicates the imaginative power, the linguistic skill and the emotional intensity of Dante's poetry—the qualities that make the *Commedia* perhaps the greatest literary work of all time and not simply a medieval treatise on morality and religion.

The book provides a graphic account of the complicated geography of Dante's version of the afterlife and a sure guide to thirteenth-century Florence and the people and places that influenced him. At the same time it offers a literary experience that lifts the reader into the universal realms of poetry and mythology, creating links not only to the classical world of Virgil and Ovid but also to modern art and poetry, the world of T. S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney and many others.

Dante's questions are our questions: What is it to be a human being? How should we judge human behavior? What matters in life and in death? *Reading Dante* helps the reader to understand Dante's answers to these timeless questions and to see how surprisingly close they sometimes are to modern answers.

*Reading Dante* is an astonishingly lyrical work that will appeal to both those who've never read the *Commedia* and those who have. It underscores Dante's belief that poetry can change human lives.

Review: This veteran expert on Dante guides us through thematic chapters rather than a chronological commentary through the *Commedia* or a critical biography introducing us to the highlights of his life. The results can be challenging, but if you can keep the Guelphs from the Ghibellines straight--and this Cambridge professor makes sure we do--this study may reward those new to Dante, or those, like myself, looking for a broader overview of his career, and his influences, than a footnoted edition of *The Divine Comedy* might provide.

Dr. Shaw appears to have spent half a century examining Dante. Therefore, she knows every facet of the poet's considerable erudition, his complicated political entanglements (we are reminded he faced torture and

death for his allegiance), and the dramatic achievement that made the vernacular, after the poet had his way with Tuscan dialect and his own nimble invention of so many more words that he recorded in his verse, the standard for the emerging language of Italian, from an era when regional variations proliferated. None, as Shaw shows, as good as Dante's own, as he agrees in a show-off comparison he set down to display his own Florentine expertise. This type of confidence, growing as Dante took on more challenging models after 1300, resulted in those famed hundred masterful cantos.

*Reading Dante* progresses by chapters on friendship, power, his life, love, time, numbers, and words. I found to my surprise those on time and numbers as engrossing as those on love and words. For, Shaw sharpens her gaze when delving into the textual acumen that displays Dante's talents at their best. You come away convinced that the more Dante took on--the journey down to hell, up past purgatory, and to the Beatific Vision and that surpassing expression itself on a human plane--the more he rose to the occasion and found language worthy of the subject, certainly one to humble any one.

A few highlights from Shaw's take on Dante: he's a "good Catholic but an independent thinker," and humanity's place in the cosmos and the individual's place in society occupy his center stage. His journey downward and upward is also "the story of becoming capable of writing the poem about the journey." In examining for me the unexpected presence of public non-believers in medieval Florence, condemned to suffer infernally, we note Dante's typical symmetry, the punishments he often invents that match or invert the crime perpetrated above on earth. "Those who thought life ended in the grave are destined to spend eternity in a tomb."

However, the *Commedia* isn't a political tract any more than it is a sermon, for Shaw promotes Dante's primary concern within the "power of words" to chastise his contemporaries and to correct the many flaws of his troubled city and a compromised Church. The vanity of Pope Boniface VIII gains special note, for his massive statue as a memorial--shown in one of the helpful illustrations throughout this volume (although on a Kindle I had to enlarge many to make out their detail, as in the delicate Botticelli line drawings of the cantos)--finds few admirers today, certainly. Shaw contrasts this with a statue of Dante she glimpsed in New York City behind shrubbery. Elsewhere she brings in Catholic schoolgirls in 1950s Australia, UN sanctions, and Siena-Florence soccer rivalries as apropos. She connects the controversies of Dante's era, often in the political realm ones that feel very distant from our own, by revealing a poet who strives to fix his society's woes by honest poetic craft.

While his masterpiece may also appear arcane, Shaw notes how it's "not an account of a dream" as were other visions of the time, "but of something that happened when the poet woke up" at the start of the cantos, intriguingly. We are charmed by some of those whom Dante and Virgil meet in hell, but the moral scrutiny persists. Ulysses or Francesca may inspire our sympathy, but we must keep our guard, for Dante presents an ethical strategy that keeps ambiguity alive along with dispassionate judgment, reflecting after all divine justice as well as human frailty.

The epic spirals down into earth, where Satan burrowed after he fell from heaven, only to claw itself up the slope of the soil displaces from the center of the earth, as purgatory carries Dante to its summit. And, since the cantos end with the heavenly light, and language must stop trying to capture this scene, it's a poignant "dream that one cannot recall on waking" which "leaves a trace of the emotions experienced in it. Snow melting in sunlight retains a faint tracing of an imprint on it. The oracles of the Sibyl are lost on the winds that blow away the pages they were written on."

Thus, referring to dazzling images employed by Dante in his writings, Shaw leaves us with our own wonder at Dante's bold ambition and the courage taken to put down honestly his revulsion against so much corruption clerical, personal, and political around him. He also undertakes a redemptive task, to make his everyday language, enhanced by his talent and coinages, capable of taking on the next world, not to mention this one. From Here to Eternity is her aptly chosen subtitle for this study.

Supplemented by notes and a very extensive bibliography, told in scholarly but engaging language, Shaw's survey of Dante should reward anyone wanting to learn more about him and his times. She makes a strong case for his linguistic range and his dogged ambition, and one will close her own book more convinced than ever, most likely, that Dante's legacy deserves to sustain its lofty power. By [John L. Murphy](#)

### **Dante, Columbus and the Prophetic Tradition: Spiritual Imperialism in the Italian Imagination by Mary Alexandra Watt [Routledge, 9781472488886]**

Exploring the diverse factors that persuaded Christopher Columbus that he could reach the fabled "East" by sailing west, Dante, Columbus and the Prophetic Tradition considers, first, the impact of Dante's Divine Comedy and the apocalyptic prophetic tradition that it reflects, on Columbus's perception both cosmos and the eschatological meaning of his journey to what he called an 'other world.' In so doing, the book considers how affinities between himself and the exiled poet might have led Columbus to see himself as a divinely appointed agent of the apocalypse and his enterprise as the realization of the spiritual journey chronicled in the Comedy. As part of this study, [Dante, Columbus and the Prophetic Tradition](#) necessarily examines the cultural space that Dante's poem, its geography, cosmography and eschatology, enjoyed in late fifteenth century Spain as well as Columbus's own exposure to it. As it considers how Italian writers and artists of the late Renaissance and Counter Reformation received the news of Columbus' 'discovery' and appropriated the figure of Dante and the pseudo-prophecy of the Comedy to interpret its significance, the book examines how Tasso, Ariosto, Stradano and Stigliani forge a link between Dante and Columbus to present the latter as an inheritor of an apostolic tradition that traces back to the Aeneid. It further highlights the extent to which Italian writers working in the context of the Counter Reformation, use a Dantean filter to propagate the notion of Columbus as a new Paul, that is, a divinely appointed apostle to the New World, and the

Roman Church as the rightful emperor of the souls encountered there.

Excerpt: Christopher Columbus was a sailor who imagined himself as a writer. Dante Alighieri was a writer who figured himself as a sailor, and both were avid readers of the Bible. Although Dante died 130 years before Columbus was born, they shared a concept of the cosmos in which time is finite and human history has both a beginning and an end. The book of Genesis recounts that beginning and the book of Revelation foretells its end. In between lies the plot, complete with prophesies or foreshadowing expressed through a variety of hermeneutic strategies, all with the purpose of facilitating man's understanding of the reason for his sojourn here. In each life, of course, there is also a beginning and an end, such that each human life may be a microcosm of this larger universe.

In the fifth century St. Augustine linked scriptural history to physical space when he called the world a book. In associating travel and exploration with reading, Augustine likened both to hermeneutic exercises through which the meaning of one's own journey might be revealed. In the Christian tradition (as in others), sacred travel in the form of pilgrimage embodies a similar dualism, figuring the physical journey as a spiritual journey from darkness into light, from ignorance into knowledge, from blindness into sights. Further, the end of the pilgrimage represents the end of one journey and the beginning of a new life, functioning much the same way as baptism, which ends one life and initiates another. The end of the pilgrimage corresponds to the conversion experience in which the "old man" (homo vetus) is transformed into the "new man" (homo novus). The macrocosmic counterpart of the pilgrimage of an individual is equally cataclysmic; at the end of the book of the world, at the end of mankind's journey, the meaning, or the truth of the book will be revealed as the old world gives way to a new one.

In the late medieval Christian tradition pilgrimage was equally concerned with the direction of such progress, for such travel was not mere wandering. For the most part, pilgrimage was directed to the East where the sun rose, where Jerusalem was located and where even further east, lay the fabled Eden, closed to mankind since his fall. The return to Eden was equally linked to the beginning of the journey, but also to its end, for this return to an age of innocence, to a time when the world was new, would only come when mankind had grown too old. Indeed, the East was also where the end of the world would take place.

The timing of the end of one's own history as well as the larger history of humankind in the Christian imagination, necessarily concerns itself with the question of when, but for those who perceived the world in Augustinian terms, the end of the world was also necessarily linked to the question of where. In the Middle Ages, maps of the Christian world reflected this perspective so that mapmaking constituted an act of writing, as medieval maps represented the history that the book of the world recounted. Maps existed, as they do now, alongside guidebooks, the former showing and the latter telling the voyager how to reach the desired destination. Such maps and guidebooks reflected the significance of place and embodied the intersection of



geography (world-writing) and Holy Scripture (God's book of the world).

Dante's *Divina Commedia* reflects the importance of both pilgrimage and the eschatological traditions in medieval Christian Europe. As Dante's pilgrim protagonist enters zones normally forbidden to living creatures, the poet provides a vision of both the end of one man's life and the end of the world. For modern readers, the nature of the *Commedia*'s daring might not be immediately obvious but in the fourteenth century, Dante's journey bordered on blasphemy. Consequently, his task as a writer was a dangerous one that required him to convince the reader that his audacious voyage through hell, purgatory and the spheres of heaven was willed by God and, therefore, his transgression into sacred spaces was legitimate.

Although his election was exceptional, Dante's trek is intended to have broader implications, for he leaves a trail for others to follow. The Ulysses episode recounted in *Inferno* 26 tells the reader how to find Eden: sail west from Gibraltar, bearing always a little south until you come to the antipodes. There on top of the mountain you will find Earthly Paradise. The trail, however, does not give *carte blanche*, for not all will be permitted to follow it to its destination. Dante uses the Ulysses episode to underscore the extraordinary nature of this letter: only those called by God can complete it and reenter Earthly Paradise. The episode also reiterates the danger of the forbidden fruit that grows in that garden, since it is precisely a thirst for knowledge that lures Dante's Ulysses to his death. The apocalyptic pageants that Dante witnesses in the garden, moreover, underlines the link between this reentry and the end of time. The lesson of the Ulysses episode is revealed when Dante reaches the destination that Ulysses could not.

In late fifteenth century Europe, so frequently associated with the newness of the Renaissance, the question of the end of the old world was never far from the reimagining of a new one. Moreover, in an age that took its cues from the past, a return to a golden age was not so immediately severable from a leap into the future. The apocalypticism associated with Franciscan and Joachimite culture had not died with the emergence of Renaissance thinking (humanism), rather the late fifteenth century, confronted with a very changing world, turned to the prophets for an explanation and to make sense of the unfolding of history while new prophets emerged to interpret the events of the century in eschatological terms.

In the late 1480s and early 1490s, neither Italy nor Spain were oblivious to the voices of those who imagined the end of the world was imminent. The Italian preacher Girolamo Savonarola predicted a coming apocalypse, while the closing battles of the Reconquista in Spain were figured as the closing chapters of Armageddon.

From this study emerges the depth of Columbus's concern with the timing of the coming apocalypse. Columbus, a "profoundly religious individual much influenced by the Spiritual Franciscans," we learn, saw the events of the late fifteenth century as important clues as to the timing of this apocalypse.<sup>1</sup> Columbus's knowledge of a Christian apocalyptic tradition that envisioned the spiritual conquest of Islam, the liberation of Jerusalem, and the conversion of

the Jews as preludes to the millennium and the second coming of Christ, caused him to conclude that the end days were imminent' and that the world was on the brink of a new age. Columbus was, for example, acutely aware of the predictions of Peter of Aragon' and of John Alamany for he cites them and others" in his own *Libro de las profecias*, an unfinished book of prophecies that he worked on throughout his lifetime. Moreover, Columbus cited a number of these prophecies when making his case to Isabella and Ferdinand.

But for a sailor such as Columbus, steeped in a millennial culture, the itinerary contained in the *Commedia* must have been enormously tempting. Its implicit warning was nonetheless daunting, and Columbus had to be certain that he was divinely sanctioned to make this transgressive and potentially fatal journey. At least two other documented expeditions had attempted to sail west to reach the East and failed. Perhaps more importantly, Columbus had to convince others, namely a monarch with funds and authority, that he was chosen by God to succeed where others could not.

Columbus, we know, was well acquainted with the imagery of medieval millennialism and put great store in Franciscan apocalypticism, as well as a great number of medieval prophecies. But it was Dante's literary imagining of the *aldilà* that provided Columbus with a "summa" of the various and sometimes conflicting sources he had consulted, and which can be found at the heart of Columbus's unique perception of the cosmos. Indeed, more than any medieval geographer's, Dante's geography legitimized Columbus's perception of the world and his conviction that his journey was a pre-ordained portent of a coming apocalypse.

In his letters and in his will, Columbus also writes that his discovery of the New World was part of a series of apocalyptic events of which the Reconquista was but one. The gold that would be revealed in the New World would provide the means of financing the eventual recapture of Jerusalem, the next step in the apocalypse.

Similarly, the question of why Columbus would sail west to reach the East can only be satisfactorily answered with recourse to more than the Franciscan prophecies in which Columbus was steeped. Despite the plethora of Columbus scholarship, little has been made of the Italian cultural heritage of which Columbus was a product or of his own fascination with the Roman Empire and its westward course.

For Columbus, who also linked the end of the world with a return to the garden from which mankind had been expelled, reaching it by sailing west must necessarily have been interpreted in the context of the successful Reconquista of the Roman Empire's westernmost extension and his own interest in Empire. To go west to reach the East, for Columbus was to bring such expansion full circle, and was thus linked to the prophesied Last World Emperor.

The book starts, therefore, with an overview of this backdrop, examining the context into which we ought to consider how Christopher Columbus "read" the world and the unfolding of time. More importantly it considers the extent to which the *Commedia* provided Christopher Columbus with an encyclopedic compendium of this tradition

together with a series of signs that would support Columbus's assertion that he had been chosen for this task.

In so doing, it considers the role that the *Commedia* played in Columbus's social circle and in the courtly circles he frequented in search of funding. It looks at how affinities between himself and the exiled poet might have led Columbus to see himself as a divinely appointed agent of the apocalypse and his enterprise as the realization of the spiritual journey chronicled in the *Commedia*. As part of this study, the book necessarily examines the cultural space that Dante's poem, its geography, cosmography and eschatology, enjoyed in late fifteenth century Spain as well as Columbus's own exposure to it.

In this respect, the book also considers the dissemination of the *Commedia* in Columbus's world. It argues that Columbus used the poem as an itinerary as well as a hermeneutic tool by which to interpret his own role in the unfolding apocalypse with which he associated his journey.

While it is impossible to determine precisely all that Columbus had read in his lifetime, it is possible from his *Libro de las profecías* and the copious notes that he has left behind in his extant books to conclude not only that he read extensively but also that, like Dante, Columbus was thoroughly engaged in glossing and absorbing a variety of sources to create his own text.

A certain debt to Dante's own hermeneutic strategy is evident if not explicit in Columbus's writing. Like Dante, Columbus explicitly relies upon the four-fold methodology of the *quadriga* when studying scripture. Moreover, Columbus notes that in addition to this four-fold methodology, he also employs a system used by Nicholas of Lyra in his *Glossa ordinaria* to include in his hermeneutics a two-fold system, similar to that known to Dante scholars as *figura* and fulfillment.

It is also possible to get a good sense of his knowledge and absorption, whether conscious or unconscious, of the *Commedia*. Most striking are the similarities between Columbus's perception of the shape of the earth and the shape of the earth as posited in the *Commedia*. Columbus's earth, like Dante's is pear-shaped rather than perfectly spherical. Columbus's departure from a spherical configuration, like Dante's is created by the existence of a mountainous landmass, located in the western hemisphere antipodal to Jerusalem. For Columbus, as for Dante, Paradise could be found because it was perceived as a real location. While Columbus relies on the Bible as proof of the physical existence of Earthly Paradise it is the *Commedia* that provides Columbus not only with its physical locator but also with the eschatological key to its whereabouts or perhaps more accurately, its "whenabouts."

For Dante, the Reconquest of Earthly Paradise in the *Commedia* was a staging for reentry into the Holy City, into that Rome where Christ is a Roman. For Columbus, it was a staging point from which Christianity could finally spread and conquer the entire unknown world. Columbus's *postille* in his own books and his *Libro de las profecías* reveal a man who was deeply concerned with issues of Empire. Although we cannot confirm that Columbus owned a copy of the *Aeneid*, his margin notes suggest that he was at least

familiar with it and likely with the prophecies that it contained, especially that of a Roman empire without end in time or space. The *Aeneid* establishes the westward trajectory of this expansion, but it is subsequently reiterated in the Acts of the Apostles, and ensconced in the *Commedia*.

At the same time though Columbus would have found numerous affinities in Dante's life and his own that would eventually allow him to adopt the figure of Dante as a paradigm for preordination. Columbus, like Dante, a person living far from his home, was "anxiety ridden about his social status." The affinities that Columbus bears to Dante, however, extend beyond their common social circumstances which could describe any number of sailors.

Dante's question, "Why me? I am not Aeneas; I am not Paul?" was the same one that Columbus asked and reflected the same self-doubt that had kept him at the mouth of the Orinoco, fearful of sailing inland to penetrate Paradise. Like Dante's Ulysses, Columbus was conscious of the destruction that befalls the navigator who goes beyond what has been providentially destined. Yet the question of who should be appointed to make this westward journey to uncover and recover Paradise lost, was integral to Columbus's imaginings and crucial to the success of his project. The prophecies on which Columbus relied did not always name names, however, and Columbus was therefore constrained to consider the exempla contained in his readings, to find justification for his own election as "agent of the apocalypse."

If early in his enterprise Columbus was not convinced that he was the one, he did eventually come to see himself as divinely appointed, asserting that he was the appointed agent of this apocalypse. After the discovery, he says that the idea of crossing this western ocean was planted in his head by God much earlier, around the time he was living in Santo Porto with his wife. Writing in 1500, Columbus reports that "Of time for Columbus, his apocalypse, is thus linked to the beginning of time. This new place, this new world is in fact very old. Or as Catherine Keller has put it, "the symbolic future has been remade as a literal past." It is likely that it was Pierre D'Ailly's intertwining of the legends of Eden with the eleventh century prophecies of Joachim of Fiore that made his *Imago Mundi* so appealing to Columbus.

Virgil's *Aeneid* and the Acts of the Apostles, specifically those portions referring to Paul's journey to the west, would certainly have furnished Columbus with examples of westward journeys willed by God, but it is the absorption, appropriation and reiteration of both in the *Commedia* that provides the typology into which Columbus could insert himself as well as a scriptural template against which to measure and define himself.

Moreover, Columbus's desire that the people of this other world should be converted to Christianity recalls the cleansing mission of Paul, and in turn of Dante whose literary journey was aimed at bringing about a New Jerusalem. But Columbus does not go so far as to pronounce himself a new Paul, just as Dante did not explicitly do so, but allowed others to infer this. Columbus's journals and letters describe his mission in apostolic terms. Following the hagiographical conceit in which the saint's name is also a signifier, Columbus exploits the meaning of his own given

name ("Christ bearer") and adopts a new signature: "Christoferens."

Most importantly Columbus's discovery would have legitimized Dante's paradigm as the typological model for a new apostle. Columbus thus becomes, for writers and poets of the late Italian Renaissance and Counter-Reformation, a "type" of Dante just as Dante was a "type" of Paul and of Aeneas before him, and is legitimized as the heir to an apostolic tradition that starts with Aeneas and continues through Paul.

Perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of such influence is the frequency with which Italian writers in the years following the discovery used a Dantean filter to represent Columbus and to lend significance to his journey.

While contemporary cartographers confirmed Columbus's New World as the world imagined by Dante, so too did the Italian Renaissance writers confirm Columbus as the inheritor of the Dantean journey, informed in turn by the journeys of St. Paul and before him Aeneas. Columbus is thus another exile bound for Rome, a new apostle on the road to the New Jerusalem.

The mapmaking frenzy spawned by the Age of Encounters, however, ought not to be considered as distinct from but perhaps as symptomatic of a concomitant cosmopoietic impulse, or "worldmaking," that Giuseppe Mazzotta has suggested is the most emblematic feature of Renaissance culture. Columbus's letter on his first voyage had barely been translated into Latin and disseminated in Italy when in 1493 Giuliano Dati wrote a poetic version of it in Italian. And while it may be tempting to view the emergence of the Columbus myth merely because of the cosmopoietic urge, a closer look at the figure of Columbus himself, as well as his writings, suggests that the Italian literary and cultural treatment of the New World owes as much to the medieval imagining that facilitated Columbus's journey in the first place as it does to fifteenth and sixteenth century humanism.

In the decades and centuries following his historic journeys, Italian poets and writers almost invariably elevated Columbus from Genoese navigator sailing for Spain to an Italian apostolic warrior fighting on the side of Christendom. In such literature, the discovery of the western landmass constitutes a reconquest of Paradise and signals the coming of the apocalypse and the eventual triumph of the Church militant.

In the wake of the New World discovery, the Italian literary treatment of the figure of Columbus, and other explorers, but mostly of Columbus, fortified the notion of Columbus's discovery as providential and confirmed the Italian and, consequently, the pan-European impression of Columbus as an inheritor of a longstanding tradition of apostolic voyagers eschatologically linked to the role of Rome as the New Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, Italian Renaissance writers imagined the Columbus episode as an historical event with ontological significance and crucially, to exploit the Dantean model in interpreting such significance. Torquato Tasso's revision of Canto 15 of his *Gerusalemme liberata* (1575) to include a reference to the eventual discovery of a new world by Columbus, a man from Liguria,<sup>29</sup> provides a good example

of such literary construction. Significantly, Tasso's epic interprets Columbus through a Dantean filter, contrasting Columbus's success with Ulysses's failure, implying that Columbus, like Dante was able to complete a journey that the pagan voyager was not.

Notably, it is not Homer's Ulysses to which Tasso makes reference, however. Rather his paraphrasing of Ulysses's journey and Ulysses's eventual destruction are a clear reiteration of Inferno 26. Tasso thus invokes a Dantesque reading in which Columbus is, like Dante, distinguishable from the pagan navigator.

Accordingly, later chapters of this book examine how Italian writers, such as Ariosto and Tasso interpreted Columbus and his voyages and how they used Dante to do so. It seeks to contextualize these works against the backdrop of the Counter-Reformation and the increasingly secular and commercial New World enterprise, and considers their appropriation of a Dantesque Columbus to promote the position of Rome on the world stage. Specifically, it considers how the existence of the Dantean exegetical model and the auto-exegetical project undertaken by Columbus himself, allowed Italian writers to perceive Columbus's journeys as a fulfillment of the prophecies promulgated throughout the Middle Ages and absorbed into the narrative of the *Commedia*.

[Dante, Columbus and the Prophetic Tradition](#) proposes that these writers as well as artists such as Giovanni Stradano recognized the integral role played by Italian navigators in the Age of Discovery and, in the absence of an Italian colonial project, sought to imbue the Italian navigators, and Columbus, with a supranational identity. It further highlights the extent to which Italian writers working in the context of the Counter-Reformation, use a Dantean filter to propagate the notion of Columbus as a new Paul, that is, a divinely appointed apostle to the New World, and the Roman Church and as the rightful emperor of the souls encountered there.

As the Spanish claimed the new world as their own and Spanish nationalism threatened to consume the other powers of Europe including the papacy, a new type of war had to be fought, a war for the souls of the world. Charles V as much as he was the inheritor of the eastern empire and even arguably the English nation, represented a threat to the Church's power, as the 1527 Sack of Rome attests. Charles was eventually crowned but not in Rome and after this coronation in Bologna the papacy never again anointed a world emperor.

Threatened as well by the rise of English and Lutheran Protestantism, the Church responded with the Council of Trent, the establishment and recognition of the Jesuit Order in 1534 (recognized in 1540), the creation of the Congregation of the Inquisition in 1542, and eventually, the Collegio di Propaganda Fide (by Urban VIII in 1623) for the training of missionaries. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a genuine flowering of Columbus epics through which the Dantean filter was used to transform the act of discovery into divine revelation, and to figure Columbus as both crusader and apostle, claiming the new world not for the Spaniards but for the Catholic Empire of the Spirit. Situated thus in the center of universal history,

Columbus emerges in the Italian literary tradition as more than a sailor on the Spanish payroll, but rather as a harbinger of a greater Empire to come. In light of the irony of a plethora of "explorers" (Cabot, Vespucci, Columbus, for example) produced by a country with no colonial program of its own, it ought not to be surprising that the Italian Columbus epics that emerge in this setting attributes significance beyond the temporal to their countrymen's voyages, focusing less on the mundane than on the universal metaphysical implications of Columbus's journey. Similarly, in the Italian Columbus epics the Spanish political context is rarely acknowledged except to the extent that Columbus's journey is situated in the context of the Reconquista which in turn is characterized as an over-arching Christian defeat of Muslims rather than as a Spanish national victory.

As Theodore Cachey has suggested, if Italy was not able to assert control over the peninsula or control the expansion of an increasingly nationalized Europe, it certainly could advise these new nations on how to build and preserve their newly won dominions. Through the Columbus epics, Cachey's "Pan European counselors" disseminated the perception of Columbus first as an Italian, but secondly as an epic figure, alongside Godefroi de Bouillon in the Chivalric tradition, Aeneas in the Roman tradition and Paul in the Biblical tradition. As the Italian Columbus epic adopts the same literary laying on of hands epitomized in the *Commedia*, Columbus is transformed into an heir to the Roman Empire.

In the seventeenth century Tommaso Stigliani's *Il mondo nuovo* (1628) embraced the Dantesque Columbus, an apostolic figure who was firmly entrenched in the Italian literary landscape and the Counter-Reformation consciousness. *Il mondo nuovo* recounts the story of Columbus's "discovery" of the New World, embellishing it with several details that were not part of the actual voyage but which create paradigmatic affinities between Columbus's journey and that of St. Paul and of Aeneas, as absorbed by Dante's own journey in the *Commedia*, for example shipwrecks and an angel / messenger sent from God to Columbus to urge him on.

The cosmology on which Stigliani relies is also the same on which Columbus relies, and which was propagated by Dante. Just as Dante included in his own adventure episodes that linked himself to Paul and to Aeneas before him, so too does Stigliani associate himself with this tradition through the absorption not only of the episodes all three have in common, the image of the shipwreck, but also using Dantean imagery.

The shipwreck, the western voyage and the visitation create an unmistakable figural relationship between Aeneas, the founder of pagan Rome, Paul the founder of Christian Rome and Columbus the discoverer of an even greater Christian empire, one that fulfills the Virgilian prophecy of an empire without end in time or space.

Stigliani thus paints Columbus as a new Aeneas expanding Roman dominion, and a new Paul, bringing Christianity to the gentiles. In so doing Stigliani also absorbs a medieval cartographical convention that attributes spiritual dominion over the unknown world to St. Paul. Stigliani's epic, therefore, belongs not only to the emerging "Columbus epic" tradition but also to a literary tradition that considered St.

Paul as the natural successor to Aeneas and Dante as the successor to Paul and Aeneas. In proposing Columbus as the natural successor to all three, Stigliani continues the literary projects of Virgil and Dante in asserting Roman (i.e. Roman Catholic) dominion over the known world and ought also, therefore, to be read also in light of the Counter-Reformation and the concomitant growth of the Jesuit and other missionary orders.

The Stigliani work responds to Columbus's own self-doubt, or perhaps more to the protestations of those who would ask "Why Columbus, he is not Aeneas, he is not Paul?" by answering firmly, "Ah, but he is both — a new Aeneas and a new Paul for a new world!"

There is a further aspect of the Counter-Reformation Columbus narrative, and Stigliani's in particular, that owes a debt to the *Commedia*. Just as Dante absorbs the figures of Aeneas and Paul and gradually transforms himself into a warrior/crusader poised to reconquer the Holy City, so too do Stigliani and other Italians such as Ubertino Carrara rely on this paradigm of transformation to present Columbus as a Warrior of God, similarly poised.

In this respect the Columbus epics reflect Columbus's instructions from the Spanish Monarchs, to "discover and acquire". In Stigliani's Columbus epic this bipartite purpose is articulated in two stages: the discovery and the conquest. In this latter stage the image of Columbus reflects as well the iconography of the sword wielding Apostle Paul, fusing conversion and conquest.

In the Pan-European imaginings of the Italian Renaissance writer, the New World thus became the extension of an empire that could not be defined by time or space, the fulfillment of prophecies ranging from the Virgilian to the Dantesque. But most notably it is Dante's establishment of a literary heredity flowing directly from Aeneas, to Paul, to himself that enabled Renaissance and Counter-Reformation writers to add Columbus to its patrimony. Through the cosmopoietic project of the Italian Renaissance the discovery of the New World, Columbus's "other world" became the incarnation of Dante's word, the fulfillment of Dante's *figura* and the promise of Paradise his *Commedia* offered. As the terminus of a new pilgrimage to a New Jerusalem, this Earthly Paradise was thus poised to become that Rome where Christ was a Roman. Concomitantly, in the literary imagining of the Italian Renaissance, Columbus as Christ-bearer and Holy Warrior was confirmed as the appointed agent of the apocalypse, in his reconquest of Paradise, his conversion of the other, and in his establishment of an Empire that was both temporal and spiritual.

But while the figure of Columbus and his attendant apocalyptic approach to the New World was convenient for the Roman Catholic Church and for Italians in their Pan-European role, it also provided a few other Christian powers with the justification for their own colonizing projects.

By the time Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo painted his 1791 masterpiece *Mondo Novo*, it seemed, however, that the entire colonial project had passed Italy by, relegating Italians to the role of watchers, gawking at a representation of the New World while the rest of Europe experienced it

firsthand. Consigned by the intricate politics of Renaissance Europe to a position of national impotence, Italy lacked the unity found in Spain, France, England and the Low Countries that facilitated expansion into the newly discovered lands on the other side of the Atlantic.

The Tiepolo fresco, therefore, reflects one of the direct consequences of Italy's lack of national cohesion and its occupation by foreign powers as the people of Venice, a city once a giant in commerce and exploration, turn their backs to the actual seas, cover their heads and stare into a contraption common in the eighteenth century, a three-dimensional diorama of a world that most Italians could only imagine.

The fresco also reflects in visual form the duality inherent in the Italian response to the New World project. The actual, or what might be termed the literal, level of the fresco depicts a people left behind, excluded from the commercial exploitation and colonization of the New World. The hawkers' device and its evident popularity illustrate the extent to which Italians, eager to see this New World, had to content themselves with an artist's impression. By not depicting what the hawkers' spectacle shows, Tiepolo not only forces the viewer to engage in a mental exercise, but also speaks to the role played by imaginative construction, that is, artistic and literary construction, in the Italian perception of the New World.

Like the ideal city of the Renaissance artists, this New World was a construction that considered the actuality of its existence and then recreated and reinterpreted it, transforming its discovery into an act on the stage of world history, a page in God's book of the world, or in the case of Tiepolo's fresco, a painting in the gallery of the cosmos. If Italy could not be there physically, it could nonetheless be there in the imagination. And by imagining it, poetically, artistically, culturally, the Italian imagination sought to shape this new world in ways that those there might not.

The Italian literary construction of the figure of Columbus and of the new world, like so many other aspects of the Italian cultural project, has its genesis in the literary projects of the past, and Dante's. Yet it was in effect a modernizing project; in looking to the past it created something truly new. By taking Columbus and creating out of him a new Paul, it created also a New Man capable of conquering this New World and reclaiming Paradise.

The approach of this work is somewhat unconventional. To a certain extent it might be considered as belonging to the field of meta-geography, in as much as it involves the study of how maps and geographic notions in general are formed. It starts from the premise that Columbus's interest in the physical geography of the world was matched or surpassed by his hunger for interpreting it. Columbus was a voracious reader whose eclectic tastes are evident in the wide variety of works he cites and the books that we know he read; they range from the popular to the theological. Columbus himself seemed not to exclude information that might help him to understand the interchange between the physical and the spiritual world, as well as the relationship between what was and what will be. Accordingly, this study also takes an eclectic approach to Columbus's world and the

world that tried to make sense of what he believed he had discovered.

In its attempt to determine what prompted Columbus to believe that he was specially chosen by God to succeed in reaching the East by traveling west, this study is necessarily speculative. The conclusions it draws, however, are supportable on the balance of probabilities and at the very least, represent a good case for continued examination.

This study also concerns itself with the question of what it means to be Italian and as such equally concerns itself with questions of nationalism and imperialism, both temporal and spiritual. Dante's attempts in the *Commedia* to formulate a theory of national identity move from regionalism, to nationalism and on to the larger question of empire. His inquiry is one that considers the question of empire not only in spatial terms but also in temporal terms as he struggles towards a unified theory of what it means to be a Tuscan in Italy and to be an Italian in the Roman Empire. The dual nature of Rome as both city and Empire is problematic in Dante's work. The conflict between the Roman Empire and the Roman Church is equally problematic for Dante. The solution that he offers in the *Monarchia* suggests a separation of Church and State with a clearly discernible separation of powers. Yet the solution he hints at in the *Commedia* is much more reconciliatory, augured by the moment in *Purgatorio* where the pilgrim is allegorically both mitered and crowned. Dante's disappointment with Constantine's withdrawal from Rome similarly speaks to the poet's hope that the Empire and Church might be restored to the early days in which the head of the Church and the head of the Empire were one.

Such questions, in both Dante's dream and Columbus's aspirations are fundamental to the issues of conquest and colonization raised by the 1492 landing. Both Dante and Columbus imagined the world as waiting for a cataclysmic transformation and concerned themselves with the relationship between what was and what will be, with two worlds colliding: the old and the new. Dante, it seems, both anticipated the age of discovery and inspired Columbus, who used the *Commedia* as a map and thereby sailed to another world. Dante's creation of the writer as voyager and Columbus's self-promotion as a new apostle, in turn, informed the works of those engaged in the act of conjuring up even newer worlds.

**[Dante, Mercy, and the Beauty of the Human Person](#) edited by Leonard J. DeLorenzo, Vittorio Montemaggi [Cascade Books, 9781498246088] paperback**

*Dante, Mercy, and the Beauty of the Human Person* is a pilgrimage to rediscover the spiritual and humanizing benefit of the *Commedia*. Treating each cantica of the poem, this volume offers profound meditations on the intertwined themes of memory, prayer, sainthood, the irony of sin, theological and literary aesthetics, and desire, all while consistently reflecting upon the key themes of mercy and beauty in the revelation of the human person within the drama of divine love. This frankly devotional appreciation of Dante adds zest to any reading.

"This thoughtful collection of essays convincingly demonstrates that the Divine Comedy has something to say to a society that is overly plugged-in yet increasingly disconnected, tribal, and short on that quality of mercy by which we come to recognize both beauty and God's unimaginable, steadfast love. Dante, Mercy, and the Beauty of the Human Person is a gift of respite and reorientation to our roiling age." --Elizabeth Scalia, Author of *Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life*

"This superb collection is more than simply an anthology of scholarly essays on Dante's *Commedia*; it is also an invitation for readers to be transformed intellectually, aesthetically, and spiritually as they journey through Dante's poem into his living theological imagination and his extraordinary vision of the mystery and grandeur of human personhood. Read alongside Dante himself, this volume may become something more than an invitation--it may become an initiation!" --Jacob Holsinger Sherman, University Lecturer in Philosophy of Religion, University of Cambridge and author of *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Philosophy*

"This delightful volume invites us to see Dante's poem as a pilgrimage, and to ourselves take steps along with the poet, not as solitary seekers of truth but as a community of fellow travelers who need to learn from one another. Written for the general audience by gifted scholars of literature, theology, and philosophy, the volume invites us into one of the greatest poetic accounts of the journey from dark to light, not in some other lifetime, but right in the midst of this one." --Janet Soskice, Professor of Philosophical Theology, University of Cambridge

Leonard J. DeLorenzo is Associate Professional Specialist in the McGrath Institute for Church Life, with a concurrent appointment in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. Vittorio Montemaggi is Associate Professor of Religion and Literature and Concurrent Associate Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Excerpt: What if reading Dante's *Commedia* were a kind of pilgrimage? That would mean that both the destination and the mode of travel would be significant, and that the reasons why one sets off on this journey in the first place would be worthy of attention. Even those with a cursory knowledge of the poem know that Dante ends up gazing upon the "love that moves the sun and other stars" after beginning in a "dark wood" midway through life's journey. With one hundred cantos and the whole cosmos in between, it seems that there is quite a lot of distance between darkness and light, confusion and clarity, sorrow and joy. And yet, that great distance is as if nothing when considering that the journey Dante makes occurs as much within him by increments of love as it takes place outside him by his footsteps. If Dante's *Commedia* were a kind of pilgrimage for the reader, too, then it would be a pilgrimage in a similar manner—one in which the reader moves toward something and also becomes someone in the process. Moreover, it would be a pilgrimage within and toward community, just as Dante himself moves from isolation to guidance to something perhaps best described as "mutual indwelling:"

This volume is the work of readers who venture to allow the reading of the *Commedia* to be a spiritual pilgrimage. Those who composed the essays collected here were willing to join with others in moving through the *Commedia* as pilgrims. While the contributors are themselves scholars, these essays are not primarily intended for the scholarly field as conventionally conceived. At the same time, each of the contributors offer their distinctive scholarly expertise to the project of reading the *Commedia* in and as community, with the hope of finding something that we often lose, of clarifying something that is often obscured, and of reclaiming something that we all too often forget: the beauty of the human person revealed in the light of mercy.

None other than Pope Francis provided the keynote for this pilgrim quest when, already looking forward to the Jubilee Year of Mercy in May of 2015, he offered these words to the President of the Pontifical Council of Culture to be shared with the Italian Senate as it observed the 750th anniversary of Dante's birth:

The *Comedy* can be read as a great itinerary, rather as a true pilgrimage, both personal and interior, as well as communal, ecclesial, social and historic. It represents the paradigm of every authentic voyage in which humanity is called to leave behind what Dante calls "the little patch of earth that makes us here so fierce" (Par. 32.51) in order to reach a new condition, marked by harmony, peace and happiness. This is the horizon of all authentic humanism.

Dante is therefore a prophet of hope, a herald of humanity's possible redemption and liberation, of profound change in every man and woman, of all of humanity. He invites us to regain the lost and obscured meaning of our human journey and to hope to see again the bright horizon which shines in the full dignity of the human person.'

Pope Francis is inviting an embodied reading of the text. He suggests that the fullness of what the "supreme poet" heralds is only available to those who read personally and interiorly, communally and ecclesially, socially and historically. Readers cannot stand safely outside the text if they are to glimpse the final horizon of the poem's vision. What is in play is nothing less than the possibility of remembering who we are and who we are called to become in and through mercy. Just as Dante journeys, so too are his readers meant to journey, and in so doing learn to see and love one another anew.

This present volume is the fruit of an intentional effort to read the *Commedia* as pilgrims, in community, with the hope of rediscovering the beauty of the human person. In the early months of 2016, the contributors to this volume collaborated to offer a series of lectures alongside a communal reading of the *Commedia* that commenced on Ash Wednesday and concluded on Divine Mercy Sunday. Participants from the University of Notre Dame, the surrounding community, and across the country and even in several foreign countries made a pilgrimage through the poem as they read two cantos each day, gathered together in discussion groups, and composed their own reflections on their personal and shared pilgrimage.' Many who made this pilgrimage were first-time readers of the *Commedia*, others had read the poem in part, while others still were well-versed in Dante's work or even, in the case of several

pilgrims, Dante scholars. Regardless of previous experience or expertise, all walked together on a common way, meeting up with others as the journey progressed, seeking to discover with each other, in each other, and for each other the glimmers of our redeemed humanity. Dante does not and cannot deliver such a gift himself but he does open a path for us to journey toward receiving such a gift together.

One of the participants in the communal pilgrimage from Lent to Easter in 2016 reflected on her journey with others through the *Commedia* in this way:

The Comedy is not the story of how Dante gets to heaven but of how God brings the human person home. It is the light of God who illuminates us, Christ who moves us, and Mary who guides us.... The journey of introspection begins by surrendering the illusion of autonomy. I struggle to surrender the belief that I can grasp this paradise—or that humanity is entitled to it.... It is grace that awakens Dante to the woods, that brings Virgil to him, and that ultimately sets him in motion as part of the divine Comedy. Thus every beautiful movement begins with the bestowal of mercy. We have only to utter the fiat that Dante murmured to Beatrice and then follow by our own movement.

The interweaving of the first person voice—"I" and "we"—testifies to how this particular reader moved into and through the text rather than standing outside of it, where she could safely observe and measure. How often does one's disinterested position become that "little patch of earth" that makes us so fierce toward one another? And how often is it that the antidote to this sickness is the humility to submit to journeying with others, alongside them, willing to become something and someone different from who you were before?

The essays presented herein therefore began as lectures composed for a community of pilgrims who gathered in liturgical time to read the *Commedia* together—setting out together on a common journey in hopes of reaching something like a common home. What changed between then and now is that the essays have—as a further stage in the pilgrimage—been revised to read more academically, and recast for a different medium and a different audience. You will, however, still find a certain spoken quality to these essays, because they were originally and always intended to be contributions to a dialogue among pilgrim-readers. In other words, those of us who have written these words invite you, who read these words, to join us in setting out on the ongoing journey of rediscovering our human beauty together, in the light of mercy.

The itinerary of this volume, which is proposed as an initial direction to which others might certainly be added and preferred, follows something of a thematic trajectory rather than a strictly chronological one that goes through the *Commedia* from beginning to end. The first essay comes from Vittorio Montemaggi, who welcomes us with joy into this journey together. His essay offers us, as if from an initial vista, the opportunity to look out over the whole terrain in order to anticipate, in hope and longing, the demanding but delightful journey set before us. Montemaggi portrays a pilgrim path that opens with the cry of mercy and ends in the spontaneity of human encounter. We are likewise invited

to always begin anew in humble admiration when we read the *Commedia*, wondering at the depths and heights of our human dignity that Dante wants to help us remember.

After this initial invitation, the volume proceeds according to three general sections. The first section—"Bearings"—includes essays that assist readers of the *Commedia* to set their faces in the direction of the pilgrimage's end. At the beginning of this section, John Cavadini offers a reading of the *Inferno* that follows how Augustine presents the "Earthly City" as an ironic mimicry of the "Heavenly City" in *City of God*. What Dante presents, according to Cavadini, is the ongoing unmasking of sin in the infernal realm, where all of sin's disguises are removed and the absurdity of the sin itself—principally, lying—is laid bare. Even here, though, the presence of mercy is the hermeneutic key since there would be no perspective to see hell for what it is if not for the true light of the human person shining down from the heavenly realm, glowing most brilliantly in the eucharistic sacrifice.

The second essay comes from Kevin Grove, CSC, who offers something of an introduction to the purgatorial nature of Dante's entire journey through the first two cantiche, principally from the perspective of the threshold of the Earthly Paradise. When the reader stands with Dante at this critical juncture atop Mount Purgatory, desire, memory, and speech are redressed and remade for the purpose of journeying into true growth and glory. Grove observes how the dawn of mercy is both devastating and healing in one swift stroke.

The third essay in this first section belongs to Christian Moevs, whose considerations of the metaphysical dimensions of the *Commedia* challenge readers to refine and elevate our typical modes of spatial and temporal thinking. Moevs draws out Dante's lament at the tragedy of losing ourselves by looking for our desire as something to grasp and possess. In so doing, Moevs enables us to listen afresh to Dante's laudation of the gift of receiving ourselves again as the fruit of divine desire, in which light and being are one.

The second set of essays falls under the heading of "Transformations," and points readers to how the *Commedia* dramatizes shifts in being and action necessary for journeying as the poem depicts. Matthew Treherne opens this section with a reminder to readers that we always come to any text, but especially Dante's, in the midst of life already in progress. The unfolding drama of the reader herself is perhaps too often neglected when considering who we are as readers of the *Commedia*, and yet from the very first line of the *Inferno* Dante opens his journey to the respective journeys of his readers. The personal and communal must always be intricately connected for the *Commedia*'s readers if they are to truly become pilgrims and not just observers.

Leonard J. DeLorenzo continues the theme of "Transformations" as he focuses attention on the middle of the Purgatorio to try to understand what, exactly, the penitent souls are doing and why. Reflecting on the communal praying of the "Our Father" on the first terrace of purgatory, DeLorenzo ventures to discern how the movement practiced there might serve as an interpretive key for the movement of the whole *Commedia*. From the pattern of

movement that the penitents exhibit, a vision of the meaning of the saints in beatitude emerges and, with them, a way of understanding how Dante's pilgrimage begins, in the order of grace.

Stephen C. Pepper, CSC, concludes the section with an essay that critically distinguishes between gazes locked into fixation and gazes opened up to fascination. The course of treatment for those being capacitated for the full flourishing of beauty in the dignity of the human person has to do with changing the way that we look at each other. Pepper reminds readers that what we are looking for and what we are willing to see is every bit as important—if not more important—as what appears to us.

The third and final section of this volume focuses on "Beatitude," with three essays situated much more on the side of journey's end, helping us

see what according to Dante constitutes the mutual indwelling of humanity and divinity embodied in the heavenly community. Jennifer Newsome Martin attends to transcendent vision in the *Paradiso*, where the narrative shuttles toward the nearly unbearable luminosity and the impossible distances of astronomical imagery. Echoing the recalibrations to spatial thinking according to the properties of light that Christian Moevs initiates in his essay, Martin contends that the *Paradiso* requires a new way of seeing, one that reaches toward the perfection of form and proportion. Once again, as in the previous essay, what one sees and how one sees bear directly upon one another.

Jessica Keating explores memory, specifically tracing how Dante presents memory as failed, redeemed, and sanctified in the three cantiche of the *Commedia*. Returning to a note that John Cavadini introduces earlier, Keating elucidates the eucharistic memory as both the path and the goal of human memory once sick in sin but, in Christ, bound for communal perfection. What Keating helps readers of the *Commedia* to find is that our own memories find their source and summit in that love that first remembers us.

The third essay of the final section comes from Cyril O'Regan, who reads in the *Paradiso* the healing of rivalries through the charitable exchange of praise. Looking at the figures of St. Francis and St. Bonaventure, St. Dominic and St. Thomas Aquinas, O'Regan sees how particularity is celebrated and union is achieved when Dante orchestrates a mini-drama of chiasmic praise that has the children of each spiritual tradition heaping praise upon the "rival" tradition's founder (Bonaventure sings of Dominic, Thomas Aquinas of Francis). Here we glimpse that the final horizon of the human person—and the beauty of which it is an expression—lights up when the will to self-possession opens to the mutual exchange of gifts.

Following the ten distinct yet unified essays outlined above, this volume enjoys the benefit of an eloquent afterword—a rich essay in its own right—from a leading scholar and experienced pilgrim of Dante's poem. All of us—authors and readers—owe a special debt of gratitude to the afterword's author, Robin Kirkpatrick, who not only wrote something new for this volume but who also wrote the translation of the *Commedia* used throughout this work.<sup>1</sup> Though his contribution to this volume is therefore apparent

on just about every page, a great deal of his influence on the approach we have undertaken abides, implicitly but significantly, beneath the surface. Kirkpatrick's teaching, scholarship, and contemplation of the *Commedia* at the intersection of religion and literature present interpretive perspectives that help us see how we might become both vulnerable and courageous before Dante's work: readers who are boldly confident that they have something meaningful to bring to the *Commedia*, and radically open to the piercing and surprising meaning the *Commedia* brings to us.

Confidence and openness are twin dispositions that all readers of the *Commedia*—no matter how experienced or not—are always challenged to cultivate. Language can aid in this cultivation or stifle connections between a text and a person, between one person and another. The language of this introduction, as well as the tone of the volume as a whole, is crafted with the explicit hope of building connections and perhaps even community. To some readers, this language might well seem unconventional or perhaps even inappropriate for a work on Dante generated in the academy. Scholarly writing on the *Commedia* does not often embrace perspectives that explicitly explore the spiritual significance of Dante's work. And, even in academic theology, it is often assumed that a more neutral rhetoric with respect to spiritual journeying can more productively convey scholarly meaning. At the same time, and by the same token, the fruits of scholarship are not always given the possibility of reaching readers who might be interested in exploring their broader, non-scholarly implications, especially in connection with questions of spiritual consequence. This volume consciously attempts to pursue such possibility, with confidence and openness.

Along the lines just suggested, the present volume can thus be seen as an experiment and as an invitation: an experiment as to whether the possibility spoken of at the end of the previous paragraph is indeed a viable one; and an invitation to readers to help us carry out such exploration. We intend such exploration to be open-ended. We certainly hope you will join us in our journeying. But, equally certainly, we do not wish to suggest that the particular readings offered in this volume provide, individually or as a whole, the only possible ways of pursuing this kind of journeying. Neither do we wish to presume that the validity of the readings offered here ought to be measured by the extent to which readers will agree with them. We simply hope that the experiment and the invitation of this volume might be welcomed by you as a genuine attempt to enrich interpretation of the *Commedia* by adopting perspectives not usually adopted, at the intersection of scholarship and spiritual seeking.

To our knowledge, and for the reasons outlined in this introduction so far, this is the first volume of its kind. At the same time, it consciously builds on recent scholarly developments that illuminate our understanding of the theological dimensions of Dante's work.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the volume owes its existence to a particular context at the University of Notre Dame that is uniquely suited for the kind of experiment and invitation that this volume represents. Such context is defined by an intersection of resources that



allows for the coming together of academic theology, Dante studies, and reflection on connections between scholarship and ecclesial living. Hosted by the McGrath Institute for Church Life, the initiatives in which this volume originates found their primary context precisely at a point of interaction between academic life and the life of Church. In the case of these initiatives, the scholarly dimension of such interaction was defined, primarily, by conversation and collaboration across the Department of Theology and the Devers Program in Dante Studies. With this capacity to bring together the scholarly and the pastoral, it would be difficult to think of another set of resources that could allow for such a concentrated and extensive response to Pope Francis's invitation to read Dante in conjunction with the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

[The Divine Comedy: Inferno - Purgatory - Paradise](#) by Dante Alighieri. 13 compact discs, the entire unabridged Comedy and a one-disc biographical introduction to his life and work. [Naxos Audio Books, 962634315X]

*This is a wonderful performance of the entire Divine Comedy which one can listen to many times. The reader, Heathcoate Williams, must be some sort of an actor -- full throated furious at times, pale and poignant at others as he wends his way through it all, mimicking all the saints and sinners like a mockingbird. Each of the 100 cantos is prefaced by a short suggestion of period music for a breather and for atmosphere, which does not intrude or ham up the performance, as often happens with similar efforts.*

*Shameless drama of Williams' variety may be embarrassing to some, out of style to others. But it supplies an important element lacking to the rather dry academic fashion by which most are these days exposed to Dante. Nor is any accuracy of meaning sacrificed thereby. The three parts of the Comedy are all read from a prose translation by a man named Benedict Flynn. I am not aware that this translation is available anywhere in print, but having read several English translations of Dante, the word choice is familiar and sounds properly middle of the road. Truth be told, a dramatic flair does no disservice to this very personal poem at all, which was radical in its day for being written in common vernacular. For the hearer of our language, it places Dante in the ring where he belongs: with the fully engaged Shakespeare of the history plays, not with the closet dramas of a T.S. Eliot or a Robert Lowell.*

*The set is well worth the price, and the bonus disc lecture on Dante's life not only adds the academic dimension, but makes the price for the whole a steal. The liner note helps with some of the chief references. <>*

The Jubilee Year of Mercy had, on Francis's own definition, a specifically Marian dimension, significantly expressed in its formal inauguration on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. In this sense, too, the context provided for our initiatives by Notre Dame—a scholarly community ultimately formed in Marian inspiration (and whose most recognizable symbol is its golden dome with Our Lady standing atop)—proved spiritually fruitful. As if to enhance the significance of this, it so happened that in 2016, Ash Wednesday—the liturgical moment we had chosen for the formal opening of our pilgrimage with Dante—fell on February 11, feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes (remembered at Notre Dame by its famous "Grotto") and anniversary of the birth of Blessed Basil Moreau (founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross). We offer these observations not as mere spiritual curiosity, but in recognition of a further, important connection with the *Commedia*. Dante's poem, too, was ultimately formed in Marian inspiration (see, for instance, *Inferno* 2 and *Paradiso* 23.88-89). One way of engaging spiritually with the *Commedia* is to see it as an opportunity for deep reflection on Marian devotion.

That said, in whichever way readers choose to respond to this volume, we hope that the encounter will prove a fruitful one. As mentioned above, we do not write on the assumption that in order to be fruitful the encounter needs to be based on agreement, either of spiritual presupposition or of Dantean interpretation. Indeed, in this respect, we believe that the best way to be true to the spirit of the Year of Mercy is to think of our journeying as open-ended. Intellectual openness can, in this sense, be seen as a scholarly analogue to how, in spiritual terms, we might think of the all-embracingness of divine mercy. This means that we embark upon our journeying on the understanding that it can be a transformative one for us, in and through the way in which readers will contribute to enriching, refining, or correcting what this volume presents. At the same time, we offer this volume to you in the hope that you too will be able to find in it resources for renewed spiritual recognition of human personhood as a mystery in which is manifest a truth we all share. Whether you are reading the *Commedia* and this volume as part of conscious spiritual journeying or not, we hope the reading will offer you an occasion for renewed, courageous, open-ended exploration of that which makes us what we are.

[To Hell and Back: An anthology of Dante's Inferno in English translation \(1782–2017\)](#) edited by Tim Smith, Marco Sonzogni [John Benjamins Publishing Company, 9789027212511]

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) maintained that translation destroys the harmony of poetry. Yet his *Commedia* has been translated into English time and again over the last two-and-a-bit centuries. At last count, one-hundred and twenty-nine different translators have published at least one canticle of the Italian masterwork since the first in 1782, and countless more have translated individual cantos. Among them there are some of the finest poets in the English language, including Robert Lowell and the Irish Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney. Smith and Sonzogni have assembled and annotated two complete translations of

Dante's most popular canticle, *Inferno*, each canto translated by a different translator. *To Hell and Back* is a celebration of the art and craft of poetry translation; of the lexical palettes and syntactical tempos of the English language; and, of course, of the genius of one of the greatest poets of all times.

Excerpt: Dante's *Inferno* in English translation: A hell of a cookbook

"Thus, all should know that nothing harmonised according to the rules of poetry can be translated from its native tongue into another without destroying its original sweetness and harmony." Dante Alighieri, *The Banquet*, I VII 141 [Dante Alighieri, *The Banquet*. Translated by A. S. Kline, 2008]

Very well. And yet, his *Commedia* has been translated into English time and again over the last two-and-a-bit centuries. At last count, one-hundred and twenty-nine different translators have published at least one canticle of the Italian masterwork since the first in 1782. There could be others that have slipped under the radar, and there will certainly be many more to come. Ned Denny and Patrick Worsnip claimed their place at this banquet just as the food was leaving the kitchen. And the progress constantly and speedily being made in machine-translation and artificial intelligence may soon lead to an entirely automated - and entirely accurate - translation.

It is distinctly likely, though perhaps empirically unprovable, that no author (or single work, for that matter) has been translated more frequently into another language than Dante's masterwork has into English. There is something about the *Commedia*, and the *Inferno* in particular, that attracts anglophone translators. The reasons for this have been discussed at length. So it is not the purpose of this book to review and analyse such a remarkable surfeit, nor is it our intention to pass judgement on the individual translations reproduced here. Edoardo Crisafulli's edition of Cary's translation, one of the earliest and most important, is exemplary of how each translator and each translation - indeed each canto of Dante in English, as well as their sociocultural milieu and linguistic signatures - ought to be studied in both scholarly and creative terms.

Our aims are humble, and we want the reader to decide. To demonstrate the breadth of translations, we wanted to collect as many different versions as possible, and arrange them in a continuous narrative. It would be possible to produce an entire translation of all of Dante's one-hundred cantos of the *Commedia* with a different translator for each canto. Although there would be some merit in doing so (at least from our perspective) it would proliferate with translations that, to put it as politely as possible, are not (and, indeed, were not even at the time of writing) particularly easy for the reader to follow. So, we considered a full *Commedia* to be a bridge too far. The *Inferno*, then, proved the most logical canticle to reproduce in this way. But thirty-four seemed, somehow, unsatisfactory. We didn't just want a catalogue of the best and most readily available translations.

There have been two original composite collections of original translations in the last century: the 1966 collection of translations for the BBC [Dante's Inferno](#) edited by Terence

Tiller, and the 1993 collection of [Dante's Inferno: Translations by 20 Contemporary Poets](#) edited by Daniel Halpern. The most similar work to this is the marvellous volume titled [Dante in English](#) (2005), edited by Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds, in which a vast array of translations, versions, and works inspired by Dante are presented in chronological order, from Chaucer right up to the twenty-first century. But the present collection has a more specific focus. It is our intention to give life to some less prominent translations that deserve to be remembered for their linguistic skill, their verve or poeticism in English, or their challenge to translation norms.

To do this job properly, we have selected two translations for every canto: sixty-eight seemed like an acceptable compromise and an enticing invitation to go through hell twice. In the deliberately convoluted and inevitably discordant narrative that we offer, the reader can begin at Dante's first canto at either end of the book. They then may slowly work their way into the center of the volume to meet Satan at its core. Or, having experienced the full gamut of Dante's underworld and contrapasso, they can return and exit the forest the way they have entered it. Or, Prezi-like, zoom in and out of *Inferno* as they wish, sampling one translated canto at a time.

As with any anthology, our choices regarding the sequence of translations are ultimately subjective and even idiosyncratic at times. However, they have been threaded together to illustrate the contrasting strategies employed by Dante's myriad translators. Alongside almost all of the well-known translations,<sup>6</sup> we have included translations that are culturally significant, linguistically daring, or those that represent some kind of landmark in the tradition of translating Dante. These are, we should add, not necessarily the sixty-eight 'best' versions of the *Inferno* (again, that is not the intention of this book).

Furthermore, there is a logic - whimsical as it might occasionally seem - behind the pairings of translators of the same cantos. Canto I, for example, is printed here with translations by Henry Francis Cary, who provided Dante's first truly consequential Englishing, and Clive James, the *Divine Comedy*'s most recent translator. The translators of Canto IV are both better known as translators of classical material. Canto XIX features both the first and the most recent translation to be published by Penguin Books. And the translators of Canto XXXII intended their translations to be received aurally. The respective relationships between our other pairings can be left to the reader to decipher, develop or debunk.

As will be clear in reading this book, Dante's *Commedia* has been rendered in English in numerous different ways. In all forms of translation of verse, translators tend to defend their work as a vessel that carries the 'spirit' of the original. If they cannot preserve the words of the source text, at least they can preserve its spirit, its essence. Other formulaic terms that translators frequently resort to include 'faithfulness', 'fidelity', and 'accuracy'. These metaphors too, of course, are subjective. Over the centuries, and across languages, cultures and media, the theory and practice of translation has demonstrated time and again that there can never be consensus on what these terms mean - how strictly

and how flexibly they can be embraced or enforced when producing, contextualizing, classifying and evaluating a translation. However, the distinct lack of unanimity on what 'faithfulness to the spirit of Dante' means, accounts for the great diversity in translations of Dante. He appeals to each of his readers - and, by extension, translators - in a unique way.

Nonetheless, and metaphors aside, it is possible to compartmentalize the various approaches in translating the *Commedia* that have been attempted. The following four categories, subjective as they too are like all the other choices made so far, have enabled us to pigeonhole our selected translations as objectively and univocally as possible:

Scholarly prose translations, whose primary purpose is to assist the reader in understanding the Italian. Such translations seem to appear once per generation or so.

Narrative prose, which eschews any attempts at poetry but nor is it a scholarly attempt to act as a crib for the Italian text. This is the least common approach.

Terza rima, or third-rhyme. The problems of employing such a rhyme-scheme in English is well-documented. Suffice it to say that it is not to everyone's taste. The primary function of such translations is to create in English the same interlocking rhyme scheme as Dante did in the *Commedia* (aba, bcb, cdc, etc.). This often results in so-called "padding": adding words to the target text (or translation) that have no recognizable linguistic equivalent in the source. This approach appears in various guises: some translators attempt to end each line with an exact rhyme, while others opt for a more imperfect rhyme to allow themselves a greater range of vocabulary. There is also "defective" terza rima, where the first and third line of the tercets rhyme, but there is remains an unrhymed line between them (axa, bxb, cxc, etc.).

Finally, we will put all other forms of verse into one category. This could be divided into scores of sub-categories. By far the most common is blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), though many others have been attempted over the years, such as rhymed quatrains, Spenserian stanzas, and iambic tetrameter to name just a few. One must also add free verse (poetry with no recognizable metre or rhyme-scheme), which has been employed with increasing frequency over the last few decades.

Extending this classification - to include, for example, 'bowdlerizers' and 'vernacularizers' of Dante or 'manipulative-conservative' and 'manipulative-subversive' translators - would have compromised the meaningfulness of distinction in general and the viability of pairings in particular.

Similar considerations have led us to do without a map of *Inferno* or textual notes because our reader is likely to be already familiar with the characters and their stories; besides, this information is readily accessible in print and online.

The proliferation of Dante's *Commedia* in English translation has, over the years, been the source of much chagrin and despair. The poet Richard Moore once wrote that "the

attempt to represent Dante's *Commedia* in our language is one of the most consistently and conspicuously failed projects in the history of English translation." But we would like to offer a different perspective. It is customary for the translator of Dante's *Commedia* to apologize for their failings before the reader has even ventured into Hell (if, indeed, the reader even bothers with the translator's preface). But, in our opinion, there is nothing to apologize for.

Michael Palma, one of the translators of the cantos reproduced here, has encapsulated this perfectly: "given the inexhaustible richness of Dante's achievement, perhaps we should wonder not why there are so many versions available, but why there are not even more." That is, critics who bemoan the influx of translations are perhaps missing the point. There can never be a definitive translation of the *Commedia* precisely because of the diversity and complexity of Dante's poetry. The unabated urge to continue to translate (and, therefore, to read) Dante in the English-speaking world stems not from the inadequacy of past translations, but from the richness of Dante's Italian.

Translations, as Susan Bassnett wrote, "ensure the survival of a text through the centuries"; "[F]ar from being a marginal activity, translation is, and always has been, fundamental to literary and cultural renewal and change." And translations of Dante's *Commedia* are the forefront of this activity. The English, as the Nobel Laureate Eugenio Montale famously wrote, cook up Dante in their own way. But, most importantly, he adds that hanno ragione: they are right to do so. Long may it continue.

The Hollander's translations are akin to the restoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling and altar for English speaking lovers of Dante not yet able to read his works in Italian. A work of tremendous beauty has been made available - this after generations of only being able to experience a forbidding, darker version of the original.

This beautifully bound, cleanly translated Dante has the clearest, most teachable set of notes of any English edition. Hollander, who knows this vast territory as well as anyone, has a gift for presenting it in just the right detail. This is to be highly recommended for those teaching Dante as well as for those who are making their way into Dante's overwhelmingly complete, beautiful world.

**[Inferno: English/Italian Translation by Dante Alighieri, translation and commentary & notes by Robert Hollander, Jean Hollander \[Doubleday, 9780385496971\] \(Paperback\)](#)**  
Dante's immortal poem enters English in the clearest, most accurate, most readable translation in decades, accompanied by a commentary of unsurpassed scholarship.

The *Inferno*, the opening section of Dante Alighieri's epic theological poem *La Divina Commedia*, is one of the indispensable works of the Western literary canon. The modern concept of hell and damnation owes everything to this work, and it is the rock upon which vernacular Italian was built. Its influence is woven into the very fabric of Western imagination, and poets, painters, scholars, and translators return to it endlessly.

This new verse translation (with facing-page Italian text) by internationally famed scholar and master teacher Robert Hollander and his wife, poet Jean Hollander, is a unique collaboration that combines the virtues of maximum readability with complete fidelity to the original Italian—and to Dante's intentions and subtle shadings of meaning. The book reflects Robert Hollander's faultless Dante scholarship and his nearly four decades' teaching experience at Princeton. The introduction, notes, and commentary on the poem cannot be matched for their depth of learning and usefulness for the lay reader. In addition, the book matches the English and Italian text on the Web site of the Princeton Dante Project, which also offers a voiced Italian reading, fuller-scale commentaries, and links to a database of some sixty Dante commentaries.

The *Inferno* opens the glories of Dante's epic wider for English speakers than any previous translation, and provides the interpretative apparatus for ever-deeper excursions into its endless layers of meaning and implication. It is truly a Dante for the new millennium. Now comes a fresh rendition of the *Inferno* from a husband-and-wife team. Robert Hollander, who has taught Dante for nearly four decades at Princeton, supplies the scholarly muscle, while his wife, poet Jean Hollander, attends to the verbal music.

How does their collaboration stack up? In his introduction, Robert Hollander is quick to acknowledge his debt to John D. Sinclair's [prose trot](#) of 1939, and to the [version](#) that Charles Singleton derived largely from his predecessor's in 1970. Yet the Hollanders have done us all a favor by throwing Sinclair's faux medievalisms overboard. And their predilection for direct, monosyllabic English sometimes brings them much closer to Dante's asperity and rhythmic urgency. One example will suffice. In the last line of Canto V, after listening to Francesca's adulterous aria, the poet faints: "E caddi come corpo morto cade." Sinclair's rendering—"I swooned as if in death and dropped like a dead body"—has a kind of conditional mushiness to it. Compare the punchier rendition from the Hollanders: "And down I fell as a dead body falls." It sounds like an actual line of English verse, which is the least we can do for the supreme poet of our beleaguered civilization.

Robert Hollander has also supplied an extensive and very welcome commentary. There are times, perhaps, when he might have broken ranks with his academic ancestors: why not deviate from Giorgio Petrocchi's 1967 edition of the Italian text when he thinks that the great scholar was barking up the wrong tree? In any case, the Hollanders' *Inferno* is a fine addition to the burgeoning bookshelf of Dante in English. It won't displace the relatively recent verse translations by Robert Pinsky or Allen Mandelbaum, and even John Ciardi's version, which sometimes substitutes breeziness for accuracy, can probably hold its own here. But when it comes to high fidelity and exegetical generosity, this *Inferno* burns brightly indeed.

The opening canzone of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* has appeared in almost every imaginable variety of English translation: prose, blank verse and iambic pentameter; unrhymed or in *terza rima*; with and without the

original Italian; with commentary ranging from a few notes to a full separate volume. The translations have been produced by poets, scholars and poet-scholars. In the past six years alone, six new translations of the *Inferno* have appeared (including Robert Pinsky's 1994 rendition for FSG) and at least 10 others remain in print, including Allen Mandelbaum's celebrated 1980 translation (Univ. of Calif. Press and Bantam) and the extensively annotated editions of Charles Singleton (Princeton Univ. Press) and Mark Musa (Univ. of Indiana Press), the latter two unlikely to be surpassed soon in terms of extensiveness of commentary. Dante scholar Robert Hollander and the poet Jean Hollander bring to this crowded market a new translation of the *Inferno* that, remarkably, is by no means redundant and will for many be the definitive edition for the foreseeable future. The heart of the Hollanders' edition is the translation itself, which nicely balances the precision required for a much-interpreted allegory and the poetic qualities that draw most readers to the work. The result is a terse, lean Dante with its own kind of beauty. While Mandelbaum's translation begins "When I had journeyed half of our life's way,/ I found myself within a shadowed forest,/ for I had lost the path that does not stray," the Hollanders' rendition reads: "Midway in the journey of our life/ I came to myself in a dark wood,/ for the straightway was lost." While there will be debate about the relative poetic merit of this new translation in comparison to the accomplishments of Mandelbaum, Pinsky, Zappulla and others, the Hollanders' lines will satisfy both the poetry lover and scholar; they are at once literary, accessible and possessed of the seeming transparency that often characterizes great translations. The Italian text is included on the facing page for easy reference, along with notes drawing on some 60 Dante scholars, several indexes, a list of works cited and an introduction by Robert Hollander. General readers, students and scholars will all find their favorite circles within this layered text.

### [Purgatorio: English /Italian Translation by Dante Alighieri, translation and commentary & notes by Robert Hollander, Jean Hollander \[Doubleday, 0385496990 \(Paperback\)\]](#)

"In the years of my reading Dante, after the first overwhelming, reverberating spell of the *Inferno*, which I think never leaves one afterward, it was the *Purgatorio* that I had found myself returning to with a different, deepening attachment, until I reached a point when it was never far from me . . . Of the three sections of [The Divine Comedy], only *Purgatory* happens on the earth, as our lives do, with our feet on the ground, crossing a beach, climbing a mountain. All three parts of the poem are images of our lives, but there is an intimacy peculiar to the *Purgatorio*. Here the times of day recur with all the sensations and associations that the hours bring with them, the hours of the world we are living in as we read the poem."

**Paradiso: English/Italian Translation by Dante Alighieri, translation and commentary & notes by Robert Hollander, Jean Hollander [Doubleday, 0385506783 (Paperback)]**

Given our modern sensibilities the part of the Divine Comedy that is most likely to be read by students of the humanities and readily appreciated is the Inferno. Hollander himself makes a case for why the purgatory of *deserves* close reading because much like middle Earth it joins the twin the arcs of paternity as everlasting duration and pre-created perfection. Personally, I have grown into a deep appreciation of the Paradise, its language and its selection of images to attempt to show us what is beyond all visionary appreciation. The book has often been called the most exalted and impossible work of poetry in any language. One schooled in the platonic reach of the true meaning of this work will find many great subtleties of metaphysics buried in the simple and straightforward language. As with the previous two volumes, the notes and commentary judicious and ample enough to satisfy most readers that they have a gist sense of the poem.

Robert and Jean Hollander's verse translation of [Paradiso](#) with facing-page Italian offers the dual virtues of maximum fidelity to give the English reader a sense of the work's poetic greatness in Italian. And since Robert Hollander's achievements as a Dante scholar are unsurpassed in the English-speaking world, the commentaries that accompany each canto offer superb guidance in comprehension and interpretation. This translation is the text of the Princeton Dante Project Web site, an ambitious online project that offers a multimedia version of the Divine Comedy and links to other Dante Web sites. On every count, then, this edition of *Paradiso* is likely to be a touchstone for generations to come, and it completes one of the great enterprises of literary translation and scholarship of our time.

**Dante: The Story of His Life by Marco Santagata, translated by Richard Dixon [Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 9780674504868]**

Marco Santagata's [Dante: The Story of His Life](#) illuminates one of the world's supreme poets from many angles—writer, philosopher, father, courtier, political partisan. Santagata brings together a vast body of Italian scholarship on Dante's medieval world, untangles a complex web of family and political relationships for English readers, and shows how the composition of the *Commedia* was influenced by local and regional politics. The translation by Richard Dixon is also distinguished with adroit rhythmic prose.

Santagata traces Dante's attempts to establish himself in Florentine society as a man of both letters and action. He raises the intriguing possibility that Dante translated an illness, thought by some to be epilepsy, into an intensely physical phenomenology of love in the *Vita Nova*. Most importantly, Santagata highlights Dante's constant need to readjust his political stance—his involvement with the pro-Papacy Guelph faction as well as his network of patrons—in response to unfolding events. Linking these shifts to the changing ethical and political convictions expressed in the *Commedia*, Santagata reveals the paradoxical

achievement of Dante's masterpiece: a unified, universal poem nonetheless intimately entwined with the day-to-day dealings of its author.

The most striking facet of Dante's personality was a belief in his unique destiny. In every aspect of his life—his birth under the sign of Gemini, falling in love with Beatrice, banishment from Florence—Dante glimpsed the shadow of his fate. This idea, cultivated by the poet in his youth, grew into the conviction that God had invested him with the prophetic mission of saving humanity.

Excerpt from reviews

Definitely recommended, it will make my best non-fiction of the year list for sure. (Tyler Cowen *Marginal Revolution* 2016-03-26)

To the ranks of the best popular biographies of the great Florentine poet Dante Alighieri...is added Marco Santagata's *Dante*... [Santagata] tells it with a fiercely learned calm and energy throughout... As with all first-rate author biographies, the book will propel readers straight back to Dante's own works, which is right where they should end up in any case. (Steve Donoghue *Open Letters Monthly* 2016-04-03)

Full of useful information and explanations of a very complicated time, well worth reading for its bold claims and wealth of historical evidence, this book constructs a novel, strong reading of Dante as political actor. (Alison Cornish, University of Michigan)

Both specialized readers and the general public will benefit from this account of Dante Alighieri's life as a man of letters and of political action. A welcome addition to the catalogue of intellectual biographies of Dante available in English. (Simone Marchesi, Princeton University)

A superb intellectual biography of Dante. (Ian Thomson *The Tablet* 2016-05-05)

This sumptuous volume by Marco Santagata...offers the reader a richly documented and often gripping account of the development, peregrinations, and shifting fortunes of the celebrated poet Durante (Dante) Alighieri. (Diana Glenn *Australian Book Review* 2016-05-01)

Santagata does a thorough and highly engaging job of bringing politics and social pressures of 13th-century Florence to the page in this very readable biography that doesn't scrimp on scholarly research...Even more fascinating is the way the author reveals Dante's intense interest in political systems, philosophy, and in the makeup of the universe, all shown to be at the very heart of the imposing poetic figure. (Herman Sutter *Library Journal* (starred review) 2016-04-15)

Santagata has written a book that any reader interested in Dante will find absorbing, richly informative and very thought-provoking...With their well-known fondness for literary biography, [English readers] will surely be grateful for this bold, vigorous and invigorating account of Dante's life and times. (Prue Shaw *Times Higher Education* 2016-05-12)

It is lively and a pleasure to read. (Simon West *The Australian* 2016-05-07)

This substantial work incorporates all the most recent Dantean scholarship. There is much to chew upon, since Dante lived at the very center of his city's political life...Santagata, thoroughly steeped in the politics and genealogies of the period, gives the best account I have ever read of Dante in his historical context...You will never read an account clearer than Santagata's. Nor will you read a more convincing description of how Dante changed his mind, quite fundamentally, about the political issues which confronted him (Pope vs Emperor) and the deep religious questions which underpin his work...This is a wonderful book. Even if you have not read Dante you will be gripped by its account of one of the most extraordinary figures in the history of literature, and one of the most dramatic periods of European history. If you are a Dantean, it will be your invaluable companion forever. (A. N. Wilson *The Spectator* 2016-05-21)

Reading Marco Santagata's fascinating new biography, the reader is soon forced to acknowledge that one of the cornerstones of Western literature [The Divine Comedy], a poem considered sublime and universal, is the product of vicious factionalism and packed with local scandal...It's the biography's evocation of the factional world of the time and the values sustaining it that throws light on the great poem and helps us to read it with fresh awareness...Elegantly translated by Richard Dixon, Santagata's biography avoids the quarrels among critics that sometimes dominate Dante studies. (Tim Parks *London Review of Books* 2016-07-14)

Santagata...has written an impressive new biography that takes into consideration every bit of reliable and semireliable information available to us about Dante's life, from his birth in Florence in 1265 to his death in Ravenna in 1321...If you are looking for the most thorough, factually based account of Dante's life and times to date, Santagata is your man. (Robert Pogue Harrison *New York Review of Books* 2016-10-27)

Santagata not only constructs an impressively detailed account of Dante's actual life but uses that account to interpret and make sense of the Comedy...The result is a remarkably innovative probing of his life and work. (Peter Hainsworth *Times Literary Supplement* 2016-10-14)

This biography will be most useful and enjoyable to those who already have a familiarity with the Comedy and want a more nuanced view of its place in Italian history...Santagata's book is a catalogue of contingencies, which will both introduce the reader to the political situation of the Italian peninsula in Dante's time and show how that context assists us in reading the poem. (Kyle Skinner *New Criterion* 2016-09-01)

Marco Santagata's *Dante: The Story of His Life* deconstructs the great poet with humor, aplomb and deep learning. I have never read any book which makes such complete sense of the vital continuum between Dante the man, and the projected self of the *Convivio*, *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia*...There is much humor in Santagata's exposure of the violent contradictions in Dante's character, all set against the background of his times. If you have a tendency to muddle Guelfs and Ghibellines, look no further than this

lucid book. (A. N. Wilson *Times Literary Supplement* 2016-11-23)

## Dante: A Life in Works by Robert Hollander [Yale University Press, 9780300212594]

### Interview with Robert Hollander

Robert Hollander is Professor of European Literature Emeritus at Princeton and the founding director of both the Dartmouth Dante Project and the Princeton Dante Project. He taught Dante's *Divine Comedy* for forty-two years and is the author of a dozen books on Dante and Boccaccio, and of some ninety articles on them and other writers. He has received many awards, including the gold medal of the city of Florence and the gold florin of the Dante Society of America, in recognition of his work on Dante.

His collaborator and wife, Jean Hollander, is the director of the Writer's Conference at the College of New Jersey. Her third book of poems is about to be published. Each bring their own remarkable gifts to this truly phenomenal rendering of the *Divine Comedy*—Robert, his deep passion for understanding the text in the context of its interpretive and critical history, and Jean, her inspired phrasings that lend beauty and clarity to its reading.

The publication of *Paradiso* marks the final installment of your translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. How does it feel to be finished with it?

Bob: First of all, I in particular felt a tremendous sense of relief just to have completed the task (see the next answer for why). We had finished the penultimate version of the translation and so the only remaining major task (and it is the most difficult task confronting any Dantist -- which may explain why so few attempt it) was for me to write the commentary. This one is much longer than the notes to *Inferno* and considerably longer than those to *Purgatorio*. There is more in *Paradiso* that requires explanation.

Jean: While I also felt relief when we finally completed our work after ten years and I could get back to my own poetry without interruption, I also felt sadness. Despite some heated moments of disagreement (especially over the *Inferno*, where we were learning how to translate Dante and how to deal with each other as interpreters), it was a great pleasure to be inside that poem together day after day. To say that this was a fascinating and deeply involving project is an understatement.

While working on *Paradiso*, Bob suffered a stroke that put the translation project on hold. Tell us about your experience working back from there.

The stroke was (1) a bleeding stroke (the more deadly kind) and (2) a very bad one, at that. Not only did I not believe I would survive; for Jean's sake I wanted not to. But about a week along (a week that is now a jumble of confused semi-somnolent memories: e.g., I once came to and found three Italian colleagues in my room and me speaking Italian), I suddenly found myself looking down from the epicycle of Mercury (the phrase is Montaigne's), watching me (not myself, but this crippled fellow with his buttocks protruding from of his gown) and the hospital world with enormous distance and amusement. I think that comic vision helped me

turn a corner. Significant recovery from a major stroke requires luck and time and effort. In any case, the completion of this project was probably delayed by about a year.

What has it been like for you two to collaborate on this project?

In all the years of our marriage, while we have worked in the same or similar fields of literature (and had on occasion taught at the same university and twice in the same course -- with many resultant conversations about the texts under consideration), we, while we frequently showed the other our work for his or her comments, have never collaborated on anything. Thus each of us learned how the other really thought the poem worked. It was a challenge and a rewarding experience for us both.

In what ways do you think this translation of *Paradiso* differs from other available translations?

There are about one hundred translations of the poem into English published in the last two centuries. I am not sure one could group them; each is unique (or mainly so -- some translators unabashedly steal from their precursors without notice that this is what they are doing). In my many years of teaching *I*, of course, have looked at many of them. I do not know off hand how many of these are complete, but a good many are not (among several reasons, because the translator died or had decided to do only *Inferno* or even *Purgatorio* alone [there is even one translation of only *Paradiso*, I believe]). No one takes on the task of translating a great work without thinking his or her version cannot be improved upon, and only a fool believes his or hers is the last word (although I am aware of a few of these). On the other hand, this task is assumed by no one who is convinced that an existing translation pushes all the buttons or rings all the bells. Naturally we believe our work does a reasonably good job representing Dante, had he wanted to exist in English. That's the task, isn't it? To produce a version at which the writer would not snort in disgust. If you keep him in mind as you work, he certainly produces a certain restraint and a great deal of humility.

This translation is the text of the Princeton Dante Project Web Site. Tell us about the site and what it offers students and Dante enthusiasts.

The PDP is consultable at [www.princeton.edu/dante](http://www.princeton.edu/dante). Those who have not actually visited might want to, rather than reading about it. The site contains the text of the poem in Italian and in our translation. It also contains my commentary, historical notes by Paget Toynbee, philological notes (under development), illustrations to each canto, an Italian voicing of the entire poem by Lino Pertile (Professor of Italian at Harvard), access from each line of the text to the Dartmouth Dante Project (with its roughly six dozen other commentaries). It also includes access to many other Dante sites around the globe. In addition, users of the site find all of Dante's other works, in the original and English translation, as well as other resources (lectures, maps, diagrams). Princeton University generously allows consultation of this resource at no charge.

What prompted your interest in him and his *Divine Comedy*?

I was bitten by the A.B. (Alighieri Bug) when I was teaching in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia in the very early 1960s. To tell a long story briefly, I fell in love with him (as I had already done with Jean) at Columbia. And when I moved to Princeton in 1962, I was asked to teach a course on Dante, Cervantes, and Goethe. I have been studying Dante ever since (he's my Day Job; Boccaccio is my Night one [I have written three books about Boccaccio and, with Timothy Hampton, translated his *Amorosa Visione*, a poem of some interest that imitates the *Commedia*]). Jean had not ever done scholarly work on Dante before. But she now teaches courses on the poem at various institutions.

What has been the most rewarding part of your work on Dante?

It may seem corny, but the response we have gotten from complete strangers, some of whom have become friends: e.g., two law professors, one at NYU the other at Pennsylvania, who meet one day each weekend to mull over a canto as they work their way through the *Comedy* (they are beginning their second trip through the entire poem next year); a nine-year-old Chicagoan named Warren whose parents wrote (in 2001) to tell us about their son, a Harry Potter fan who ended up telling his schoolmates that our *Inferno* was almost as good as Rowling (our Dante A. and her Harry P. were "born" in the same year [1997: HP hit the bookstores and Jean and I began translating in Florence] and finished publication in the same year [summer 2007: HP and *Paradiso* published only a month from one another]); the Italian actor and Dante-reciter Roberto Benigni, who calls to talk about Dante when he is not turning his fellow-citizens on to Dante (he currently "barnstorms" around Italy reciting Dante to vast crowds, bless him); the Italian students whom I met lecturing this spring in Milan and Bologna, some of whom are still in touch with us, with all of whom it was and is a delight to talk about Dante's work.

Jean brings her considerable gift of poetry to this text. Tell us about your writing process bringing these words to life on the page.

We began with a prose version (as we have made clear in our Introductions to each cantica of the poem) and quickly turned it into something like "poetry." We chose the least limiting form, free verse, finding that even blank verse, with its regular rhythms, impinged too much on our desire to represent Dante's words as clearly and as precisely as is possible. That was our first priority; but we also wanted to give those words in English as much "musicality" as we could. This was Jean's primary focus (though each of us spent a lot of time invading the other's terrain -- I think with positive result). Jean started us out when she insisted that prose translations are not "sayable," that is, one cannot read them aloud with any sense that the original was not only a poem, but one of the greatest poems ever written. One sign that poetry in translation is "working" is observed when the translation not only seems to be faithful to the meaning of the original, but also expresses, in English, the sounds and associations that suggest that meaning. As an example, consider this tercet from the first canto of *Paradiso* (vv. 19-21):

<i>Entra nel petto mio, e spira tue si come quando Marsia traesti de la vagina de le membra sue.</i>	Enter my breast and breathe in me as when you drew out Marsyas, out from the sheathing of his limbs.
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How well we have succeeded in accomplishing this joining of sound to sense is not ours to judge. All translators, at the outset, know (or ought to know) that they will fail. The crucial measure is by how much they do not fail, how far they get into the meaning and feeling of the original. Cervantes, in the preface to Part II of the Quijote, had it right: To read a book in translation is to look at a tapestry from the wrong side.

What are you two working on next?

We both confess that it's again a pleasure to be working alone. Jean is back at her poems (and has been having things accepted at a great rate); the third volume of her poetry, *Bloodroot*, should be out next year. As for me, I'm working on a grammar book for adults -- no, not a racy one, but a short "serious" book that has the working title "What They Don't Want You to Know about Grammar." I am well into it and enjoying the work, which is like nothing I've ever done.

On the other hand, as we began translating Dante, we also spoke of taking on the challenge of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. And I, some twenty-five years ago, began a translation of Dante's *Vita nuova*. We have also talked about completing that project. We'll see.

Since this interview Robert Hollander has had his little introduction to Dante republished. In it this preeminent Dante scholar analyzes the only real biography of the poet that we have—Dante's body of works—to illuminate the question: How did Dante come to create his masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, a work unrivaled by any of his other writings? Robert Hollander considers Dante's political writings, commentary, and other poems as well as the *Comedy* to construct an intellectual biography of the great poet.

[Dante: A Life in Works by Robert Hollander \[Yale University Press, 9780300212594\]](#)

[The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso by Dante Alighieri, translation by Allen Mandelbaum, introduction by Eugenio Montale \[Everyman's Library, 183, Knopf, 0679433139\]](#)

[The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri, translated by Charles H. Sisson \(\\$17.95, paperback, 771 pages, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press; ISBN: 0192835025\)](#)

[The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri, translated by John Ciardi \[W.W. Norton & Company, 0393044726 Paperback\]](#)

[The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri \[10 audio cassettes, Blackstone Audio Books, 078610256X\]](#)

[The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno Vol 1 Part Italian Text and Translation edited translated and commentary by Charles Singleton \[paperback Vol 001, Princeton University Press, 0691018960\]](#)

[The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: The Inferno/Commentary, edited translated and commentary by Charles Singleton \[paperback commentary edition Princeton University Press, 0691018952\]](#)

[Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio 1: Italian Text and Translation, edited translated and commentary by Charles Singleton \[paperback, Princeton University Press, 0691019096\]](#)

[Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio 2: Commentary edited translated and commentary by Charles Singleton \[paperback, Princeton University Press, 069101910X\]](#)

[Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso/Text, edited translated and commentary by Charles Singleton \[paperback, Princeton University Press. 0691019126\]](#)

[Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso/Commentary edited, translated and commentary by Charles Singleton \[paperback, Princeton University Press. 0691019134\]](#)

Long narrative poem originally titled *Commedia* (about 1555 printed as *La divina commedia*) written about 1310-14 by Dante. The work is divided into three major sections--*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*--which trace the journey of a man from darkness and error to the revelation of the divine light, culminating in the beatific vision of God. It is usually held to be one of the world's greatest works of literature. The plot of *The Divine Comedy* is simple: a man is miraculously enabled to visit the souls in Hell, *Purgatory*,



and Paradise. He has two guides: Virgil, who leads him through the Inferno and Purgatorio, and Beatrice, who introduces him to Paradiso.

Through these fictional encounters taking place from Good Friday evening in 1300 through Easter Sunday and slightly beyond, Dante the character learns of the exile that is awaiting him (an actual exile that had already occurred at the time of writing). This device allowed Dante not only to create a story out of his exile but also to explain how he came to cope with personal calamity and to offer suggestions for the resolution of Italy's troubles as well. Thus, Dante's story is historically specific as well as paradigmatic; his exile serves as a microcosm of the problems of a country, and it also becomes representative of the Fall of Man. The basic structural component of The Divine Comedy is the canto. The poem consists of 100 cantos, which are grouped into the three major sections, or canticles. Technically there are 33 cantos in each canticle and one additional canto, contained in the Inferno, that serves as an introduction to the entire poem.

For the most part the cantos range from 136 to 151 lines. The poem's rhyme scheme is the terza rima (aba, bcb, cdc, etc.) Thus, the divine number three is present in every part of the work. Dante adopts the classical convention of a visit to the land of the dead, but he adapts it to a Christian worldview by beginning his journey there. The Inferno represents a false start during which Dante, the character, must be disabused of harmful values that somehow prevent him from rising above his fallen world. Despite the regressive nature of the Inferno, Dante's meetings with the damned are among the most memorable moments of the poem: the Neutrals, the virtuous pagans, Francesca da Rimini, Filippo Argenti, Farinata degli Uberti, Piero delle Vigne, Brunetto Latini, the simoniacal popes, Ulysses, and Ugolino impose themselves upon the reader's imagination with tremendous force. Nonetheless, the journey through the Inferno primarily signifies a process of separation and thus is only the initial step in a fuller development. In the Purgatorio the protagonist's spiritual rehabilitation commences. There Dante subdues his own personality so that he will be able to ascend. He comes to accept the essential Christian image of life as a pilgrimage, and he joins the other penitents on the road of life. At the summit of Purgatory, where repentant sinners are purged of their sins, Virgil departs, having led Dante as far as human knowledge is able--to the threshold of Paradise. Beatrice, who embodies the knowledge of divine mysteries bestowed by Grace, continues Dante's tour. In the Paradiso true heroic fulfillment is achieved. Dante's poem gives expression to those figures from the past who seem to defy death and who inspire in their followers a feeling of exaltation and a desire for identification. The Paradiso is consequently a poem of fulfillment and of completion.

The scholarship and depth of knowledge Charles Singleton brings to his translation and detailed annotations of this masterpiece makes it accessible for the late twentieth-century reader. I have used volumes 1 and 2 extensively, and regret being unable to procure the third. Problems with Latinisms and words that Dante coins in Tuscan disappear. Biblical references that would have been overlooked are brought to notice. As good as a course of study.

**The Design in Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and Its Meaning by Marc Cogan [The William and Katherine Devers Series in Dante Studies, 3; University of Notre Dame Press, 0268008876]**

*The Design in Wax* approaches the *Divine Comedy* from an explicitly medieval interpretation of the structure which underlies each part of the poem and the whole poem. It uses the theology and psychology derives from Thomas Aquinas as a guide to the background of the work attempting to show the unities between the three parts of the poem. In this way, one is given the tools to uncover much that might otherwise seem obscure. Cogan shows how to discover the single consistent principle which organizes each part and the overall narrative.

The incidents of the poem would remain hopelessly ambiguous were it not for the philosophical and theological distinctions embodied in the structure of the narrative, in which light it is possible to reduce the ambiguity of concrete incidents to their intended allegorical content. Through medieval interpretations of Dante's sources, Cogan discovers a single consistent moral and theological principle organizing each of the sections of the poem and its overall narrative. He argues that, using one common principle, Dante brings the separate allegories of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* together into one great allegory, making the transformation of the principle into an ordered set of variations on the theme of love and its representation in human beings as the image of God. This allegory, he points out, provides a meditation on the nature of God and the capacities of human beings that will inspire perceptive readers.

*The Design in Wax* is a thought-provoking tool for all students of the *Divine Comedy* interested in studying Dante's calculated use of poetry to overcome the limits of human understanding.

What seems in the Divine Comedy to be an external landscape is really the psychological landscape of a man who wished to make the intangible tangible and the invisible visible. Dante's mind, packed with interesting figures from classic philosophers to contemporary political rivals, as well as wisdom and common sense, is laid out before us in the Divine Comedy. As Dante journeys through the labyrinth of memory and contemplation we learn more of those mysterious processes our own minds must experience to travel from the nadir and inferno of our own ignorance to the summum bonum of divine revelation.

Divina Commedia is the most awesome story ever written. Dante ranks among the most brilliant men of all time. Maybe I feel this way because I'm a kid who likes fantasy novels, but I must say that I have read no wilder, more beautiful adventure quest than Dante's journey through the Catholic hereafter. The imagery alone is incredible. These books are stunning. Really. They make me wish I could understand Italian, so I could catch the magic of Dante's rhyme...

And if you've already read the Commedia, you haven't caught the whole story until you've finished *La Vita Nuova* as well! *La Vita Nuova* is a collection of sonnets about Dante's reactions to the life and death of Beatrice.

### [Dante and the Knot of the Body and Soul by Marianne Shapiro \[Palgrave Macmillan, 0312217501\]](#)

This semiotic approach to Dante opens some useful new insights into the thicker meaning of Dante's work as a whole. It entails seeing verse and prose as a structure, of which the building blocks are primarily linguistic, and taking the form of these building blocks to be part of the content. Shapiro analyzes Dante's verse by treating language as the only sure repository of meaning. This insightful work offers a wide range of semiotics approaches to understanding Dante's texts.

This study seeks to evaluate in just measure the material, bodily, erotic, and aesthetic aspects of the intellectual foundations of the Commedia and explore the idea of embodied spirit and its poetic consequences in Dante's worldmaking poem. Bodies, be they ghostly, demonic, fleshly, or angelic, are tied up in both literal and figurative knots because of their unstable ontology, an ontology that they share with human language. In each chapter, Marianne Shapiro addresses the interconnections between poetic speech and embodied spirit as they develop over the course of the Commedia's three canticles. Instead of regarding Dante as an Olympian poet, her approach emphasizes process, for even a masterpiece may conceal adjustments and shifts in strategy as part of its structure. While much current scholarship has set out to recover the specifically literary dimensions of Dante's enterprise by prying them away from the overriding theological concerns, this work is intended to bring the two together in an integrated vision.

### [Dante's Aesthetics of Being by Warren Ginsberg \[University of Michigan Press, 0472109715\]](#)

"I am one who, when love inspires me, takes note . . ." -- Dante

Despite the absence of tracts about beauty and art, aesthetic issues did command the attention of people in the Middle Ages. Whenever poets or philosophers turned their thoughts to the order of the heavens, whenever they delighted in music or art, they contemplated how the pleasure they took in the artistry of the universe was related to the God who created it. For Dante, aesthetics was the discourse of being and could not be narrowly defined. The aesthetic became the domain in which he considered not only form and proportion, but questions of love, identity, and perfection of the self.

Warren Ginsberg expertly guides us through Dante's work. He distinguishes between early texts such as the *Vita Nuova*, in which the aesthetic offers only a form of knowledge between sensation and reason, and the *Comedy*, in which the aesthetic is transformed into a language of existence. Among other subjects, Dante's *Aesthetics of Being* treats poeticism, literary history, language theory, the relation of philosophy to poetry, and of course, aesthetics. Its readers will include not only experts in Dante and medievalists in general, but literary critics of all periods. Indeed, anyone interested in poetic theory, the philosophy of beauty, or interdisciplinary studies will profit from reading Ginsberg's thoughtful offering.

### [Dante's Interpretive Journey by William Franke \[Religion and Postmodernism, University of Chicago Press, 0226259978 Paperback\]](#)

Critically engaging the thought of Heidegger, Gadamer, and others, William Franke contributes both to the criticism of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and to the theory of interpretation.

Reading the poem through the lens of hermeneutical theory, Franke focuses particularly on Dante's address to the reader as the site of a disclosure of truth. The event of the poem for its reader becomes potentially an experience of truth both human and divine. While contemporary criticism has concentrated on the historical character of Dante's poem, often insisting on it as undermining the poem's claims to transcendence, Franke argues that precisely the poem's historicity forms the ground for its mediation of a religious revelation. Dante's dramatization, on an epic scale, of the act of interpretation itself participates in the self-manifestation of the Word in poetic form.

[Dante's Interpretive Journey](#) is an indispensable addition to the field of Dante studies and offers rich insights for philosophy and theology as well.

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**Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge by Giuseppe Mazzotta [Princeton University Press, 0691069662]**

In a masterly synthesis of historical and literary analysis, Giuseppe Mazzotta shows how medieval knowledge systems--the cycle of the liberal arts, ethics, politics, and theology--interacted with poetry and elevated the Divine Comedy to a central position in shaping all other forms of discursive knowledge. To trace the circle of Dante's intellectual concerns, Mazzotta examines the structure and aims of medieval encyclopedias, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the medieval classification of knowledge; the battle of the arts; the role of the imagination; the tension between knowledge and vision; and Dante's theological speculations in his constitution of what Mazzotta calls aesthetic, ludic theology. As a poet, Dante puts himself at the center of intellectual debates of his time and radically redefines their configuration. In this book, Mazzotta offers powerful new readings of a poet who stands amid his culture's crisis and fragmentation, one who responds to and counters them in his work. In a critical gesture that enacts Dante's own insight, Mazzotta's practice is also a fresh contribution to the theoretical literary debates of the present. In a masterly synthesis of historical and literary analysis, Giuseppe Mazzotta shows how medieval knowledge systems--the cycle of the liberal arts, ethics, politics, and theology--interacted with poetry and elevated the Divine Comedy to a central position in shaping all other forms of discursive knowledge. To trace the circle of Dante's intellectual concerns, Mazzotta examines the

## Comic Spirituality

**Dante Alighieri: Divine Comedy, Divine Spirituality by Robert Royal and Christine Chapman [Crossroad Pub Co, 0824516044]**

A Popular Presentation of the Spiritual Genius of Dante New in the Spiritual Legacy Series. While exploring the human pilgrimage on Earth in his legendary poem, Dante lays out a spiritual path through the canticles of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Readers will appreciate the careful, reader-friendly approach to the actual poetry, as well as the fine biographical portrayal of Dante, the man, the writer, and the spiritual lover extraordinaire.

Robert Royal holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in Italian Studies from Brown University; a doctorate in Comparative Literature from Catholic University; and was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship from Florence, Italy.

structure and aims of medieval encyclopedias, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the medieval classification of knowledge; the battle of the arts; the role of the imagination; the tension between knowledge and vision; and Dante's theological speculations in his constitution of what Mazzotta calls aesthetic, ludic theology. As a poet, Dante puts himself at the center of intellectual debates of his time and radically redefines their configuration. In this book, Mazzotta offers powerful new readings of a poet who stands amid his culture's crisis and fragmentation, one who responds to and counters them in his work. In a critical gesture that enacts Dante's own insight, Mazzotta's practice is also a fresh contribution to the theoretical literary debates of the present. <>

## The Complete Danteworlds: A Reader's Guide to the Divine Comedy by Guy P. Raffa 8th edition [University of Chicago Press, 9780226702704]

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* has, despite its enormous popularity and importance, often stymied readers with its multitudinous characters, references, and themes. But until the publication in 2007 of Guy Raffa's guide to the *Inferno*, students lacked a suitable resource to help them navigate Dante's underworld. With this new guide to the entire *Divine Comedy*, Raffa provides readers—experts in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Dante neophytes, and everyone in between—with a map of the entire poem, from the lowest circle of Hell to the highest sphere of Paradise.

Based on Raffa's original research and his many years of teaching the poem to undergraduates, [The Complete Danteworlds](#) charts a simultaneously geographical and textual journey, canto by canto, region by region, adhering closely to the path taken by Dante himself through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. This invaluable reference also features study questions, illustrations of the realms, and regional summaries. Interpreting Dante's poem and his sources, Raffa fashions detailed entries on each character encountered as well as on many significant historical, religious, and cultural allusions.

We are amid a mini renaissance in the cultural appreciation of Dante's poetic masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*. Hardly restricted to the rarefied air of higher education, this extraordinary interest in Dante Alighieri, an Italian poet from the late Middle Ages (1265-1321), is easily seen in the proliferation of new and recent works—translations, biographies, even popular novels featuring Dante or his poem—displayed on the shelves and Web sites of booksellers.

Naturally, this growing fascination with the man and his poem inspires many readers to learn more about Dante's world and the influences, events, and experiences out of which his vision of the afterlife was born. To gain a better understanding of the *Divine Comedy*, inquisitive readers (students and literature enthusiasts alike) most often rely on explanatory notes accompanying the poem or on the occasional book or essay written with a general audience in mind. The valuable notes provided with translations are generally limited (due to lack of space) to brief presentations of background information and concise explanations of difficult passages. Translations are sometimes accompanied by a separate volume of commentary, usually aimed at a scholarly audience, but these notes, like those placed after each canto of the poem or gathered at the back of the book, still follow a strictly textual order, commenting on the poem canto by canto, line by line. Essays and book-length studies, while broader in scope and freer from a rigid textual chronology, are perhaps most useful to Dante's readers after they have already worked through the *Divine Comedy* at least once, on their own or with a teacher and classmates.

[Danteworlds](#) takes a different approach. The project grew out of a desire to meet two basic challenges facing college students who read and discuss the *Divine Comedy*, in most cases for the first time, in the Dante course I teach one or

more times each year: first, to become adequately familiar with the multitude of characters, creatures, events, and ideas—drawn from ancient to medieval sources—that figure prominently in the poem; second, to become adept at recalling who and what appear where by creating and retaining a mental map of Dante's postmortem worlds. My own experience, and that of my students, suggests that gaining such knowledge and skill while reading the *Divine Comedy* serves as an indispensable foundation on which to build ever higher levels of understanding and interpretation. [The Complete Danteworlds](#) therefore provides entries on major figures and issues arranged to help you connect your textual journey through the poem with Dante's physical journey through the realms of the afterlife. This arrangement allows you to proceed geographically as well as textually, not only canto by canto but also—as Dante and his guides do—region by region through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

Dante's readers have long recognized his powerful visual and encyclopedic imagination as a fundamental reason for the appeal of the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's poem, more than other depictions of the afterlife, takes us on a journey along with the protagonist by encouraging us to see and understand what Dante himself claims to have witnessed and learned as he descended through the circles of Hell, climbed the mountain of Purgatory, and visited the celestial spheres of Paradise. A letter from the late Middle Ages, addressed to the poet's most revered benefactor (Cangrande della Scala) during Dante's years of exile, offers general guidelines for reading and interpreting the *Divine Comedy*. Scholars disagree as to whether Dante or another well-educated person of the time wrote this Latin epistle, but few would dispute the letter's basic premise: in contrast to most (if not all) medieval accounts of otherworldly travel, the *Divine Comedy* famously insists on the literal, material truth of the protagonist's voyage as a basis for any other (allegorical) meaning. The more we know about the people and creatures Dante encounters, and the more precisely we envision the poet's representation of the afterlife, the better prepared we are to identify and understand additional meanings—sociopolitical, religious, philosophical, or personal—conveyed by and through the poem for posterity.

[Danteworlds](#), created to enrich the experience of reading and discussing Dante's *Divine Comedy*, aims to assist readers of the poem in their interpretive journeys by providing an original, accessible commentary and study guide in a format uniquely suited to Dante's visual poetics. It is organized according to the geographic layout of Dante's representation of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise: After the Dark Wood and a peripheral region just inside the gate of Hell, Dante's underworld is divided into nine concentric circles in the form of a large funnel, the last three of which are further divided into subcircles. Purgatory is an island-mountain comprising Ante-Purgatory (the shore and lower portion of the mountain), the Valley of Rulers, seven ascending terraces, and, at the top of the mountain, the Terrestrial Paradise. Paradise, celestial realm of the blessed, contains seven planetary spheres (including the Moon and the Sun), the Fixed Stars (constellations of the zodiac), the Primum Mobile ("first-moving" sphere), and the

Empyrean Heaven, which exists beyond time and space. Each circle of Hell, terrace of Purgatory, and sphere of Paradise is discussed in its own chapter, with one exception. Because circle eight, which Dante divides into ten subcircles (ditches or "pouches"), is so much more complex and crowded than other regions (over a third of the Inferno cantos are required to describe it), I thought it best to split the material into two chapters.

Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise are each introduced with an overview of Dante's conception of the realm and an original illustration showing how it is structured. For each region of Dante's three worlds, you will find a brief plot summary followed by entries explicating "encounters" and "allusions," significant verses (in Italian and English), and a series of study questions to aid comprehension and facilitate discussion of the poem. The "encounters" entries introduce the souls of dead men and women as well as assorted creatures (guardians, tormentors, angels, symbols) whom Dante sees at this stage of his voyage, while the "allusions" entries cover other items essential for a fuller understanding and appreciation of the cantos under consideration: theological and philosophical ideas, historical and political events, classical and biblical references, and literary devices. For the reader's convenience, I include information about inhabitants of the region not seen by Dante but named by someone he does meet in the entry for the encountered speaker. The same holds true for future inhabitants of the region named by a spirit (yes, Dante's dead see into the future), except for a few anticipated arrivals—such as Dante's archenemy, Pope Boniface VIII—who merit their own, more detailed entries in the "allusions" section.

In the [Danteworlds](#) entries, geographically arranged, you will therefore find valuable information on all the resident souls encountered by Dante (or named as current or future inhabitants) and on a host of other relevant topics. In preparing these entries, I consulted commentaries and studies by other Dante scholars in addition to the following standard reference works: Paget Toynbee's [A Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante](#), revised by Charles S. Singleton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), the monumental [Enciclopedia dantesca](#), directed by Umberto Bosco (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970-78), [The Dante Encyclopedia](#), edited by Richard Lansing (New York: Garland, 2000), and [Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia](#), edited by Christopher Kleinhenz (New York: Routledge, 2004).

I based my decision on what to include in each entry first and foremost on a close reading of the encounter or allusion as it appears in the poem, and then on a careful examination of Dante's written sources, from the Bible and texts by classical authors to literary, philosophical, and theological works of the Middle Ages. I also made ample use of the earliest commentaries on the poem (produced within one hundred years of the poet's death in 1321), especially for news of people and events from Dante's time and place. For this, *Danteworlds* owes much to the online, searchable database of the Dartmouth Dante Project (<http://dante.dartmouth.edu>), a magnificent resource conceived and directed by Professor Robert Hollander of

Princeton University. I turned repeatedly to Dante's primary influences and first commentators

to find and explicate material I believed most pertinent for enabling students and other readers to deepen their understanding of characters and allusions in the *Divine Comedy*. My hope is that some of these entries will provide fresh insights into the poem and its relation to Dante's world and perhaps to our world as well. I tried to provide as much useful information as possible for each subject while still covering all the encounters and major allusions in the poem.

Ambitious readers will (and should) want more; to get you started, [The Complete Danteworlds](#) includes a bibliography of Dante-related materials: selected translations and editions of the *Commedia*, reference works, classical and medieval sources, Web sites, biographies and guides, and a selection of modern criticism and commentary. While most of these materials are written in English, a sampling of Italian works is provided for advanced students of the language.

In addition to following Dante's geographic representation of the afterlife, [Danteworlds](#) emulates the poem's own remarkable system of cross-referencing and self-commentary, the way in which figures and events that appear in later portions of the poem refer back (often explicitly) to previous episodes. Such internal recollections encourage readers to retrace their steps and observe the development of important themes. When a previously discussed character or allusion reappears within a later entry, the name or term, set in small capitals, is followed by a reference to the previous location. For example, the entry on Emperor Henry VII in the tenth and final heaven of Paradise contains (in the final paragraph) back-references to Clement V (Circle 8, pouch 3), Charles of Valois (Terrace 5, "Hugh Capet"), and Philip The Fair (Jupiter, "LUE Acrostic"). Here "Circle 8, pouch 3" indicates a region of Hell, "Terrace 5" a level of Purgatory, and "Jupiter" a sphere of Paradise. Note that for Charles of Valois and Philip the Fair the titles of the earlier entries are provided ("Hugh Capet" and "LUE Acrostic"); Clement V has a separate entry under his name, but the mentions of Charles and Philip fall within larger entries. To cite one key pattern of narrative echoes, the "Harrowing of Hell" (the story of Christ's descent into Hell to retrieve the shades of his biblical predecessors) is first told in Limbo (the first circle of Hell) and then recalled, with new details, in circles five, seven, and eight of Hell, the first region of Purgatory (Ante-Purgatory), and the third sphere of Paradise (Venus).

The entries for each region in *The Complete Danteworlds* are followed by a selection of significant verses from the canto(s) describing the region and a series of study questions. The verses, including many of the most moving and meaningful lines of the *Divine Comedy*, appear in the original Italian followed by an English translation. Here is the famous opening line:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita (Inf.1.1)  
Midway along the road of our life  
("Inf 1.1" indicates canto 1, line 1 of the Inferno; this citation method is used throughout the book, with Purgatorio abbreviated "Purg." and Paradiso "Par.") I attempt in my translations to respect the poet's renowned vernacular style

and to assist the reader with little or no Italian by rendering Dante's original in modern, idiomatic English. These verses are intended to give readers (particularly those who are reading the poem in a translation with no facing-page original text) both a sample of Dante's own inimitable way with words and a place to begin to identify major ideas and themes. Thus the line just cited establishes the overarching journey motif of the *Divine Comedy*, underscores Dante's desire to relate his experience to that of his readers ("our life" as opposed to "my life"), and raises the issue of a midlife crisis affecting the protagonist ("Midway along the road"). This last point is addressed in one of the study questions for the region (the Dark Wood). In fact, the selected verses frequently convey information useful for answering these questions.

The study questions are designed both to aid individual study and to foster group or class discussion. For example, most chapters covering the *Inferno* include a question that asks you to explain the logical relationship between the sin of which the circle's inhabitants are guilty and the punishment to which they are subjected, a relationship (called the *contrappasso*) often suggested in one of the selected verses. Other study questions point to more challenging interpretive issues, such as Dante's own participation in a punished vice or the psychologically complex relationship between Dante and Virgil, his guide. In certain cases, a question explicitly asks you to reflect on similarities and differences between Dante's worldview and your own. For teachers and students, I hope some of these questions will provoke stimulating ideas for essay

topics or research assignments.

Accompanying this book is a *Danteworlds* Web site (<http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu>), created and hosted by Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services at the University of Texas at Austin. The multimedia site contains, in addition to abridged versions of the entries in this book, Italian recordings of many selected verses and a vast gallery of images depicting characters and scenes from the *Divine Comedy*.

Suloni Robertson, the artist who produced the illustrations for this book, created many original images for the Web site (digital reproductions from her own paintings), the *Inferno* section. Other images are drawn from works by Sandro Botticelli, John Flaxman, William Blake, and Gustave Doré, as well as from illustrations by an unidentified artist for Alessandro Vellutello's sixteenth-century commentary on the poem. Like this book, the *Danteworlds* Web site is structured around a geographic representation of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise the three worlds of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

#### HELL

Dante didn't invent hell — the idea of a place of punishment for wayward souls in the afterlife receives significant attention in biblical, classical, and medieval narratives. But he created the most powerful and enduring representation of the infernal realm, drawing freely from these earlier sources, integrating material from different traditions—in both high and popular culture—and adding his own, at times daring, personal touches. The seamless blend of adaptation and innovation is the hallmark of Dante's *Inferno*.



#### *Images of the Journey in Dante's Divine Comedy* by Charles H. Taylor, Patricia Finley [Yale University Press, 0300068344]

*The vivid events and characters of Dante's Divine Comedy -- one of the most powerful expressions of sacred imagination in all literature -- have inspired artists for over six centuries. This magnificently illustrated book assembles more than 250 illustrations of Dante's poem, created by fifteen known artists and some twenty anonymous illuminators to depict every aspect of the pilgrim's journey to the depths of Hell, the mountain of Purgatory, and the heavenly spheres of Paradise.*

#### *The Dore Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy* by Gustave Dore [136 Plates, Dover Publications, 048623231X]

*Gustave Doré (1832–83) was perhaps the most successful illustrator of the nineteenth century. His Doré Bible was a treasured possession in countless homes, and his best-received works continued to appear through the years in edition after edition. His illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy constitute one of his most highly regarded efforts and were Doré's personal favorites.*

*The present volume reproduces with excellent clarity all 135 plates that Doré produced for The Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise. From the depths of hell onto the mountain of purgatory and up to the empyrean realms of paradise, Doré's illustrations depict the passion and grandeur of Dante's masterpiece in such famous scenes as the embarkation of the souls for hell, Paolo and Francesca (four plates), the forest of suicides, Thais the harlot, Bertram de Born holding his severed head aloft, Ugolino (four plates), the emergence of Dante and Virgil from hell, the ascent up the mountain, the flight of the eagle, Arachne, the lustful sinners being purged in the seventh circle, the appearance of Beatrice, the planet Mercury, and the first splendors of paradise, Christ on the cross, the stairway of Saturn, the final vision of the Queen of Heaven, and many more.*

The idea of a place for souls in the afterlife is only vaguely defined in the Hebrew Bible. The dead descend below the earth, to Sheol ("the grave"), but the term could refer simply to burial and not imply a negative moral judgment. In the Vulgate (the Latin Bible), however, Sheol is generally translated as *infernus* (hell), and several passages in which the term appears suggest an underworld in which transgressors are punished. For instance, individuals who revolt against Moses and spurn God perish when the earth opens and they fall "alive into hell, the ground closing upon them" (Numbers 16:30-33) and God warns those who have forsaken him that "a fire is kindled in my wrath, and shall burn even to the lowest hell" as they are punished with a series of calamities (Deuteronomy 32:21-25).

Although ambiguity persists in the Gospels and other parts of Christian Scripture, Hell begins to take shape as a domain of eternal pain and suffering for the wicked. The prophet Isaiah says of the dead who have offended God, "their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched" (Isaiah 66:24). Mark takes this as a reference to Hell and infers two essential characteristics of the realm: fire and everlasting punishment (9:41-49). Matthew emphasizes those same aspects in his depiction of the Last Judgment, in which Christ separates the good from the wicked, setting "the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left" (25:33). The just, he writes, will be blessed with everlasting life in the Kingdom of God, while the damned—those who failed to minister to Christ by neglecting those who were hungry or thirsty, without clothes or shelter, or ill and in prison—will be cast into "everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels," and there they will suffer "everlasting punishment" (25:41-46). Luke, in the parable of the rich man and the beggar, similarly distinguishes between the fates of individuals: after their deaths, Lazarus, the poor man, "was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom," while the rich man "was buried in hell," where he was tormented by fire (16:19-25). Hell is reserved not only for wicked humans but also for the angels who sinned by rebelling against God (2 Peter 2:4). Augustine (354-430), who played a central role in establishing the Christian conception of Hell in the Middle Ages, likewise populates the realm of eternal punishment with both fallen angels and sinful human souls, adding that the damned suffer "degrees of misery, one being more enduringly miserable than another" (*Enchiridion* 111). The punishments are proportionated to the gravity of the sins, and thus is justice served.

Long before Dante, the punishment of bad souls in Hell had become a staple of popular Christian visions of the afterlife. Early texts cover a multitude of sins, often emphasizing sexual transgressions or vices commonly associated with religious life. For instance, in Saint Paul's *Apocalypse* (late fourth century) the apostle first sees religious figures—priest, bishop, deacon, and lector—punished in a river of fire and only later observes a range of nonclerical sinners, including usurers, blasphemers, sorcerers, and adulterers (Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*, 37-46). In many cases punishments correspond less to the seriousness of the sins than to their form. Thus the narrator of *Thurkill's Vision* (dated 1206) describes a vast arena in which the damned are tormented through reenactments of

their offenses (*Visions*, 226-31), and the protagonist of *Tundale's Vision* (1149), an Irish knight, witnesses God's rendering of justice "to each one according to his or her merit": thieves bear the weight of their loot while crossing a bridge of nails, and gluttons are butchered by executioners, while fornicators are impregnated by a beast (men as well as women!) and give birth to vipers (*Visions*, 155-71).

Andreas Capellanus, in his highly influential *The Art of Courtly Love* (late twelfth century), depicts the correspondence between human behavior and eternal consequences in an afterworld—divided into three concentric areas—based on how women treated men who sought their love (74-83). The central location (called "Delightfulness") is reserved for women who loved wisely, while the outermost area, assigned to women who rejected worthy suitors, resembles an earthly Hell. In this waterless region, called "Aridity," women who spurned receive commensurate payment. Their bodies, dirty but still beautiful, are clad in filthy, heavy clothes. The ground, baked by the sun, scorches their bare feet. The women sit on bundles of sharp thorns, which are shaken by strong men and tear into their flesh. Such suffering "is scarcely to be found among the infernal powers themselves" (80). Suffering to a lesser degree, though still with no hope of relief, are those in the second region, "Humidity," which is marked by frigid flooding waters, unbearable heat, and the absence of shade. These women, who shamelessly satisfied the lust of all suitors (worthy or not), are now swarmed by men seeking to serve them—so incessantly that no services can be rendered and the women would find it a comfort "if they had been left to serve themselves" (75).

Dante puts the notion of poetic justice to even greater dramatic effect in the *Inferno*, devising appropriate torments for each particular sin. His representation of Hell far surpasses earlier versions both in its detailed examination of individual sinners' lives and eternal punishments and in the precision and coherence of its overall moral structure. The foundation for the distribution and arrangement of sins in Dante's Hell is the hierarchical scheme, derived from the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE), of incontinence, mad bestiality ("brutishness"), and malice. Onto these Aristotelian categories Dante grafts the seven deadly sins (at least in part) and a host of other offenses, creating a moral edifice capable of housing nearly every type of unrepentant sinner recognized in medieval Christian doctrine. Dante places the entrance to Hell at the center of the habitable northern hemisphere (where he locates Jerusalem). The structure of the underworld, as we learn during a pause in his descent (to allow him to adjust to the stench of lower Hell), consists mostly of concentric circles, widest at the top and narrowing as one approaches the earth's core. Sins of incontinence or desire are punished in circles two through five, those whose sins involved violence occupy circle seven, and perpetrators of fraud are consigned to circles eight and nine. The first circle is Limbo—a region for those who, though virtuous, lacked Christian faith (or baptism)—and the sixth circle is reserved for heretics.

To flesh out the topography of Hell and the creatures charged with judging, transporting, guarding, and

tormenting the shades of the damned, Dante transforms and systematizes material from representations of the classical underworld (Hades). He engages most extensively with the Roman writer Virgil (70-19 BCE), who recounted Aeneas's visit to the lands of the dead—at once terrifying, heartbreaking, and edifying—in book 6 of the *Aeneid*. While Virgil imbued his underworld with a fluid, dreamlike atmosphere, Dante strives for greater realism, providing features that are more sharply drawn and tangible. Four classical rivers (Acheron, Styx, Phlegethon, Cocytus), whose purposes and courses appear to overlap in Virgil's *Aeneid*, serve distinct functions within an elaborate water system in Dante's *Inferno*. Likewise, Dante recasts an impressive array of Virgilian creatures to fill roles both practical and symbolic within his medieval Christian Hell: Charon, Minos, Cerberus, Plutus, Phlegyas, Furies, the Minotaur, Centaurs, Harpies, Geryon, and several Giants are among the figures appearing in both works. It is no wonder that Dante chooses Virgil himself as his guide through the infernal realm and—to increase the poignancy of Virgil's status as a beloved authority in the Christian afterlife—through Purgatory as well.

Dante skillfully molds these disparate elements into a world at once unified and varied—and frighteningly believable. But his depiction of Hell is also remarkable for several outright inventions. While Limbo, for instance, was accepted in late medieval Christian theology as the place for unbaptized children in the afterlife, Dante expands its population to include virtuous individuals who lived before Christianity, as well as other select non-Christians. He also creates an extraordinary rule for one group of sinners: traitors against guests lose their souls to Hell not at death but at the moment of their betrayal, and demons inhabit their bodies for the rest of their mortal lives. The poet's most important conceptual innovation, however, may be his discovery of a region just outside the nine infernal circles in which throngs of cowardly souls and neutral angels—scorned by Heaven and Hell alike—are punished for having refused to take a stand and choose between good and evil. For seven centuries, Dante's Hell has elicited strong reactions—from fascination to revulsion and everything in between. Whatever responses the *Inferno* evokes in today's and tomorrow's readers, they are unlikely to be neutral.

## PURGATORY

Even more so than for Hell (and perhaps Heaven), Dante had significant leeway in imagining and representing Purgatory, the second realm of the Christian afterlife, in which those who died in God's grace prepare themselves for Heaven by suffering temporal punishment for unrepented venial faults and completing penance for repented sins. The concept took shape over the course of early Christianity and the Middle Ages and has been, since the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, a major point of doctrinal disagreement among Christians. While the Bible contains no specific reference to such a place, certain biblical passages were read as supporting the idea. Thus, Judas Maccabeus, honoring the custom of offering prayers for those who died in God's grace, proclaims that it is "a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins" (2 Maccabees 12:46). Some components of Purgatory

do figure prominently in the Bible, notably the idea of trial by fire: "Thou hast proved my heart," sings the psalmist, "and visited it by night, thou hast tried me by fire: and iniquity hath not been found in me" (Psalm 16:3 [Psalm 17 in the Protestant Bible]). John the Baptist, who baptizes in water, prophesies the greater power of Jesus, saying, "He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost and fire" (Matthew 3:11). Based on these and other passages, medieval theologians introduced the idea of "purging fires" as a way to imagine the purification of souls who died in God's grace but bore the stains and habits of sin. From the adjective *purgatorius* arose the noun *Purgatorium* as the concept of Purgatory as a place took hold in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, finally becoming part of official church doctrine at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274. Even though Purgatory is theologically closer to Heaven than to Hell (as a place for saved souls to purify themselves), it functions as an intermediate realm through which souls pass after death on their way to Heaven. The place itself had a beginning—the mountain was formed when Lucifer plunged headfirst to the center of the globe and received its first visitors when Christ harrowed Hell—and will come to an end at the Last Judgment. It has indeed been argued that the late Middle Ages gave birth to Purgatory in part because the very notion of intermediacy grew stronger in this period with the rise of middle socioeconomic classes and lay (tertiary) religious orders (Le Goff, [The Birth of Purgatory](#), 6-7).

The elaboration of Purgatory can be seen in depictions of the afterlife in popular visionary literature predating Dante. The author of *Drythelm's Vision* (seventh century) speaks of "consuming flames and cutting cold" that punish certain souls; helped by prayers, alms, fasting, and masses, "they will all be received into the Kingdom of Heaven at the Day of Judgment" (Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*, 61). Saint Patrick's Purgatory (mid-twelfth century) describes harsh punishments to purge souls of their repented sins and thus enable their return to the Terrestrial Paradise from which humanity was once banished (*Visions*, 144). The Monk of Evesham (end of twelfth century) also describes cruel torments; nonetheless, "by atoning for their crimes or by the intercession of others, in that place of exile and punishment, they might earn admission to the heavenly country" (*Visions*, 204). In *Thurkill's Vision* (dated 1206), the souls pass through a "large purgatorial fire" and are immersed in a lake "incomparably salty and cold" (*Visions*, 222).

Elements from both theological authorities and popular accounts—including painful (if fitting) torments, at times tempered or shortened by prayers and good works of the living—certainly inform Dante's *Purgatorio*. However, the poet creates the world's most indelible image of this second realm of the afterlife by fleshing out the idea of Purgatory in the way we would expect: through a meticulous geographic and topographic representation; a sophisticated application of sources that both reinforces and challenges received dogma; subtle psychological portraits of the region's inhabitants; dramatic interactions between Dante and these characters as well as between Dante and his guide, Virgil; and trenchant commentary—social, moral, and political—on the world of the living.



Of conceptual originality is Dante's Ante-Purgatory, the zone between the island's shoreline and the gate of Purgatory proper, at the limit of the earth's atmosphere. This area is populated by saved souls who, for one reason or another, delayed repentance until the end of their lives. They must therefore spend statutory periods of time in Ante-Purgatory before being permitted to begin their purgatorial trials higher up on the mountain. Individuals who delayed repentance and were also excommunicated from the church must remain in Ante-Purgatory for a period of thirty times the number of years they lived outside the church. Other groups of late-repentant souls—the indolent (who delayed repentance due to apathy or laziness), the unabsolved (who repented just before they died from acts of violence), and rulers (whose political and military obligations caused them to postpone repentance)—must wait a period equal to their lifetimes before being allowed to pass through the gate of Purgatory and climb to the first terrace. The rulers are gathered within their own region, a secluded valley cut into the mountainside. Above this valley is the entrance to Purgatory proper, which is guarded by an angel. Once through this gateway, the shades cleanse themselves of the stains and habits of sin on seven terraces, one for each of the capital sins, that circle the mountain. A steep passageway winds up the mountain from one terrace to the next; the spirits are met by an angel each time they leave a terrace and begin their climb to the next level. On the mountain's summit, the goal of the penitents' climb, is the Terrestrial Paradise, the biblical garden (Eden) where Adam and Eve lived in innocence before they disobeyed God and were banished. Dante imagines that when Lucifer fell headfirst from Heaven into the southern hemisphere, dry land fled in fear to the northern hemisphere, while the earth displaced by his penetration rose up to form the island-mountain. Purgatory is therefore located in the southern hemisphere, diametrically opposite the center of the habitable northern hemisphere, where Dante places Jerusalem and the entrance to Hell (Inf. 34.112-26).

## PARADISE

In imagining Paradise and his voyage through the heavens, Dante follows in the footsteps of biblical, classical, and medieval travelers to a limited extent and then, like a comet, blazes a new and exciting trail through the celestial lights on his way to a vision of God. Dante's Paradise, consistent with medieval cosmology, comprises concentric spheres revolving around a fixed, immobile earth. The first eight spheres each carry a heavenly body—or bodies, in the case of the eighth—in circular orbit around the earth: The Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and Fixed Stars (the constellations of the zodiac). The ninth, outermost sphere in Dante's geocentric cosmos is the crystalline sphere or *Primum Mobile*—that is, the sphere that is first moved and thus able to impart movement to the spheres below it. Beyond the *Primum Mobile*, and therefore beyond space and time, is the Empyrean (from the Greek *empyrios*, meaning "fiery"), an immaterial, motionless heaven that is the divine mind itself and the true home of angels and the blessed.

The most influential cosmological models available to Dante, if not directly (albeit in Latin translation) then through medieval commentaries, were those of the Greek authorities

Plato (428-348 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), and Ptolemy (second century CE) (Circle 1, "Virtuous Pre- and Non-Christians"). From the translated portion of Plato's *Timaeus* and the accompanying commentary by Chalcidius (fourth century CE?), Dante learned that the seven planets (including the Moon and the Sun) revolve around the earth from east to west each day but travel in the opposite direction, west to east, against the background of the Fixed Stars over a much longer period. From Aristotle and his followers Dante drew more detailed support for this model, which placed the earth at the center of a series of perfectly concentric spheres, while Ptolemy and his commentators established the order of the heavens for the Middle Ages. Ptolemy was also a source for astronomical measurements, such as the distances of the planets from the earth, and the idea that apparent irregularities in planetary motion could be explained by the movement of a planet around a smaller circle (epicycle) centered on its larger orbit around the earth. For instance, the epicycle of Venus, which Dante mentions (*Convivio* 2.3.16; Par. 8.1-3), was meant to account for the planet's apparent retrograde motion. The Ptolemaic system used by Dante also posited a great circle (the ecliptic), inclined approximately 23.5 degrees to the celestial equator, along which the Sun appeared to travel in its annual

course through the constellations of the zodiac. Dante appropriately dates his entry into the heavens to the vernal equinox, one of the two places (the autumnal equinox is the other) where the ecliptic (the Sun's path) crosses the celestial equator (Par. 1.37-45). It should be noted that Dante's astronomical learning hardly precludes a belief in astrology, which was also considered a legitimate science in the late Middle Ages. Thus Beatrice, while dismissing Plato's literal claim that the souls return to their stars of origin, nonetheless reinforces the point made in Purgatory by Marco Lombardo (Terrace 3, "Free Will") that the heavens exert some influence on human affairs (Par. 4.49-60).

While Dante follows ancient and medieval authorities in the overall structure of the celestial realm, his depiction of Paradise—and his travel through it—is far more detailed and developed than previous versions. Biblical accounts are sketchy at best. Elisha witnesses the prophet ELIJAH swept up into Heaven in a fiery chariot pulled by fiery horses, but nothing else of his voyage is told (4 Kings [2 Kings in the Protestant Bible] 2:11; Circle 8, pouch 8, "Elijah's Chariot").

## THE APOSTLE PAUL

(Dark Wood, "Aeneas and Paul") is similarly reticent in describing what happened when he was snatched up to the third heaven of Paradise: only God knows whether he traveled bodily or only in spirit, and "it is not granted to man to utter" the secret words Paul heard during his celestial visit (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Popular Christian narratives of heavenly journeys or visions are more informative, but the paradises they describe tend to be earthbound. For instance, in Saint Paul's Apocalypse (late fourth century) Heaven contains gates, rivers, trees, and walls (Gardiner, [Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante](#), 26-35), in Thurkill's Vision (1206) the blessed inhabit an immense cathedral located on the Mount of Joy (Visions, 222), and in Tundale's Vision (1149) the residents of

Paradise—including faithful spouses, martyrs, virtuous monks, builders and defenders of churches, and the nine orders of angels—appear in regions embellished with silver and gold walls, tents and pavilions, a fruit-laden tree, and a wall made of precious stones (Visions, 185-92). Andreas Capellanus (late twelfth century) describes "Delightfulness," the privileged area of his afterworld for women, as a luxuriant meadow containing beautifully decorated couches, each located next to a rivulet. Herein the King and Queen of Love preside over beautiful women accompanied by well-dressed knights. Because these women conducted themselves wisely in matters of love (by showing favor to worthy suitors and responding properly to those who sought love falsely), their blessed spirits enjoy an afterlife of pure pleasure, including entertainment by jugglers and musicians (The Art of Courtly Love, 77-80). From the Islamic tradition, Dante may have known, in a Latin or Old French version, the *mi'raj* or *Libro della Scala* ("Book of the Ladder"), the prose account of Mohammed's visit to the otherworld. Guided by the archangel Gabriel, the Prophet witnesses the lush, sensuous wonders of Paradise (as well as the punishments of Hell) in his journey from Mecca to God's throne.

Medieval works that address theological and philosophical issues through the celestial travel of allegorical figures are another source of inspiration for Dante's *Paradiso*. [The Cosmographia](#) (mid-twelfth century), by Bernardus Silvestris, is an account of creation in which Nature journeys to the summit of the firmament to find Urania (queen of the stars); the two of them then ascend beyond the physical universe to God's abode of pure light before journeying back through the stars and the planetary heavens, down to the sublunar and terrestrial regions of material imperfection and variability. In Alan of Lille's [Anticlaudianus](#) (late twelfth century), Prudence, assisted in turn by Reason, Theology, and Faith, traverses the heavens in her quest to obtain a soul from God for the creation of a new, perfect man. Alan associates the heavens with the liberal arts by having the latter construct the chariot used by Prudence in her celestial voyage. In the *Convivio* Dante fully expounds this identification of the liberal arts (and other disciplines) with the celestial spheres based on perceived commonalities: The Moon with grammar, Mercury with dialectic (logic), Venus with rhetoric, the Sun with arithmetic, Mars with music, Jupiter with geometry, Saturn with astronomy, the Fixed Stars with natural science (physics and metaphysics), the *Primum Mobile* with ethics (moral philosophy), and the *Empyrean* with theology (2.13.8-30, 14.1-21). These pairings play an important though limited role in his representation of the heavens in the *Paradiso*.

As Virgil's account of Aeneas's visit to the underworld (*Aeneid* 6) is Dante's greatest model for his descent through Hell, so another classical narrative anticipates the cosmology and several major themes presented in his celestial voyage. In Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, Scipio Africanus the Younger, a Roman military and political leader (second century BCE), dreams at age thirty-five of an encounter in the heavens (the Milky Way, to be precise) with the souls of his father, Paulus, and his grandfather, Scipio Africanus the Elder. Like the character Dante, Cicero's dreaming protagonist is instructed in human and divine matters and hears prophesies of future events in his life,

both bitter and sweet. Dante's presence in the *Celestial Paradise*, however, is presented not as a dream but as actual experience. Despite his humble declaration (following the example of the apostle Paul) that only God knows whether he made the journey in both body and soul (*Par.* 1.73-75), Dante gives every indication—including protestations of his inability to recall and describe adequately what he saw—of having traveled through the heavens in his full, living being. Unprecedented and unsurpassed, Dante's *Paradiso* narrates the physical journey of a living man through a celestial realm that, both cosmologically and theologically, is carefully and coherently conceived.

### [Dante's Interpretive Journey by William Franke \[University of Chicago Press, 9780226259970\]](#)

Critically engaging the thought of Heidegger, Gadamer, and others, William Franke contributes both to the criticism of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and to the theory of interpretation.

Reading the poem through the lens of hermeneutical theory, Franke focuses particularly on Dante's address to the reader as the site of a disclosure of truth. The event of the poem for its reader becomes potentially an experience of truth both human and divine. While contemporary criticism has concentrated on the historical character of Dante's poem, often insisting on it as undermining the poem's claims to transcendence, Franke argues that precisely the poem's historicity forms the ground for its mediation of a religious revelation. Dante's dramatization, on an epic scale, of the act of interpretation itself participates in the self-manifestation of the Word in poetic form.

Dante's *Interpretive Journey* is an indispensable addition to the field of Dante studies and offers rich insights for philosophy and theology as well.

#### A New Hermeneutic Horizon for Religious Revelation in Poetic Literature?

This project opened on a wager that hermeneutic thought and Dante owed each other a lot, though the reciprocal debt had perhaps not been fully realized, nor certainly exploited. What are the returns, in sum, on the account that was opened by this wager and on the two-fold investment it entailed? What insights of hermeneutic thought, medieval or modern, have lent an enriched fund of intelligibility and challenge to the *Commedia* and perhaps profited in turn by the transaction?

Medieval theories of interpretation per se have not been extensively dealt with in this study, for by and large they are instrumental to the exegetical task and do not explicitly pursue the speculative implications of the phenomenon of interpretation. Speculative insight into how interpretation constitutes reality as it can be humanly experienced is, however, powerfully active in certain strains of metaphysical thinking (for example, in debates over speculative grammar in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) and operates especially vigorously, as has been the argument of this book, in Dante's poetic praxis of address to the reader.

That truth or the disclosure of reality, and this for Dante includes the ultimate eschatological reality of Christian belief, should take the form of an event that intrinsically involves the one to whom the disclosure is made, that is, the interpreter or reader, is a thesis—the mainspring of speculative hermeneutics—that receives constant confirmation and conspicuous application throughout Dante's poem. The exposure of structures of interpretive involvement permeates the work and its styles in more, and subtler, ways than can be exhaustively examined. The poet's personal involvement in all that his poem discloses and the

inscription of the reader and of the event of reading into the text of the poem—both macroscopically in the structure of direct address and in filaggrin in various forms of continuous implicit address, as well as in a generally diffused presentation of objective states of souls as modalities of their own self-understanding—mark and achieve what is a thoroughgoing hermeneutic understanding of reality as itself an event of understanding.

That any revelation of truth or event of understanding should be an event of someone who understands, and that interpretation is internal to this event rather than working on any sort of object from the outside, is the common principle that animates Dante's work and hermeneutic thought alike, appropriating them to one another. Dante's poem compellingly demonstrates this self-reflexive structure of mutual implication between truth and understanding. This is particularly brought out by the poem's hermeneutic imperatives, the addresses, as secularly doubling the protagonist's interpretive predicament back upon the reader's, with which it is discovered to coincide. By this means, Dante impressively realizes the participatory potential of poetry to render theological revelation effective in personal experience and in history.

In ways examined in this study, the *Commedia* works out our being within our world and reality rather than outside and over against it taken as object. Moreover, we have seen that this makes it possible for the things in the world and even and especially our own artifacts, our "poiēmata," so to speak, to become vehicles of a word that addresses us, in a way they could not when they were limited to being objects within our epistemological framework, as has been the prevailing way of treating them in modern times obsessed by the powers and possibilities of technological control. For what speaks, means, intends, addresses can no longer be grasped as any objectified entity: all objects are translated into the infinity of the medium, language, which itself in turn must not be objectified and totalized as "all there is," but rather should be let be as on the way to what transcends it. Thus, we are not led inevitably to the conclusion, merely because it is never possible to present in positive, objective form a subject who is speaking, that therefore the phenomenon of address is nothing but illusion. Rather, it is only consistent with full cognizance of the finiteness of our knowledge to allow whatever might answer to the notion of author or source of the address to recede to a position of transcendence.

Communicating takes a little faith, even though the fashion of doubting all that cannot be positively demonstrated all too often still passes for intellectual rigor in our secularly

minded culture. The hermeneutic point of view takes all the positive objects of our knowledge as nothing but mediations, and yet leaves open the possibility—arguably the necessary possibility—of their reference to transcendent being.

We can opt for a "demystified" view that would dissolve subjectivity, along with all such purported realities, like divinity, that are not objectively given in experience, as so many metaphysical illusions. This, however, involves maintaining dogmatically that the effects of subjectivity, or the faith in a transcendent God, have no ultimate ground or referent just because any object that can ever be positively presented is already within the mediations of hermeneutics and therefore not graspable as an independent principle or self-sufficient subject. But to say on this basis that there can be no metaphysical entities is to take the mediations not as mediations but as the real thing, the only thing there is, which is once again to betray the very insight that hermeneutics has fostered. It is to forget or neglect the hermeneutic distance that makes our dealings should do most directly with things that are defined and rendered objects of knowledge and discourse by being defined and known, and that therefore are mediations rather than "things themselves." Rejection of the possibility of a transcendent truth and world simply translates the world of appearances into a real world come back to haunt us, even while it triumphantly announces an end to the shadowy "other" world of metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> It has forgotten the point of the language of the other world's coming into being in the first place as a sign of the structure of understanding as always unable to fully objectify what it understands, including itself.

Alternatively, we can let subjectivity float free, above and beyond all its positive instances, such as in "man," and allow that these may be partial images of a possible true Subject. That such a Being should reveal itself through the world's religions or specifically as the Trinity or the Incarnate Son is not impossible. It can even become an compelling form for symbolizing the mystery of transcendence built into the hermeneutic nature of our experience. Conviction becomes possible only from within the specific historical mediations in which one finds oneself involved (and in which one first finds oneself), and Dante's poem demonstrates the crucial role poetry can assume in mediating such a revelation. In this, Dante is only continuing to develop a poeticality intrinsic to the religious revelation of the Bible.

The hermeneutic outlook, far from having been invented toward the turn of the eighteenth century, is one of the perennial orientations of philosophy and of the experience of reality in general. It was discovered by Heidegger in the Greeks, for whom the world was not an object but an opening, the Open ("die Lichtung"), in which "man" found himself disclosed together with his world.<sup>1</sup> But even more pertinent to Dante's hermeneutic consciousness is the historical and relational understanding of human existence in the Bible. Knowing in the Bible is above all a being involved with. Knowledge of God and God's knowing his people cannot be prescinded from the covenant and commitment, personal and communal, that bind the parties together in a relationship.

This direct dependence of all we know and believe on what we are comes to articulation even in the untheoretical texts on which Christianity is founded. That the knowledge of God is bound up with an ontological condition is stated explicitly throughout the New Testament, perhaps nowhere more suggestively than in John's words: "[I]t doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3.2). Being like God and knowing him truly are inseparable. John measures the degree of a person's knowledge by the quality of his being, so that being and its modes become the criterion of genuine knowing: "He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love" (1 John 4.8). The rationally baffling formula "God is love" becomes more understandable when we consider that God's being can be known to us only through our own possibilities of being, among which Christians recognize love as the highest. St. John's grasp of the unity of being and knowing is so simple and clairvoyant that there is simply no theoretical problem for him; he blends the orders of being and knowing together unproblematically, again, for example, in accusing of hypocrisy those who claim to have fellowship with God yet walk in darkness "and do not the truth" (1 John 1.6).

At stake in the problem of hermeneutics is the possibility of communication and of a revelation of meaning or truth, not only among human beings but also primordially of and from God as what transcends them, or from Being as such. The Christian religion responds to this problem fundamentally through the idea of Incarnation, and Dante incorporates the logic of this idea as a light of understanding in his work as poet and prophet. We have seen how Dante's poem works incarnationally to reveal its truth in the lives of those who can embody it, the readers, and in the history of interpretations of Christian revelation. Inextricably connected with the notion of Incarnation is the other great doctrine of the Christian religion, that of the Trinity. The second and final part of this meditation on the hermeneutic logic or theologic of the *Commedia* will bring out the self-reflexive structures of Dante's poetry, particularly that of the *Paradiso*, that incorporate a dynamic of self-transcending. It will explore how the self-reflexive verbal structures that characterize poetry, especially lyric, become at the same time a reflection of a divine transcendence. Whereas for postmodernity, self-reflexivity has become a structure of self-enclosure upon the self in its intricate self-deceptiveness and ultimate emptiness, for Dante and his culture self-reflexivity could also, and more profoundly, be understood as the reflection of transcendence, even as the image of a Trinitarian divinity.

The theory of interpretation here argued for by the freeing of key insights, rather than in any exhaustive, systematic fashion, can be unveiled in its subtleties only as evoked by the minute inflections of the poetry as it does its work of interpreting, projecting speculative horizons of a suggestiveness and complexity beyond the capacity of theoretical statements to articulate. The present labor of searching out the broad horizons of the interpretive phenomenon of religious truth in poetic literature hopefully has made us more ready and able to take in what the poetry itself reveals about this truth in its effectual working. Thus, it may be possible to light upon the significant nuances

of the poetry that can make a work like the *Divine Comedy* happen for us in the power of its truth as an event of religious revelation.

## Essay: Dante's Medieval World

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"*In la sua voluntade è nostra pace.*" "In his will is our peace." Dante

Imagine yourself living in the thirteenth century confronted by a young man who, though only twenty, looks fifty. He is of average height, about 5'3" or 5'4" tall, and anemic. He is dirty, poor, his clothes are in tatters, and he stinks so strongly he drowns out even the stench of the animal excrement and rotting garbage that litter the streets. He has a pockmarked face and few remaining teeth. Of those remaining, most are riddled with cavities and one or two are abscessed, causing him almost constant agony. He experiences all manner of pain daily and he lives in constant fear of death; although he has survived smallpox he has reason to fear "stones," gout, influenza, the common cold (which may develop into pneumonia), typhus, dysentery, and, above all, bubonic plague. Though it was not until 1345 that waves of plague swept over Europe until in the 150 years prior to 1665 "there were only a dozen years when London was free from the plague," nonetheless, plague was something everyone feared throughout the middle ages. This man is lucky to be alive at all: 60% of all people in his era are dead before they reach age 11 and 36% die before they reach age six. As it is, he can only expect to live another ten years.

As if fear of death from natural causes is not enough, this man must also fear fire, which is awful in its frequency, thieves, murderers, brigands, pirates, and all manner of unexpected violence from friend and foe alike. For the most part, this violence is simply a fact of life; not much can he do to diminish it. Writing in *The English Historical Review* in 1964, J.G. Bellamy reports that "not one investigator has been able to indicate even a few years of effective policing between 1285 and the end of the fifteenth century." Matters became so bad at times that authorities paid criminals protection or simply hired thieves and brigands to work for them. "It was the tortured logic of medieval jurisprudence that a pledge of licensed violence for the future canceled the stigma of unauthorized crime in the past.

In addition to his insecurity and fear of death, our man's head is filled with superstitions, fear of ghosts, demons, the devil and his torments, and unappeased Saints. His conviction that these non-corporeal powers are "real" is as unshaken as our belief that they are not. Much of what we see as inanimate, this man not only sees as alive and (probably) threatening, but also named. His is "an age maximally open to belief." St. Jerome remarked that the legions of demons and spirits were so numerous that "the mass of humanity is as nothing." Not only were they numerous, their powers, which no one doubted, were truly frightening. Demons could "unsettle the senses, stir low the passions, disorder life, cause alarms in sleep, bring diseases,

fill the mind with terror, distort the limbs, control the way lots are cast, make a pretense at oracles by their tricks, arouse the passions of love, create the heat of cupidity, lurk in consecrated images; when invoked they appear; ... they take on different forms, and sometimes appear in the likeness of angels."

To protect himself against these powers our man carries talismans and amulets, charmed stones, magical writings, and almost certainly the "agnus dei" or a crude cross made of wood. He memorizes prayers and magic spells to suit a variety of circumstances. He does not distinguish between these charms and the icons and prayers in Latin he hears in Church, all of which he hopes will alleviate his fears and his pain. "...the availability of occult and religious counterforces prevented a sense of hopelessness, and made possible a certain accommodation between the visible and invisible worlds. And the Church, while condemning certain (by no means all) occult knowledge, in practice cooperated actively in this accommodation." If all else fails, he will drink strong beer. "Beer was a basic ingredient in everyone's diet, children as well as adults... every member of the population [in the late Middle Ages], man, woman, and child, consumed almost forty gallons a year, i.e., nearly a pint a day."

Though the Church makes every effort to distinguish its mysteries from magic, the distinction is lost on a man such as this. His mind is constricted and narrow and his world is too small to admit of subtle distinctions. His is a fractured consciousness, a tangle of contradictions, pagan beliefs, superstitions, and bits and pieces of dogma gleaned in Church. As suggested above, his fears are not simply of things imagined, by any means, though what he imagines terrifies him. "Medieval people lived in expectation of misfortune and loss — an expectation made more pronounced by an accompanying conviction of helplessness." In the words of historian Carolly Erickson, our man lives in "an enchanted world" with fear as a constant companion.

The "gentry" are not much better off, exhibiting the same fears, the same sort of "extreme excitability" and "vehement passion" that lead to conflicting emotions, vivid imaginings, and contradictory behavior. Amid this chaos stands the Church and the medieval conviction that "right is absolutely fixed and certain." Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision* [Oxford University Press, ]

Not that our man or his lord and lady trust Churchmen. In their eyes, the Church and its institutions and ceremonies stand firm, but many, if not most, of the men who people the Church are flawed. To simple-minded, primitive men, respect for celibate priests who will not fight is not to be expected, especially if it is generally known that they have feet of clay. And even though celibacy is by no means universally embraced by the clergy, there are those who remain celibate and take the pacifism advocated in the New Testament seriously. In most instances, however, the parish priest is barely distinguishable from members of his congregation, living with his wife or concubine, drinking heavily, unable to read more than a few words, and struggling to survive on a pittance. Giovanni Boccaccio reflects the common attitude toward the ordained when he has Elisa tell her fellows in *Decameron* that "all clerics are

more avaricious than women, and at daggers drawn with liberality. And although every man naturally desires revenge for an injury done him, the clerics, as we see, permit themselves to pursue revenge more eagerly than other men, although they preach patience and above all things commend the forgiveness of offenses."

If, on the other hand, clerics become involved in warfare, as especially the high-ranking Church officials often do, they are generally held in high regard by popular opinion. Attitudes of common folk toward the clergy are, again, a tangle of conflicting emotions, from contempt to admiration. Doubtless this is due, in part at least, to the fact that there are clerics of all stripes, many of whom are admirable and many of whom are not. William, Bishop of Valentia, was regarded as a "man of blood, strenuous in slaughter, prone to bloodshed and wanton in incendiarism" and was viewed by his contemporaries as "a spiritual monster and a beast with many heads." Worse yet was the priest Don Niccolo de Pelagati of Figaro. "He had twice celebrated his first Mass; the first time he had the same day committed murder, but afterward received absolution at Rome; he then killed four people and married two wives, with whom he traveled about. He afterward took part in many assassinations, violated women, carried others away by force, plundered far and wide, and infested the territory of Ferrara with a band of followers in uniform, extorting food and shelter by every sort of violence. . . the clergy and monks had many privileges and little supervision, and among them were doubtless plenty of murderers and other malefactors — but hardly a second Pelagati." One of the most notorious thieves and murderers of fourteenth century England, Robert Folville, was also a priest. Most of the forgers during this period, many of whom became quite wealthy consequently, were clergymen. On balance, respect for the parish priest weakened during the medieval period until, toward the end, it was rarely felt at all. ". . . in many parts of Europe [toward the end of the medieval period] it was considered bad luck to meet a priest, or to pass one by on the right side."

Of necessity, medieval man turns to Churchmen for guidance, but he also blames them for his plight. Among countless examples of this, none is more telling than the testimony of a simple miller by the name of Domenico Scandella, who was brought up before the Inquisition on charges of heresy late in this period. In his sworn testimony he says, "It seems to me that under our law, the pope, cardinals, and bishops are so great and rich that everything belongs to the Church and to the priests, and they oppress the poor, who, if they work two rented fields, these will be fields that belong to the Church, to some bishop or some cardinal." Scandella was on solid ground, as members of the Inquisition certainly knew. "So strong were their secular loyalties that many medieval Churchmen retained the outlook and behavior of feudal aristocrats throughout their lives. Clerics frequently kept their seigniorial rights even after entering the Church, or accepted civil authority after their religious professions were made." In general, the relationship between the clergy and the laity (especially toward the end of the medieval period) was one of bitter and brutal antagonism. Nonetheless, to the medieval mind "the unworthiness of the persons never compromised the

sacred character of the institutions." This was doubtless due to the doctrine of the priesthood's "character indelibilis" taught by the Church, which allowed the masses of men and women to "loathe the individual [priest] and still desire his spiritual gifts."

This inconsistency was evidence of the one characteristic that stood out in the dark ages between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the dawn of the Renaissance, and that characteristic was conflict. Reverence for the Church and its holy relics went hand in hand with contempt for Churchmen; fear of hell was coupled with an almost frantic joy in living; cruelty was joined to remarkable tenderness; asceticism existed alongside "insane attachment to the delights of this world"; and "the ecstasy of contemplation and love of Christ" was joined to "the horrors of demonomania." The result of this conflict was an imbalance "rendering both individuals and masses liable to violent contradictions and to sudden changes." Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* [Harper and Row, ]

In the face of this is it surprising that the people regard their fate and that of the world as a succession of evils? "Bad government, exactions, the cupidity and violence of great wars and brigandage, scarcity, misery and pestilence — to this is contemporary history reduced in the eyes of these people. The feeling of general insecurity ... was further aggravated by the obsession with the coming of the end of the world, and by fear of hell, of sorcerers, and of devils. The background of all life in the world is black. Everywhere the flames of hatred arise and injustice reigns. Satan covers a gloomy earth with his somber wings."

We must continue to remind ourselves that the man we have before our mind's eye is still primitive, "not yet fully Christianized." His world frightens him and he lives in hope of deliverance from pain and suffering after death. His eye is drawn upward to the top of his great cathedrals, and beyond. If he lives well he will be rewarded, and if he lives badly he will be punished. Of this he has no doubt whatever. This certainty gives him focus in his living and order (if not peace of mind) amid conflicting images.

The medieval cosmos is fixed and static in its hierarchical arrangement. This applies not only to the three estates of humankind; it applies to all of God's creation from God himself down to the most insignificant inanimate object. This has dreadful implications for men such as the one before us: since he is born a poor member of "the third estate," as most are, he will almost certainly remain poor for the duration of his short life.

Because of his fear of this world and his constant turning toward heaven (or hell), this man sees everything as symbolizing something else: the world is not what it seems; it must be interpreted in terms of a complicated set of static images placed in the rigid hierarchy mentioned above. Into this world the medieval poet par excellence Dante Alighieri cast his masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, which sought to deliver medieval men and women from their fears and justify the ways Of God to man. "The abundance of images in which religious thought threatened to dissolve itself would only have produced a chaotic phantasmagoria, if symbolic conception had not worked it all into a vast system where every figure had its place." *The Divine Comedy* describes in

detail just such a system, drawing on the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas and the dogma of the Roman Church, permeated throughout with pagan mythology and medieval superstition, informed by Dante's poetic imagination, and inspired by Dante's muse, Beatrice. Most important of all, it made sense of an otherwise baffling and terrifying world. And, like human existence itself, in the world of allegory everything the poet said meant something else: the words and images suggested and revealed certainties to those willing to take the time to interpret.

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, may have put it best in describing such a complex world of symbols and hidden meanings when he observed that "the outward face of nature need not alter, but the expressions of meaning in it alter. It was dead and alive again. It is like the difference between looking on a person without love, or the same person with love... When we see all things in God, and refer all things to Him, we read in common matters superior expressions of meaning." Such is the world of the frightened man who has stood before us throughout this exercise; it is the world Dante captured in his masterpiece. In everything he saw, Dante sought to provide superior expressions of meaning through allegory. "For [Dante] all reality is symbolic; the higher allegory is only the inner truth of reality."

It is difficult for the modern mind to grasp how the medieval mind saw its world — most of us, being literate, also tend to be realists who believe only what we see. Carl Gustav Jung decries the modern mind with its inability to see things symbolically, its loss of connection with its deeper self and with the collective unconscious. Not so medieval men and women. The medieval mind saw through things, or past them, to what they meant in a terrifying, but ordered and intelligible world created by a beneficent God. "Their sight was different from ours in kind; accepting a more inclusive concept of reality, they saw more than we do." The historian Johan Huizinga provides us with an excellent example:

The vision of white and red roses blooming among thorns at once calls up a symbolic assimilation in the medieval mind: for example, that of virgins and martyrs shining with glory amidst their persecutors. The assimilation is produced because the attributes are the same: the beauty, the tenderness, the purity, the colors of the roses, are also those of virgins, their red color that of the blood of martyrs. But this similarity will only have a mystic meaning if the middle-term connecting the two terms of the symbolic concept expresses an essentiality common to both; in other words, if redness and whiteness are something more than names for a physical difference based on quantity, if they are conceived as essences, as realities. The mind of the savage, of the child, and of the poet never sees them otherwise. [Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*]

Huizinga's use of the term "savage" in this context is entirely appropriate, as is the use of terms such as "primitive" or "childlike" to describe the medieval man we have imagined above. These terms are not used derisively, but descriptively, to portray a mind unlike our own — not worse or better, simply different. Such was the mind of Dante Alighieri. Though it was deeper and more cultured than the mind of the man we have imagined, for whom Dante would

have had utter contempt, it (ironically) bore important similarities in its fears, suspicions, and beliefs. Above all else it was similar in seeing all things symbolically.

Symbols allow us to organize and harmonize an otherwise incomprehensible world. "Symbolism's image of the world is distinguished by impeccable order, architectonic structure, hierarchic subordination. For each symbolic connection implies a difference in rank or sanctity: two things of equal value are hardly capable of symbolic relationship with each other unless they are both connected with some third thing of a higher order." Symbols allowed the medieval mind to unify its world and make sense of an incoherent and disordered motley of elements whose lack of meaning would otherwise have been overwhelming. Ironically, it was a more rigorous unity than that which modern science can offer, according to the historian Johan Huizinga. It must have been; it was simple and left no questions unanswered. This sense of order, reflecting hierarchical schemata that were as old as ancient Greece, permeates Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

Symbolic assimilation as extensive and saturated with vivid images as that found in the medieval period suggests the importance of number. "An immense perspective of ideal series of relationships is opened up in this way, but they amount to nothing more than arithmetical exercises." These "exercises" branched off into astrology, which had a significant impact on medieval culture and provided a livelihood (casting horoscopes) for a great many men, including respected men of science in the later Renaissance. One can scarcely determine where astrology leaves off and astronomy begins in the works of Kepler, for example, who was steeped in medieval superstition despite his brilliant mathematical mind. These "arithmetical exercises" were of vital importance to Dante and to his world; they comprise the framework of *The Comedy*. As Archibald MacAllister noted in 1953:

The *Comedy* is made up of three nearly equal parts which are distinct yet carefully interrelated to form a unified whole. Each part, moreover, is the expression of one Person of the Trinity: Inferno, the power of the Father; Purgatory, the wisdom of the Son; and Paradise, the love of the Holy Spirit. Each part, or *cantica*, contains 33 cantos [the age of Christ at his death, according to tradition] for a total of 99. If we add the introductory canto we obtain a grand total of 100, which is the square of 10; 10 is the perfect number, for it is composed of the square of the Trinity plus 1 which represents the unity of God. Even the rhyme scheme itself is the *terza rima* of 'Third rhyme' which Dante invented for this purpose... Almost literally, nothing was left to chance. (Ciardi, *Inferno*, xxiv)

This is not a book about Dante, nor about his *Comedy*. Thus, I shall not take a prolonged look at the fascinating twists and turns of the poem. Rather, I shall restrict my attention to the general schemata to determine how Dante viewed his world with eyes cast heavenward.

In the introductory canto, Dante encounters, in turn, a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. This encounter foreshadows the major levels of Hell itself, consisting of a vestibule plus nine circles of progressively greater sin. The degree of sinfulness reflects the sinner's gradual abandonment of

reason and love, both of which, Dante would have agreed with Aquinas, were necessary for human redemption. The leopard represents incontinence in which love is misdirected and reason is ineffective. (I might note that will is also ineffective, but it is not necessary to do so, since Dante embraced the Socratic view that virtue is knowledge: anyone who knows what is right will do it; reason and will are two sides of the same coin.) The lion represents violence in which love is perverted and reason powerless. The she-wolf represents both malice and fraud, in which love is absent and reason is reduced to calculation, and the corrupt, earthly Roman Church.

It probably gave Dante's contemporaries great joy to discover so many clerics (especially high-ranking Church officials) in Hell, reflecting the medieval disenchantment with the behavior of the clergy. This in no way diminished respect for the institution of the Church itself, as I mentioned above. We must keep in mind the distinction between the Church as it should be and the Church as an earthly institution, which had become, in the eyes of Dante and many of his contemporaries, corrupt to the core. This corruption Dante traced to the "donation of Constantine" in the late Roman Empire when Christianity became the official Church of the Romans and thereby an avenue to power for ambitious men. ("Ah Constantine, what evil marked the hour — not of your conversion, but of the fee the first rich Father took from you in dower!" *canto XIX*, 106). As a result, the Church, like the she-wolf, "tracks down all, kills all, and knows no glut, but feeding, she grows hungrier than she was... She seemed a rack for avarice, gaunt and craving" (50). Any doubts about the depth of Dante's contempt for the worldliness of the Church are erased in the 32nd *canto* of the *Purgatorio* in which a masque is acted out before the pilgrim's eyes describing in allegorical terms the corruption of the Church through avarice. His contempt is barely controlled in St. Peter's harangue against the corruption within the papacy in *Paradiso XXVII*.

The tri-fold division of Hell, symbolized by the three animals, derives from distinctions first made by Aristotle and later developed by Cicero and Thomas Aquinas. The use to which Dante puts this division, together with the graphic details, are, of course, the product of the poet's extraordinary imagination and limitless verbal powers. In the very first *canto* of the *Inferno* the sense of desolation, fear, and helplessness permeates the air. Nothing could be more chilling than the inscription over the gates of Hell: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." Dante the pilgrim experiences these feelings and the poet conveys them to the reader/listener. The presence of Virgil, who represents human reason, somewhat ameliorates Dante's misgivings. Virgil will guide Dante through Hell and Purgatory; but he will ultimately be replaced by Beatrice, who represents the faith and love which must augment reason if Dante is to see God.

Dante had spent much of his adult life in philosophical speculation and gradually concluded that reason is not enough. So he turned to poetry and religion. He constantly reminds us (and himself) of the limits of human reason: note Virgil's remark that he (reason) was sent by Beatrice, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Lucia (faith and love) to help Dante

find his way out of the woods "midway in [his] life's journey." Immediately we can see the place of symbolism and the traces of Dante's complicated arithmetical scheme involving the number three (representing the Trinity) and its multiples. As MacAllister said, "nothing is left to chance." Everything had to make sense, and numerical ordering guaranteed coherence and intelligibility to the medieval mind. This can be seen quite clearly by recalling Dante's description of Beatrice (who died in the "first hour of the ninth day of the month") in *The Vita Nuova* where she becomes the number nine:

What I mean to say is this: The number three is the root of nine, for without any other number, multiplied by itself it gives nine, as we plainly see that three times three is nine. Therefore, if three is the sole factor of nine and the sole factor of miracles is three, that is the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, who are three in One, then this lady was accompanied by the number nine so that it may be understood that she was a nine, or a miracle, whose root, namely of the miracle, is the miraculous Trinity alone. (XXIX)

The order and coherence of the medieval cosmos was determined by multiples of three and seven. The planets moved in perfect circular orbits. The predictability of the entire scheme comforted fearful medieval minds and rendered it extremely difficult to dislodge, as we shall see.

Remember that Dante's cosmos was a Christianized adaptation of Ptolemy's cosmology with the earth at the center and God dwelling in the Empyrean beyond the sphere of the fixed stars. The medieval cosmos consisted of nine (!) crystalline spheres, one inside the other, surrounding the earth and moving outward to the moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the fixed stars. The place farthest from God, then, is the center of the earth, where we find the pit of Hell. Since this place is farthest from the love of God, Dante imagined it as a frozen wasteland of constant, bitter winds. It was one of Dante's great inspirations, and there were many.

Dante passes through the vestibule of Hell, which is peopled with opportunists, that is, men and women who had refused to take sides on matters of grave importance. At this point Dante sees his first Pope, Celestine V, "who, in cowardice, made the Great Denial," Celestine withdrew from all worldly affairs, abandoning the mantle of the papacy to Boniface VIII, who was almost certainly the arch villain of Dante's Hell. (Even though Boniface personally expelled Dante from Florence, and was still alive as Dante was writing, nevertheless Dante, rather recklessly one thinks, takes great pains to mention that Boniface's place in Hell is assured.)

Dante was especially critical of Boniface because he represented the Church's infatuation with earthly power. We must bear in mind, as was mentioned above, that the clergy were often men of great ambition who used their offices to advance their own objectives. They commanded armies, fathered illegitimate children, and accumulated immense wealth through indulgences and the sale of holy favors. (Cesare Borgia, the prototype of Machiavelli's prince, was the son of a wealthy and powerful Pope.) These were the sorts of men who were reviled by simple men such as the miller Domenico Scandella, quoted above. And these

were the sorts of men who became the target of Dante's sharp pen.

The first level of Hell, marked by the three circles of limbo, carnality, and gluttony, was peopled by men and women "who betrayed reason to their appetite." The odd group here is that of unbaptised infants and virtuous pagans, whom we find in limbo. Dante tends to ignore the former, but the presence of the virtuous pagans bothers him and he will question this principle when he reaches Paradise (XIX). At this point we must simply accept that their sin was that they lived before the birth of Christ; they are not punished, strictly speaking, except that they, too, live without hope. It may well be that Dante has answered his own question about the virtuous pagans by depicting Virgil as disoriented in Purgatory. One can only imagine that he would be completely lost and out of place in a Christian heaven! Be that as it may, Dante is not altogether consistent in placing pagans in limbo, as we find some unvirtuous pagans deeper in Hell — men such as Alexander the Great, Ulysses, Diomedes, Epicurus, and even Tiresius. Apparently, some sins were so obvious in Dante's eyes that even those without the benefit of Church instruction should have known better. In the case of Epicurus, who argued for the mortality of the human soul, Dante was targeting a heresy that was prevalent in his time.

As Dante and Virgil leave the first level and cross the river Styx, they descend through the circle of heretics before entering the second level, which contains those who were violent against their neighbors, themselves, and the Church. Here are the murderers, suicides, blasphemers, perverts, and usurers. Note that each of these is worse than the one preceding it, which makes usurers worse than murderers in Dante's eyes. Modern readers are struck by this and might object to finding usurers, along with homosexuals, in Hell at all; but Dante was applying accepted Church doctrine at this point, and we might be well advised to recall that these are the souls of the unrepentant. (Dante will also encounter homosexuals and avaricious, but repentant, souls in Purgatory.) In general, homosexuality was viewed as a voluntary act and as such a sin against nature. Usurers, on the other hand, sinned against art by taking advantage of the poor and, by charging interest, playing God in an attempt to create something from nothing. As it was viewed by the Church at this time, usury was one of the many faces of avarice ("the source of all evil") and as such a very dark crime. Usury became a central issue in the Protestant Reformation, and the Church's proscription against usury may go a long way toward explaining Eastern and Western Europe's long-standing antagonism toward Jews, who saw nothing wrong with it and in many cases, became quite wealthy by lending money.

The principle Dante uses throughout the *Inferno*, for the most part, is to allow sinners to fully experience what they thought they wanted during their lifetimes. Usurers, for example, sit at the edge of burning sand with heavy bags of gold coins tied around their necks; the sinners' eyes are glued to the bags, doubtless waiting for the coins to multiply! If we were to object that some of these people did not deserve to be punished because they did not know what they were doing, Dante's answer would be swift and



pointed: they should know what they are doing. The medieval sense of responsibility was most exacting, and medieval justice was unflinching and blind to the point of excessive cruelty — and countless errors, no doubt.

All of the sinners in Dante's Hell suffer from a greater or lesser degree of ignorance; if they knew better they would not be where they are. Here again we see the application of the Socratic maxim that was prevalent in this age: virtue is knowledge and (conversely) vice is ignorance. The clearer it was to Dante that the sinner should have known better the more certain he was that his punishment must be severe and awful. Paolo and Francesca, the young lovers we find in the second circle, allowed their passion for one another to get the better of them (and they are therefore culpable), but their sin is not as serious as that of, say, the grafter who misuses reason, a God-given talent, to calculate ways to increase his own wealth.

The grafters are in the eighth circle, along with seducers, flatterers, simoniacs (many Churchmen there!), fortunetellers, hypocrites, thieves, evil counselors, sowers of discord, and falsifiers (such as alchemists). These are sins of fraud, which is worse than violence because of the role played by reason corrupted and aimed to deceive. The only sins worse than fraud are sins of malice and treachery, punished in the pit of Hell.

As they enter the ninth circle, Dante and Virgil encounter four giants who represent, according to Ciardi, "sons of the earth, embodiments of elemental forces unbalanced by love, desire without restraint and without acknowledgment of moral and theological laws. They are symbols of the earth-trace that every devout man must clear from his soul, the unchecked passions of the beast."

It is interesting to note that the "hellfire and brimstone" commonly connected with eternal damnation do not play an important role in Dante's scheme. To be sure, there are demons who claw and tear the flesh of sinners, and there is fire — in the circle of the simoniacs, usurers, heretics, and sodomites (for whom Dante has considerable sympathy) — but Dante is original in his imagery, and the result is even more unsettling than the Hell of popular conceptions. Above all else, it makes sense and applies the principle that men and women must accept responsibility for their deeds (none of the sinners makes excuses, for example, and some are even proud of their actions — pride being a common denominator in all sin). Dante is scolded several times by Virgil for showing sympathy for the sinners: after all, who is he to second-guess the judgment of God, which is infallible and terrifying in its exactness? Dante's God is merciful only to sinners who repent, and those sinners are found in Purgatory, not Hell.

If we recall the words of MacAllister, Hell exemplifies God's power Purgatory, being the second arm of the trinity, represents the wisdom of the Son. This seems plausible, because this part of the Comedy is filled with instruction. Much of this instruction occurs while Dante sleeps — at canto IX, canto XVIII, and again at canto XXVII. The careful reader will note that these cantos are multiples of nine; they parallel Dante's own visionary experience, recounted in *The Vita Nuova*, when he saw young Beatrice Portinari at age 9, and again at age 18, and when he concluded *The Vita*

*Nuova* at age 27. In that earlier book, he recalled having had visionary experiences at each of those times — such experiences being almost commonplace in the medieval period, as we can well imagine. The numerology connected with Beatrice, which I mentioned above, is augmented in Purgatorio when Dante sees Beatrice in the thirtieth canto and she says to him "Guardami ben: ben son, ben son Beatrice!" As Gilson points out, "Beatrice thrice utters the word 'ben,' to indicate that she is the miracle of the Trinity, as stated in *The Vita Nuova*." We might note that she appears "in the sixty-fourth line of the sixty-fourth canto [in *The Comedy*]. In Dante's numerology, such correspondences are always meaningful. Six plus four equals ten and ten equals the sum of the square of the trinity and unity." The meticulous interplay of number and symbol throughout this poem simply attests to Dante's determination to explain all things to the careful listener/reader. This sort of "explanation" satisfied on such a deep level that none other was required.

Dante had first seen Beatrice when they were both nine years of age. ("She appeared dressed in the most patrician of colors, a subdued and decorous crimson," he recalled eighteen years later.) She greeted him briefly when they were both eighteen, "so miraculously that I felt I was experiencing the very summit of bliss. It was precisely the ninth hour of that day, three o'clock in the afternoon, when her sweet greeting reached me." When he met her a third time she "denied [him] her most sweet greeting in which lay all [his] bliss." Soon after, in her twenty-fifth year, the young woman died. Based on these brief encounters, then, Beatrice became Dante's muse, "a miracle" representing everything good about women — chaste, virginal, and pure. This was the predominant view of women in a period that "loved virgins and hated women." As Beatrice developed in the poet's mind, she became the inspiration behind *The Vita Nuova* and his guide in Paradise. Most important for our purposes, she became the source of wisdom based on faith and love and transcending reason. (Virgil, recall, will leave Dante at the top of the mountain of Purgatory when they reach the Garden of Eden.)

The Earthly Paradise sits atop the mountain of Purgatory on the opposite side of the Earth from Jerusalem. It is separated into an ante-Purgatory where the negligent do penance and await God's mercy. These are the excommunicated, the indolent, the unshriven, and the negligent rulers. Upon climbing out of Hell and entering Purgatory Virgil seems disoriented, several times expressing his confusion about place and meaning. In the thirteenth canto he faces the sun (which represents the divine light of God) and gives himself up to its power: "placing our faith in you: lead us the way that we should go in this new place." The meaning is clear, of course, since human reason, as mentioned, must be augmented by faith — a doctrine the Church adopted from Augustine ("It is necessary to believe in order to know") and accepted by Dante himself in his aborted study of philosophy. This theme repeats itself several times late in the Purgatorio as Beatrice scolds Dante for forgetting her after her death and pursuing "others." The reference here may be to the "Donna Gentile" (philosophy), as he himself admits in *The Banquet*. Gilson is convinced. On the other hand, that Beatrice's scolding of Dante is based on

an affair Dante had with Forese Donati soon after Beatrice's death, which makes good sense, since her attitude toward Dante seems rather extreme for a mere symbol! In any event, it is the nature of symbols to allow of various interpretations: this symbol could mean both.

Before encountering Beatrice at the top of the mountain, however, Virgil and Dante must enter the gates of Purgatory proper in canto X by climbing three steps guarded by an angel. The three steps represent the stages of contrition necessary for the soul to pass through before climbing higher. Once through the gate, Dante will face the seven levels of Purgatory that represent the seven cardinal sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. These sins were encountered in Hell, except for pride, which, as mentioned, we can assume was present throughout. It was assuredly present in Satan, who struggles in the ice at the center of the earth beating his wings, thereby creating the terrible wind that sweeps over Cocytus. Missing in Purgatory are the sins of violence, malice, and fraud, which is odd since Christian doctrine (as advanced in the New Testament) did not hold any sins as beyond redemption: all that was necessary was remorse. MacAllister's interpretation is interesting, though somehow unsatisfactory: "Since the souls here [in Purgatory] are all saved and eager to act in accordance with divine will, there is no place among them for violence, malice, and fraud."

One of the curiosities of the Purgatorio is the arrival of Statius, a pagan poet, who joins Virgil and Dante midway up the mountain. Statius died early in the Christian era after secretly converting to Christianity, according to Dante. When Virgil disappears in the 27th canto, Statius remains with Dante and follows him into heaven. We know little about Statius, and this has given rise to endless speculation as to why Dante chose this man to join him at this point in his pilgrimage. One might plausibly suppose that Dante chose him precisely because so little was known about him, in order to be able to imbue the character with his own meanings. Accordingly, he could take a Roman who lived before Constantine, and who claimed to have been baptized in secret "out of fear," and place him in Purgatory. We know that Dante greatly admired the Roman Empire, and the introduction of Statius at this point enables Dante to combine in this symbol one who represents both Roman and Christian virtue. The fact that Statius joins the poets midway up the mountain suggests that Virgil is provided with the assistance of a redeemed soul who has completed his penance and is ready to ascend to Paradise (and who presumably knows the way). Once Statius appears, he takes over some of Virgil's role in responding to Dante's questions and provides insight into the bewildering world around him and the mysteries of Christian theology, which Virgil cannot be expected to fully understand. The presence of Statius allows Dante to gradually lose his attachment to Virgil prior to the latter's disappearance when they reach the Garden of Eden. We should note that Statius is not, strictly speaking, a guide; that would disturb Dante's numerical scheme. There must be only three guides: Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard at the very end of Dante's journey.

Whether I have correctly interpreted the significance of Statius, it is certainly the case that when Virgil does

disappear Dante panics and must be sternly admonished by Beatrice, who has arrived to replace Virgil. The symbolism here astonishes: the intellectual must abandon reason and rely solely on faith, despite such paradoxes as human suffering in a world created by an all-loving God. (As we shall see later, Ivan Karamazov, for one, cannot manage this act.) The last four cantos describe Dante's final purification, as Beatrice directs Matilda to accompany him to be cleansed in the river Lethe, which washes from him every memory of his past sins, and the river Eunoe, which strengthens his memories of the good he has done in the past.

Up to this point a few of the possible meanings of Dante's allegory have been suggested, but there are a great many more. The personal level has been nicely revealed by Jefferson Fletcher, who tells us that "[in Hell] Our Lady, divinely compassionate, moves St. Lucy — apparently Dante's patron saint — to move Beatrice, his love, to move Virgil to lead Dante to salvation. Or, allegorically, divine mercy (the Virgin) sends its illuminating grace (Lucy) to light Dante's reason (Virgil) back to the principles of right living and true believing as defined by Christian morality (Matilda) and theology (Beatrice)." And since on another more universal level Dante represents all humankind, salvation can be achieved only by combining moral philosophy with Divine grace and the love of God.

Our focus in this study will not enable us to unravel the mysteries of thirteenth century Catholic theology, or Dante's version thereof, which runs throughout the Purgatorio. What matters most, once again, is to gain a sense of the architectonic of the middle portion of Dante's Comedy and the way the pieces neatly fit together with all truth revealed and all questions carefully answered.

Dante was not the first to try to piece together this chaotic world into a coherent whole. About a hundred years before Dante undertook his pilgrimage, a twelfth-century knight by the name of Tundale claimed to have had a visionary experience and to have traveled through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. He gave a detailed account of his experience upon his "return," and Carolly Erickson [The Medieval Vision] tells us that Tundale's spiritual cosmology was informed by a definite worldview — an all-encompassing web of interlocking truths that accounted for all existence. It wove the Neoplatonic view of created beings and Christian theology into a complex visionary synthesis. This synthesis included both corporeal and non-corporeal beings, occupying appropriate planes in a vast retributive scheme...

What Tundale saw was nothing less than a visual distillation of ultimate truth, played out in a dimension outside time...

Except for the fact that Dante's pilgrimage took place in time, as he takes pains to explain, and the fact that his Christian morality is blended with Aristotelian, rather than Platonic, philosophy and science, much the same thing could be said of his pilgrimage that Carolly Erickson, [The Medieval Vision] says of Tundale's. This is not to diminish the wealth of poetic inspiration that resides at the center of The Divine Comedy; rather, it is to argue that intelligent men shared a world-view that made sense and enabled them to deal with the anxieties and fears of an uncertain age. We

can see this even more clearly as we join Dante on the final leg of his journey.

Dante has set a difficult task for himself: he must say the unsayable, communicate to others a highly personal, mystical experience. That he succeeds to the extent he does simply attests to his extraordinary poetic powers, though he admitted later how much easier it was to write about the wicked!

Powerful images, sounds, and smells surround us in Dante's Hell. To an extent the senses play a role in Purgatory as well. But in Paradise they virtually disappear as Dante relies on what Thomas Aquinas called (following Aristotle) "active intellect." Paradise, as Dante envisions it, is filled with brilliant light, "love and awe, and tender glances to holy thoughts in blissful meditations." (XI) The meditations are subtle and interspersed with Dante's own attacks against a corrupt Church, admonishments to his countrymen, and concerns over a lost Empire. As he does throughout *The Comedy*, Dante varies the theme that the one hope of Europe is a sacred Church within the bosom of a powerful Empire.

In reading Dante's masterpiece, we must bear in mind that in his view Judgment Day will come when the thrones of Heaven are filled. Ironically, then, the *Paradiso* depresses the reader, because the thrones in Heaven are nearly filled, suggesting both that Dante did not see any extraordinary men or women among his contemporaries and that he did not expect any to appear on the scene in the future. Dante, like so many of his contemporaries, thought the day of Final Judgment loomed. To offset this discordant note, Dante finds the virtue of *caritas* throughout Paradise, and love, "gladness of spirit," and willing acceptance abound — in the eyes of Beatrice and in the voices and actions of the souls he encounters.

The plan of Paradise resembles that of Hell and Purgatory in many ways, except that Dante is no longer a physical presence. He is a spiritual presence among other spirits, capable of traveling at the speed of light and passing through solid substances, such as the moon and the crystalline spheres that seat the planets. The souls he encounters appear for his edification in the various spheres of Paradise, but they all actually reside in thrones in the Empyrean outside the medieval cosmos. Having achieved salvation, they sit at the right hand of God.

Jefferson Fletcher is convinced that Dante adopted his scheme for Paradise from the Christianized Ptolemaic model "making in [this model] such amendments of the heavenly scheme as their diverse natures demand," and adapted that scheme to Purgatory and Hell — working backward, if you will. Given that the Ptolemaic scheme accepted in Dante's day was thought to comprise nine spheres, working outward from earth, Fletcher's is a plausible suggestion. He correctly points out that in each of the three regions of Dante's after-world the major divisions consist of the numerical scheme 7+2+1. Each region involves an area that stands by itself: the region of the "neuters" in Hell, the Earthly Paradise in Purgatory, and the Empyrean in Paradise. Each region also consists of two areas that seem to be super-added to the basic seven: limbo and the circle of the heretics in Hell, the two ledges of ante-Purgatory at the base of Mount

Purgatory, and the *Primum Mobile*, coupled with the sphere of the fixed stars, in Paradise. This makes the fundamental element of each region 7, broken again into groups of three and four in each case: upper Hell and lower Hell, perverted love in the first three levels of Purgatory together with defective and excessive love in the four upper levels, and three spheres of blame coupled with four spheres of honor in Paradise.

Whether Dante's scheme works out quite as neatly as this is less important than the fact that he struggled to make it so. Dante's was, indeed, "a marvelous architectonic. . . , so majestic in the whole design, so exquisitely proportioned and interrelated in all its parts." As Fletcher points out, "[Dante] was profoundly prejudiced in favor of the structural symmetry of things, even asserting it in the face of obvious fact — as when he makes the Mediterranean extend just ninety degrees, whereas it extends barely forty-two degrees." Note the concern here for "structural symmetry" as over against "facts."

Despite this admiration on the part of Fletcher and most other critics, some readers have expressed their astonishment at Dante's audacity in placing himself at the center of his comedy. After all, who is Dante to journey through Hell and Purgatory with Virgil and finally see God face-to-face? But Dante would probably respond that he simply put the pieces of the puzzle together; the poem is a marvelous synthesis of elements of Church dogma, suggestions in the Old and New Testaments, fragments from St. Thomas' *Summa Theologica*, and even prescient inspirations from ancient myths and poetry. Unquestionably for Dante and his readers and listeners, the product expresses the certainty of the believing mind — given the sources. And this certainty amid a world in chaos impresses us most and marks Dante's as the highest and most eloquent expression of the late-medieval mind.

In drawing on those sources Dante's thought evidences an extremely conservative strain, adhering strictly to dogmatic theology and Thomistic philosophy, for example, at a time when the rest of the medieval world was beginning to ask fundamental questions. Dante wrote his *Comedy* at the very beginning of the fourteenth century, the dawn of the Renaissance. But, as we have seen, he was a thoroughly medieval poet, fighting essentially a rearguard action at a time when cracks were already appearing in the grand edifice the Church had built to protect medieval men and women from their fears. This explains why even though his *Comedy* caused a sensation, it did not have much influence on subsequent thinkers.

The poet Petrarch, who was seventeen years Dante's junior, had a much greater impact on subsequent thought. ". . . Petrarch by the conspiracy of events became precisely that which Dante was not — a path breaker. With full self-consciousness, he broke up the unity of Dante's theoretically harmonious world.

His very weaknesses and vacillations of spirit bring him closer to us. He felt, as we, the disquieting doubt." Petrarch and his fellow Humanists initiated a renaissance that turned Western man's gaze from the Beyond to the Here and Now, from Dante's world toward the world of today.

The sense that Dante was almost immediately irrelevant was nowhere better expressed than by the modern Italian poet, Giosue Carducci, who said of Dante:

I hate thy Holy Empire; and with my sword  
I would from thy good Frederick's head have cleft  
The crown, when he in Val d'Oleona warred.  
Empire and Church are ruins life-bereft,  
Whence soars thy song, unto the skies outpoured:  
Jove passes — and the poet's hymn is left.

I beg to differ with Carducci. I think it is a mistake to reject the wisdom in Dante's poetic vision, as it is to ignore the healing power of Dante's spiritual universe. I refer to the "healing power" of that universe advisedly since, despite the depth of terror medieval men and women felt in their day-to-day lives, there can be no doubt that at the center of those lives was the Church, which provided them with the unshakable conviction that after this life there would be another and if they lived well they would be rewarded. The depth of this conviction cannot be overstated, since virtually everyone in this period believed in God. Lucien Lefebvre argued convincingly that in the medieval period "there was simply no conceptual space for atheism." We need to remember this as we seek to grasp the medieval mind and gauge its distance from our own. <>

### **Hell and Its Rivals: Death and Retribution among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Early Middle Ages by Alan E. Bernstein [Cornell University Press, 9781501707803]**

The idea of punishment after death—whereby the souls of the wicked are consigned to Hell (Gehenna, Gehinnom, or Jahannam)—emerged out of beliefs found across the Mediterranean, from ancient Egypt to Zoroastrian Persia, and became fundamental to the Abrahamic religions. Once Hell achieved doctrinal expression in the New Testament, the Talmud, and the Qur'an, thinkers began to question Hell's eternity, and to consider possible alternatives—hell's rivals. Some imagined outright escape, others periodic but temporary relief within the torments. One option, including Purgatory and, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Middle State, was to consider the punishments to be temporary and purifying. Despite these moral and theological hesitations, the idea of Hell has remained a historical and theological force until the present.

In *Hell and Its Rivals*, Alan E. Bernstein examines an array of sources from within and beyond the three Abrahamic faiths—including theology, chronicles, legal charters, edifying tales, and narratives of near-death experiences—to analyze the origins and evolution of belief in Hell. Key social institutions, including slavery, capital punishment, and monarchy, also affected the afterlife beliefs of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Reflection on hell encouraged a stigmatization of "the other" that in turn emphasized the differences between these religions. Yet, despite these rivalries, each community proclaimed eternal punishment and answered related challenges to it in similar terms. For all that divided them, they agreed on the need for—and fact of—Hell.

Excerpt: All three Abrahamic religions professed a belief in hell, whether they called it Gehinnom, Gehenna, or Jahannam, and all three successfully resisted similar objections to it within their own communities. To counter these challenges, religious specialists posited purgatorial fringes that offered lesser sinners temporary discipline outside the core of hell, thus sparing them damnation. Despite these threats to hell's essence, authoritative pronouncements succeeded in reasserting eternal punishment as the consensus or orthodox position in the three religions, as typified in Christian thought by Justinian's condemnation of Origenism, in Jewish thought by the rabbis' naming seven types of unforgivable offenses, and in Islam by the Qur'an's retention of its deniers in Jahannam. Exceptions to these blanket statements exist on the theological level but, as appears in succeeding centuries, stigmatization, the presumption of damnation for nonbelievers, increasingly took hold and became a practical reality. Belief in hell is self-reinforcing. As the Talmud declares that Gehinnom is for those who deny the Resurrection, hell is for those who deny hell. The Qur'an threatens hell for those who deny the Hour of final reckoning (83:10-11, 25:11, 74:43-46), and the Fire contains those who reject it (83:16-17). "What they scoff at hems them in" (6:10). Denial of hell is damning.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam therefore agree on the existence of an eternal hell for incorrigible sinners. Still, it became necessary to reconcile such a dramatic and apparently cruel fate with the mercy of God. In a centuries-long process, hell and its rivals created an ambiguous afterlife territory, contemporaries called "the places of punishment." Around the core idea of hell, specialists and visionaries perceived alternatives to hell in the form of escape, periodic relief, and purification. To understand hell's survival despite the resistance it occasioned in the religious sphere, it is important to understand how it fit society's needs. The efforts to balance justice and leniency had major political ramifications.

When they outlawed all religions except Christianity in 407, the co-emperors Honorius and Theodosius II proposed to cleanse the empire not only of "crimes," but also of "depraved intentions," thus combining their civil and religious functions. Government theorists consequently articulated a reciprocal relationship between the theological explanations of divine justice and the political premises of imperial administration. For example, the emperors of the late fourth century could portray themselves as following divine example by providing amnesty to lesser criminals each Easter. In parallel with religious debates among their bishops and the contemporary rabbis, the emperors distinguished between minor offenders and perpetrators of the worst crimes. Clemency has its limits, even as the severest penalties enhance the authority of those who would issue pardons. Thus, at the Second Council of Constantinople (553), Justinian anathematized a list of heretics, condemning them to the very hell whose existence he upheld by including Origen. After Justinian defended hell in this way, Greek-language theologians refocused on the need to repent in this life and on the holding power of Gehenna. In the West, Charlemagne would later act similarly.

With loyalty or its opposite involving both earthly and heavenly rulers together, all opponents, whether political or religious, could be stigmatized as subverting cosmic and political order. Here is one danger of hell belief. When the premises in play are based on such absolute authority as that claimed for the emperor and the divinity purportedly working in concert, it could seem that no sanction for disloyalty or infidelity, that is, for challenging the religious justification of the social order, could be too severe. The more the idea of hell connected to social deviance, the more those being threatened came to be stigmatized. Whether named as individuals or, increasingly, named as groups (Muslims, Jews), they were scorned as hell-bound, outcasts, worthy of mistreatment in society because doomed to receive worse in hell.

Just as "the powers that be" found hell useful in advancing their authority, so penitents found hell a guide in atonement. Inner death proposed that infernal punishments invade the conscience and thus uncover offenses. Although related to hell's deterrent function, inner death only serves after deterrence has failed and the guilty conscience requires repair. Given this psychological dynamic, individuals in monastic settings could imagine themselves within range of the afterlife, able to see it and report back on its nature. If monasticism was a prerequisite to the vision, monastic literacy was required to provide a written record of visions. Visionary literature became its own genre, hell's tortures its clichés. Consistent reiteration made hell more real. However ambiguous the geography of the punitive places, one constant was physical pain and dread of liability to it.

The pains of the damned, including darkness, chains, dismemberment, and torture, were very similar to those imposed on slaves. The rhetoric of religious devotion as slavery to God and sin as slavery to the devil perpetuated this arrangement. Although the distinction between a noble slavery and a base slavery would seem to alleviate this parallel, the fact that slavery was familiar enough to serve as a metaphor assured hell a constant resonance with real-world experience. Propagation of belief in hell reinforced and prolonged slavery. Slavery made hell plausible.

Hell's social utility may have aided its survival, but it does not account for the innovations and shifts in emphasis that occurred over the sweep of these centuries. The spread of monastic institutions fostered penitential introspection and the rise of inner death, a new idea in postmortem punishment. In this contemplative environment, penitential self-examination exposed distinctions within sin itself: not all wrongs deserve eternal punishment. Penance has its rewards, and those who engaged it classified themselves above the impenitent. This distinction produced a calibration of suffering in the penal places where some punishments that varied in time spent yielded eventual release and others, with no release, varied in kind.

As deceased sinners suffered in the interim, the question of whether the living could help them arose. Offerings for the dead exist in many faiths, but in Latin, Christian Europe of the early Middle Ages, suffrages assumed a form. They appear prominently in vision literature: the shades benefit from them but do not request them. The reader or hearer of the vision must infer their utility, and if so moved, provide

charitable actions on behalf of the soul in the punishments. In the next centuries, the shades will impose particular actions on the percipient, through the agency, and to the profit, of the church.

The history of hell is distinct from its definition by any religion, and belief in hell derives from no single biblical authority or even from biblical statements alone. Nor are all biblical statements on the fate of the wicked after death unanimous. Moreover, the term "biblical" unnecessarily restricts the history of hell because the idea of eternal punishment occurs in many other belief systems, from ancient Persian Zoroastrianism to intertestamental apocalyptic to Greek philosophy, the Talmud, the Qur'ān, and Pahlavi Zoroastrianism. Postbiblical developments in the interpretation of hell were crucial to its survival.

The idea of hell, therefore, was available for application in many varied circumstances and environments. Those in pagan Rome were very different from those of the Christian emperors who offered Easter amnesties or the imperial court of Justinian or the monasteries known to Bede. Religious specialists from monastic theorists to popes to imperial counselors could apply the concept according to the particular needs of their time and place. Hell survives because it is socially useful. But the passage of time will present other circumstances, and the combination of hell's functions will change accordingly—not rigidly or mechanically, but in accord with social, psychological, economic, and other factors that affect the human mind. From the period examined here, where inner death is perhaps the most characteristic aspect of hell belief, Western Europe moved in the next centuries to a phase when hell's function as an impetus to vengeance took over. Those doomed to hell in the judgment of the politically powerful increasingly became their targets on earth.

It is my hope to continue this analysis by examining the history of belief in hell in the next centuries, from the time of Charlemagne to the First Crusade. The nature of visions, the use of suffrages, political theology, all shift in that period. In later visions and other literature about the afterlife, Jews, Muslims, heretics and schismatics, conspicuously absent as named groups so far, make their appearance. Propagation of the punitive underworld breaks beyond linguistic sources to emerge in the visual arts. Manuscript illuminations make hell visual and therefore more vivid. For all the adventures of its already centuries-long tradition, even in 800, hell has a future. <>

## The Hermeneutics of Hell: Visions and Representations of the Devil in World Literature edited by Gregor Thuswaldner, Daniel Russ [Palgrave Macmillan, 9783319521978]

This collection of essays analyzes global depictions of the devil from theological, Biblical, and literary perspectives, spanning the late Middle Ages to the 21st century. The chapters explore demonic representations in the literary works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Dante Alighieri, Charles Baudelaire, John Milton, H.P. Lovecraft, and Cormac McCarthy, among others. The text examines other media such as the operas *Orfeo* and *Erminia* sul *Giordano* and the television shows *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, and *Mad Men*.

The *Hermeneutics of Hell*, featuring an international set of established and up-and-coming authors, masterfully examines the evolution of the devil from the Biblical accounts of the Middle Ages to the individualized presence of the modern world.

### Introduction: The Devil We Know and the Devils We Don't Know

For many American theologians, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is regarded as "America's greatest theologian." In his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741), Edwards, who according to Diarmaid MacCulloch "lent respectability to a seductive conception of the Last Days," depicts hell as a world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone [,] extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is Hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and Hell but the air; tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

A homology reminiscent of Edwards' sermon is almost unthinkable in the twenty-first century, apart from radical fundamentalist churches. Today, "speaking of the devil" is an idiomatic phrase, not something that is literally carried out. The theological discourse on the devil has seen a sharp decline, especially since the age of Enlightenment. While the devil and his ability to physically appear in order to torture people in this life and beyond was hardly questioned until

the sixteenth century, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a dramatic shift when it comes to belief in the devil. Addressing the University of Oxford on March 21, 1741, cleric William Dodwell complained that disbelief in the devil and uncivility went hand in hand:

It is but too visible, that since men have learnt to wear off the Apprehension of Eternal Punishment, the Progress of Impiety and Immorality among us has been very considerable. [...]

Unusual crimes have appeared; Uncommon heights of wickedness have been attained [...].

Belief in the devil, Dodwell suggests, had measurable consequences on everyday life; apparently, the fear of eternal punishment in the afterlife was a stronger deterrent from immoral behavior than the fear of God, which, as the Psalmist notes, is the beginning of wisdom.<sup>6</sup> As the plausibility of the devil waned, so did the notion of hell as a place of eternal punishment. By the twentieth century "[h]ell was no longer seen, except by fundamentalists, in terms of satisfying divine justice by the imposition of vindictive punishment, but rather in terms of the inherent freedom of the rational creature to say a final 'no' to God's truth and love."

While today the devil is hardly the subject of sermons, he can still be found in numerous literary works. Literature, as it were, has given the devil a new home. According to Elena Volkova, it is not a coincidence that we frequently encounter hell in literature, as "[a]ny work of literature that deals with conflict, pain, suffering, grief,

misery, and disaster (and which does not, at least indirectly) bears an analogy of hell [...]." Literary works that have emerged in the West and also partly in the Russian tradition have been shaped by Judeo-Christian visions of hell. Beginning in the late Middle Ages, folk traditions added new facets to the biblical devil. But it was not until the early modern period that individual authors portrayed devils that



## The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds by Alan E. Bernstein [Cornell University Press, 9780801428937]

*What becomes of the wicked? Hell—exile from God, subjection to fire, worms, and darkness—for centuries the idea has shaped the dread of malefactors, the solace of victims, and the deterrence of believers. Although we may associate the notion of hell with Christian beliefs, its gradual emergence depended on conflicting notions that pervaded the Mediterranean world more than a millennium before the birth of Christ. Asking just why and how belief in hell arose, Alan E. Bernstein takes us back to those times and offers us a comparative view of the philosophy, poetry, folklore, myth, and theology of that formative age.*

*Bernstein draws on sources from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, and Israel, as well as early Christian writings through Augustine, to reconstruct the story of the prophets, priests, poets, and charismatic leaders who fashioned concepts of hell from an array of perspectives on death and justice. The author traces hell's formation through close readings of works including the epics of Homer and Vergil, the satires of Lucian, the dialogues of Plato and Plutarch, the legends of Enoch, the confessions of the Psalms, the prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and the parables of Jesus. Reenacting lively debates about the nature of hell among the common people and the elites of diverse religious traditions, he provides new insight into the social implications and the psychological consequences of different visions of the afterlife.*

*This superb account of a central image in Western culture will captivate readers interested in history, mythology, literature, psychology, philosophy, and religion.*

were only loosely based on biblical motives and inventions of the Middle Ages.

The devil we know from the biblical tradition appears quite differently from the new devils that we find in works such as Dante's *Commedia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Dante depicts the devil as frozen in the ninth circle of hell, impotent and awaiting final judgment. In contrast, Milton's Satan prowls through the chasm between hell and the newly created earth to avenge himself and his demonic cohort by bringing God's beloved image bearers to that

First Disobedience, and the Fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe.

In the Western tradition this Judeo-Christian vision of the devil is the devil we know. And yet, these two great Christian poets render very different devils. Indeed, we could say the same about Chaucer's impish devils, the appearance in modernity of the Faustian devils of Marlowe, Goethe, and Mann, to name only the most influential poets of the Faustian myth. In short, even within the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, our cultural imagination of this archetype of evil incarnate does not portray a single, abstract vision of the devil but of devils that come in many guises—the malevolent tricksters we thought we knew.

An intriguing example in ancient Hebrew literature of the devil we do not know is found in the book of Job. This biblical and world classic opens with God boasting about his servant Job, a pious man unsurpassed in his character and integrity. Satan, the accuser, overhears God's boast upon this his model creature and challenges God's proud description of Job. He says that if you take away all that you have given him—children, wealth, reputation—he will curse you and die. Satan is a behaviorist. As you may recall, God allows Satan to take away everything including Job's health but no more and Job descends into a dark night of the soul. His friends come to comfort him in his unspeakable grief, sitting silently with him on the ash heap for a week. When they finally speak to him, they become, like Satan, his accusers, declaring that the only explanation for his affliction is that he has sinned against God. Job defends himself round after round, saying that he has done nothing to deserve such suffering. The mysterious part of these arguments between Job and his friends-turned-accusers is that none of them even hint at the existence of a malevolent creature like Satan. We the readers know that he is behind Job's losses and laments, but for Job and his accusers, he is the devil you don't know. And he is never mentioned again after the opening two chapters.

While the significance of the devil decreased in theology, authors began exploring and exploiting the complex roles of devils in literature. As it turns out, the devil can have multiple functions that might be rooted in the paradoxical nature of the biblical devil, as Philip Almond explains:

[The Christian story] is a story that is deeply paradoxical. The Devil is God's most implacable enemy and beyond God's control — the result of this having been given by God the freedom to rebel against him. Yet, he is also God's faithful servant, acting only at God's command, or at least

with his endorsement. The Devil literarily and metaphorically personifies the paradox at the heart of Christian theism.

The collection of essays in this volume about the diverse and universal visions of devils and their domains attempts to give a sample of this devilish diversity across traditions and centuries.

The *Hermeneutics of Hell* features essays by senior and junior scholars who trace the numerous transformations, developments, and manifestations of the devil in world literature from the early modern period to the twenty-first century. Grounded in a connection between religion and literature, this volume will be of interest to colleagues working in British, American, French, Russian, Italian, and German literature as well as in religious studies. As our volume has gathered essays by international scholars trained in very different schools and traditions of literary criticism, we purposely allowed for different styles of scholarship and writing.

In his essay on the Swedish mystic, Saint Bridget, Mark Peterson depicts purgatory and hell as divinely sanctioned places for sin, suffering, and redemption. Saint Bridget emphasizes the redemptive role the Virgin Mary plays as well as the prayers of believers who ease the pain of suffering in purgatory. Her visions and interpretations of hell had a direct impact on believers' personal piety. While Peterson's essay discusses hell and not the devil, it should also be noted that according to many theologians and poets, hell is the devil's de-creation, perhaps best depicted in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

In a similar vein, Martin Luther saw a connection between the temptations of the devil as a theologian's education. Unlike many other theologians, Luther emphasized the important role *tenatio* plays in shaping a person's character. In his essay "The Uses of *Tenatio*: Satan, Luther, and Theological Maturation," Carl Springer shows that Luther sees the devil's weapon to lead humans astray as a welcome gift for moral development. In a paradoxical way, the devil's tactics are portrayed as potentially positive.

By exploring early modern literature and theology David Parry finds further evidence of rhetorical paradoxes. Johann Susenbrotus' influential *Epitome Troporum ac Schematum et Grammaticorum & Rhetorum* links *paradiastole*, "a technique of excusing a vice by characterizing it in terms of the nearest virtue," with the biblical image of the devil's ability to appear as an angel of light. Is it possible to distinguish between divine and satanic appearances? What are the ethical consequences of *paradiastole* as a rhetorical device?

Beginning in the seventeenth century, literary manifestations of the devil seem only loosely connected to biblical sources. As David Olszynski demonstrates, hell in Georg Bernhardt S.J.'s drama fragment *Tundalus redivivus* (1622) appears as a very complex devilish enterprise. Ironically, hell resembles Bernhardt's native Bavarian society as it is depicted as a hierarchical place where individualized devils are given quite specialized tasks.

Similarly, the devils that inhabit Italian opera libretti in the seventeenth century are shown as biblically emancipated satanic forces that, as Aliya Shanti shows, are more inspired

by humanist literary works than post-Tridentine theology. In addition to analyzing libretti, Shanti also considers the role music, costumes, dance, and scenery play in creating innovative visions of hell.

Caroline Sauter offers a close reading of Goethe's *Faust*, Parts I and II, which, arguably, present us with one of the most influential diabolic visions of world literature. By introducing irony, ambiguity, and difference, Goethe's sophisticated Mephistopheles appears, as Sauter demonstrates, as a diabolos in the literal sense. Because of Mephistopheles' diabolic use of language, *Faust's* traditional understanding of hermeneutics falls short.

Jonathon O'Donnell compares in his essay Goethe's Mephistopheles with Milton's Satan, which has also proven to be a highly influential literary character. Building on Derrida's insights regarding the notion of survivance, O'Donnell uses a poststructuralist framework to explain both their extinction in theology and their survival in literature.

Irina Kuznetsova discusses Dostoevsky's quite diabolic demons which we encounter in his novels *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. According to Kuznetsova, Dostoevsky's demons are a synthesis of Russian and Western visions of devils. But what do these demons stand for? Are evil forces manifestations of a character's psychological processes? Or are they otherworldly (meta)physical beings?

Anthony Grasso focuses in his essay on the short story "Assembly Line" by the lesser-known, enigmatic writer known as B. Traven. By comparing "Assembly Line" with Matthew's Gospel and the *Faust(us)* myth in Marlowe and Goethe, Grasso shows the intertextual nature of the temptation narrative that is at the heart of B. Traven's story.

Milton's Satan, as Matthew Smith shows, was a source of inspiration for Baudelaire's aesthetic and religious expression of Satanism. Smith analyzes the relationship between Baudelaire and Milton through the eyes of T.S. Eliot which provides insight into Baudelaire's curious poetic ritualism.

As a practicing Catholic, Flannery O'Connor's notion of hell is closely tied to Catholic theology. She understands hell as a place where love is completely absent. Focusing on her story "The Artificial Nigger," George Piggford demonstrates that the mysterious sewer system of Atlanta with its equally tempting and repulsive entrance is linked to the author's vision of hell.

Although H.P. Lovecraft has a significant following, especially among connoisseurs of the horror genre, his oeuvre might almost be as unknown as B. Traven's. Like other authors in the Anglo-American tradition, Lovecraft was influenced by Milton's Satan. Marcello Ricciardi contrasts the similarities and differences in Milton's and Lovecraft's literary expressions of evil. Even though Lovecraft's evil god, Nyarlathotep, was clearly inspired by Milton's Satan, Ricciardi also shows Lovecraft's indebtedness to devilish visions of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Milton's Satan is not only alive and well in American literature but also in popular culture. Edward Simon argues that Milton's shadow can be seen in the Ahab character in Melville's *Moby Dick*, as well as in TV shows such as *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, and *Breaking Bad*. The red thread

Simon detects in these seemingly unrelated narratives is the consummate tendency in the quintessential American (and diabolic) characters.

Deborah Bowen confronts us with a very surprising encounter of the diabolic in nature. Landscape, as she convincingly argues, is socially constructed. Why is it that 105 canyons in the U.S. are called "The Devil's Canyon?" Bowen considers three Christian authors—Leo Tolstoy, John Terpstra, and Leif Enger—who connect the devil with very different landscapes.

In Cormac McCarthy's gloomy novel *Outer Dark* we are also confronted with a "landscape of the damned" and a "faintly smoking garden of the dead." Matthew Potts' reading of McCarthy's novel is informed by Karl Barth's notion of *das Nichtige* (Nothingness). By presenting a theological interpretation, Potts helps us understand the author's hellish depiction of Appalachia.

As the fifteen essays of *The Hermeneutics of Hell* demonstrate, visions of hell and devils abound in world literature. Providing a comprehensive overview is not the goal of this volume, as it would be an impossible task to capture all hellish manifestations from antiquity to the twenty-first century. Instead, *The Hermeneutics of Hell* provides important glimpses of historical developments and transformations of traditional notions of the devil. Although René Girard reminds us that "traditional medieval theology refuses to ascribe being to Satan" our volume makes clear that to this day the devil remains a very important literary being. <>

[The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante by Teodolinda Barolini \[Princeton University Press, 9780691069531\] paperback](#)

The Undivine 'Comedy' is a vigorous, perceptive contribution to our reading of Dante's work and to our understanding of the problems he confronted as a narrative poet.

[Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy by Teodolinda Barolini \[Princeton University Press, 9780691066097\] paperback](#)

By systematically analyzing Dante's attitudes toward the poets who appear throughout his texts, Teodolinda Barolini examines his beliefs about the limits and purposes of textuality and, most crucially, the relationship of textuality to truth.

Accepting Dante's prophetic truth claims on their own terms, Teodolinda Barolini proposes a "detheologized" reading as a global new approach to the *Divine Comedy*. Not aimed at excising theological concerns from Dante, this approach instead attempts to break out of the hermeneutic guidelines that Dante structured into his poem and that have resulted in theologized readings whose outcomes have been overdetermined by the poet. By detheologizing, the reader can emerge from this poet's hall of mirrors and discover the narrative techniques that enabled Dante to forge a true fiction. Foregrounding the formal exigencies that Dante masked as ideology, Barolini moves from the problems of beginning to those of closure, focusing always on the narrative journey. Her investigation--which treats such topics



as the visionary and the poet, the One and the many, narrative and time--reveals some of the transgressive paths trodden by a master of mimesis, some of the ways in which Dante's poetic adventuring is indeed, according to his own lights, Ulysean.

Excerpt: In sum, I suggest we accept Dante's insistence that he is telling the truth and move on to the consequences, which we can only do by accepting that he intends to represent his fiction as credible, believable, true. How to cut the Gordian knot of a true fiction? We could, like Jeremy Tambling in his 1988 study of a Derridean Dante for whom meaning is always relativized and deferred, remove the problem of belief altogether on the basis that "the problem of belief is never relevant since belief entails a hierarchy of meanings." This reading of the poem in terms of Derridean open-endedness and free-floating signifiers creates a monolith of relativity to take the place of the traditional totem of certainty. While I agree that Dante is acutely aware of texts generating texts, signs leading to more signs, in my opinion he handles his awareness not by relativizing his own claims but by absolutizing them (to say that Dante tries to do this is not, of course, to say that he succeeds). As I have tried to show previously, Dante works to cut himself out of the chain of infinitely regressive semiosis by erecting a wall between his textuality and that of all but his biblical precursors; by impugning the credibility of their signs he desperately seeks to carve out a realm of stability and truth for his own. We cannot skirt the problem of belief because Dante does not skirt it; rather, he forcibly addresses it, directly in his truth claims and indirectly in his strategies vis-à-vis other texts, other attempts to command belief. Although we must be aware that the *Commedia* is made of signs, that "nothing in the vision escapes representation," in order to further our understanding of that representation we must acknowledge that a major feature of it is that it claims to be a representation of truth.

The topic at hand is Dante's realism. Although Dante shares with other narrators the concern to authenticate his narrative, his religious pretensions make this concern particularly pressing; for, as Morton Bloomfield remarks, the "basic problem of all revealed religions is just this authentication." Bloomfield further notes that this problem is in the minds of the authors of the Bible, where, we might add, it articulates itself precisely in the terms that Nardi formulated in "Dante profeta": "The end of Chapter 18 of Deuteronomy frankly discusses the problem of how to distinguish true prophecy from false." This is the node at which the problems of discussing the *Commedia* intersect with the problems of discussing all realistic narrative: because of its biblical and prophetic pretensions the *Commedia* poses the basic narrative issue of its truth value in aggravated form. At the same time, however, Dante does not seek to hide the fact that he is crafting the word of God in language; he draws attention to his role as narrator in a multitude of ways, including the celebrated addresses to the reader. It is of great relevance to our discussion that Auerbach finds in Dante's addresses to the reader the urgency of a prophet; in other words, typically, Dante has used what could have been moments of vulnerability, moments of exposed narrativity, to forge his most authoritative voice. Leo Spitzer rejects Auerbach's insistence

on prophecy in favor of a reading that puts the emphasis on mimesis, on the addresses as aids in the reader's visualization and thus in the poem's realism. Tellingly, Spitzer does not understand that Auerbach is able to arrive at his formulation (Dante as a new prophet capable of inventing the essentially new topos of the address to the reader in the service of his prophetic vision) precisely because he had so long been thinking in terms of Dantesque realism: in Dante the prophetic stance is indissolubly wedded to the poet's concern with achieving supreme mimesis. The formulation Dante-prophet disturbs Spitzer as one who is interested in understanding how the *Commedia* works as art; it does not occur to him that in order to see how it works as art, we have first to accept—not believe!—its prophetic claims on its own terms. Only then can we discern the pressures such claims exert upon a poet. One of the great problems of studying Dante is reflected in Spitzer's taking to task of Auerbach: critics, like Nardi and Auerbach, who take the poem's pretensions seriously, are criticized for not seeing an artifact, for believing Dante too much. In fact, they are seeing the artifact most clearly and are on the road to believing Dante least.

The *Commedia*'s remarkable fusion of absolute certainty about content with self-consciousness about the human artistry that is its vehicle has continually fostered new variants of the ancient either/or critical stand, variants expressed in the critical language of their day: in his 1985 study, Jesse Gellrich myth in favor of its self-consciousness, claiming that "an awareness of illusion making is inevitable" and that the poem "does not protect itself from such awareness but encourages it." I would say, rather, that Dante creates a poem in which such encouragements may constitute one of its most effective forms of self-protection. As with the addresses to the reader, Dante protects himself most when he seems most exposed; he neutralizes the betrayal of self-consciousness implicit in all narrative authenticating devices by making his authenticating devices outrageously inauthentic (we need only remember Geryon, who is literally a figure for fraud, i.e., inauthenticity). Gellrich mistakes Singleton's position in an instructive fashion: he accuses Singleton of really thinking that Dante imitated God's way of writing, of falling for the "myth," while Singleton was in fact saying that Dante would have us believe that he imitated God's way of writing. In other words, Gellrich conflates what Singleton himself believes with what Singleton says that Dante wants us to believe. This occurs because of the enormous effort required to keep the two apart; one of the effects of Dante's realism—and one of its most insidious forms of self-protection—is that it causes people to think one agrees with him when one paraphrases him (as all teachers of the *Commedia* know, it is difficult to persuade one's students otherwise). By the same token, the reverse is also true: Dante's realism causes critics to tend to "believe" Dante without knowing that they believe him, i.e., to pose their critical questions and situate their critical debates within the very presuppositions of the fiction they are seeking to understand (sounding like a deconstructionist version of Spitzer critiquing Auerbach) argues against what he calls Singleton's sense of the *Commedia* as an example of such behavior is the common defensive move that could be called the collocation fallacy: the set of assumptions that

permit a critic to argue against a given point of view with regard to a particular soul on the basis of that soul's collocation within the fictive possible world of the *Commedia*. Thus, reading X is not tenable regarding character X because, if it were operative, character X would be located elsewhere; for example, Ulysses cannot be guilty of false discourse, because then he would be with Sinon among the falsifiers of words.<sup>35</sup> But why should collocation be elevated to a heuristic device? Only because we approach the poem through the lens of its own fiction treated as dogma. When we approach the poem in this way, treating its fiction as objective reality, we neglect to remember that Dante is a creator and that his system of classification, for all its apparent objectivity, is a representation (and a rather arbitrary and idiosyncratic one at that) designed to promote the illusion of objectivity. The fact that Dante's hell is made to look like a penal colony does not mean that the poet who constructed it functioned literally like a warden. He functioned like a poet whose job includes the construction of the illusion of a penal colony, following infinitely more complex and fluid principles of construction than the deployment of the argument by collocation would suggest. Once more, the conniving specularly of the "ver c'ha faccia di menzogna" has cast its spell, leading us to pay its creator the ultimate compliment of forgetting that he is indeed creating the world he describes.

The *Commedia* makes narrative believers of us all. By this I mean that we accept the possible world (as logicians call it) that Dante has invented; we do not question its premises or assumptions except on its own terms. We read the *Commedia* as Fundamentalists read the Bible, as though it were true, and the fact that we do this is not connected to our religious beliefs, for on a narrative level, we believe the *Commedia* without knowing that we do so. The history of the *Commedia*'s reception offers a sustained demonstration of our narrative credulity, our readerly incapacity to suspend our suspension of disbelief in front of the poet-creator's masterful deployment of what are essentially techniques of verisimilitude. Thus, the poet manages our scandalized reaction to encountering his beloved teacher among the sodomites by staging his own scandalized reaction: "Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?" creates a complicity between reader and pilgrim that masks the artifice always present in what is, after all, a text, an artifact. Thus, the poet constructs in Vergil a fictive construct so "real" and compelling that not only do generations of readers wish that he were saved (a legitimate response), but periodically—and less legitimately—the issue is raised by scholars who debate the matter in terms of its theological plausibility rather than the textual reality. Rarely do we think in terms of the narrative exigencies that require Vergil's damnation or the narrative uses to which he is put as a tool in Dante's struggle against a severely overdetermined plot. In other words, we discuss Vergil's salvation as though the issue belonged to the real world, rather than to a text whose narrative powers have generated our concern. Whatever else Dante may have had in mind, his ability to make a text that we treat as a real world constitutes his essential "allegory of theologians"; indeed, it is possible that rather than continuing to attempt to ascertain Dante's mode of signifying in the abstract, we

should begin with what the poem does, and how it accomplishes what it does, and extrapolate backward to its theoretical mode of signifying.

Standing resolutely outside of the fiction's mirror games, we can begin to examine the formal structures that manipulate the reader so successfully that even now we are blinded, prevented by the text's fulfillment of its self-imposed goals from fully appreciating its achievements as artifact. What is needed to get some purchase on this poem is not a "new historicism," which is an effective tool vis-à-vis texts that have always been read as texts, i.e., as false, but a "new formalism": a tool that will not run aground on the text's presentation of itself as true. As has been pointed out in the context of African American literary studies, the most effective approach at any given moment in any given discipline depends not on what is happening elsewhere but on the history of that discipline: "At a time when theorists of European and Anglo-American literature were offering critiques of Anglo-American formalism, scholars of black literature, responding to the history of their own discipline, found it 'radical' to teach formal methods of reading." *Mutatis mutandis*, I would suggest that a formal method of reading—in the sense of Gian Biagio Conte's call for a "philology of the narrative structure"<sup>38</sup>—could be particularly useful in Dante studies, allowing us to go through the looking glass, to get behind the author's theological speculum. We must detheologize our reading if we are to understand what makes the theology stick. For the final irony of our tradition of Dante exegesis is that, as a direct result of our theologus-poeta dichotomy, and frequently in the name of preserving the poetry, we have obscured its greatness by accepting uncritically its directives and its premises, its "theology." To the extent that we read as the poet directs us to read we have not fully appreciated the magnificence of his direction. To the extent that we hearken always to what Dante says rather than take note of what he has done, we treat him as he would have us treat him—not as a poet, but as an authority, a "theologian."

The chapters that follow propose a detheologized reading of the *Commedia*. This is not to say that they eschew theology. Detheologizing is not antitheological; it is not a call to abandon theology or to excise theological concerns from Dante criticism. Rather, detheologizing is a way of reading that attempts to break out of the hermeneutic guidelines that Dante has structured into his poem, hermeneutic guidelines that result in theologized readings whose outcomes have been overdetermined by the author. Detheologizing, in other words, signifies releasing our reading of the *Commedia* from the author's grip, finding a way out of Dante's hall of mirrors. To accomplish this, I privilege form over content, remembering that when Beatrice says, "Anzi è formale" (Par. 3.79) she is saying, "Anzi è essenziale": form is the essence. Form, in this sense, is not less deep than metaphysics; it is not abstractable as a surface value. Like all poets, Dante is subject to the exigencies of form, but he is supremely gifted at camouflaging the fact that form can dictate poetic choices; he ideologizes form in such a way as to draw our attention from it to the ideology it serves. Therefore, the formal reading that follows differs from earlier formal readings,

essentially stylistic, in that, in my reading, form is never disengaged from content; it never slips the traces of the ideology it serves. It is precisely in the ideology of the form that we can perceive the means through which Dante controls his readers and shapes their readings, and that we can locate the wellsprings of his mimetic art.

It is not enough to declare an interest in narrative to detheologize one's reading of the *Commedia*, as Robin Kirkpatrick's 1987 book on the *Inferno* testifies. Kirkpatrick's interest in the poem's narrative properties is skewed by the moral lens through which he views formal concerns; his interest in "the ethical act of writing" leads him to confuse the text's content with its form—admittedly a confusion Dante encourages in his readers, but one from which the study of the narrative dimension should help to free us. He thus claims that the *Inferno* was the most difficult of the three canticles for the poet to write—by the same token, the *Paradiso* was the least difficult—and that it is literally "dead poetry," of which Dante is ashamed. Within Dante's hall of mirrors, Kirkpatrick has taken an extra turn: rather than merely theologizing what has been represented, as Dante works to have us do, he theologizes the act of representation itself. In his earlier study of the *Paradiso* too, Kirkpatrick strenuously denies the ideological implications of Dante's formal decisions; thus, for example, he stresses the "modest voice" that dictates the third canticle's recurrent ineffability topoi and comments on the "modesty" implicit in canto 28's palinode regarding the order of the angelic ranks. Let us remember: Dante here retracts Gregory the Great's angelic hierarchy, which he had followed in the *Convivio*, and adopts Dionysius's instead.

But rather than say as much, Dante, being God's scribe, can instead have Beatrice relate how Gregory laughed at himself when, arriving in paradise, he saw his mistake. I am not calling into question the sincerity of Dante's visionary vocation when I note that this move, as a poetic strategy, is hardly modest—how can it be, when it substitutes for the reality of the poet's change of mind another "reality" whereby Gregory learned that he should have changed his? But to argue in these terms is to acknowledge that Dante wishes to persuade us of a reality he has to offer, a possible world he has seen and then made, while Kirkpatrick's concern to rehabilitate the "ornamental" leads him to deny, in the name of formalism, the ideology of Dante's form.

In Dante's *Poets*, I had occasion to note that "if, in Singleton's formula, the fiction of the *Comedy* is that it is no fiction, then it follows that the strategy of the *Comedy* is that there is no strategy" (90). My concern now is to more fully identify the workings of this strategy that would deny its own existence. Previously, I used the example of Cacciaguida, whose explanation that the pilgrim has been shown only famous souls, "anime che son di fama note," is frequently cited by critics; less frequently have they noted—Auerbach is one exception that comes to mind—that Cacciaguida's statement is not true. As I have pointed out, most of the souls we meet in the *Commedia* are famous because the *Commedia* has made them famous, and Cacciaguida's anticipation of this process effects a contamination between text and life that is precisely what Dante seeks to achieve.<sup>46</sup> Another example

of this self-denying strategy is the inscription on the gate of hell, analyzed by John Freccero in terms of the poet's successful attempt to "establish the fiction of immediacy." Reminding us that "vision is the province of the prophet, but the task of the poet is representation" (95), Freccero seeks to "dispel the unexamined assumption, encouraged by the fiction, of an innocent author describing an infernal reality rather than constructing it" (104). Like the representation of God's art on purgatory's terrace of pride, which confronts the reader with the conundrum of the poet's verisimilar art representing an art defined as the ver itself, Cacciaguida creates an "optical illusion" within the text, as do the verses that affect to present God's words on the gates of hell. It is important to note that these examples come from all three canticles: my point is that on the representational front the poem is neutral; in the mimetic realm collocation does not imply value, as it does in the thematic sphere. In Freccero's reading, by contrast, form remains subservient to theology, as is indicated by the distinctions he attempts to draw between the mimesis of the three canticles. Thus, he begins "Infernal Irony" by (1) invoking the *De genesi ad litteram*'s three kinds of vision—corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual—as analogies for the kinds of representation found in each canticle, and by (2) suggesting that "mimesis is peculiarly infernal and represents Dante's effort to render corporeal vision" (96). While irony may be peculiarly infernal, mimesis poses a problem for the poet throughout the poem—one that if anything escalates as the poem proceeds.

To associate the three canticles with Augustine's three types of vision is to address the matter of their content, not the matter of their form.

The three examples cited above—the gate of hell, the art of the terrace of pride, Cacciaguida's injunction—are taken from *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* to make the point that we cannot approach these issues by invoking the theological grid that we have become so accustomed to imposing on the *Commedia*, whereby whatever happens in hell is "bad," problematic, and whatever happens in heaven is "good," problem-free. Whereas this formulation may be accurate with respect to the text's content, its plot, and therefore the pilgrim, it need not be accurate with respect to its form, and therefore the poet. The *Paradiso* is not more serene, narratologically, than the *Inferno*, nor do Dante's representational anxieties lessen as the poem proceeds. Two logical fallacies have led to these critical clichés, which have recently been given a Derridean spin. First, the *Commedia*'s content is projected onto its form, so that difficult or dangerous fictional encounters (which do indeed lessen as the poem proceeds) are translated into difficult or dangerous representational experiences. Second, the *Inferno* is viewed as the only "narrative" canticle, because of its dramatic vigor, as though philosophy, history, theology, cosmology, etcetera did not constitute forms of narrative.

Dante consistently manipulates narrative in ways that authenticate his text, making it appear inevitable, a "fatale andare," and conferring upon himself the authority that in fact we have rarely denied him. Our tendency has been to listen to what Dante says, accepting it as true—as though he were a "theologian"—rather than looking at, and learning

from, the gap that exists between what he says and what he has wrought. To the extent, then, that we have not dealt with the implications of Dante's claims to be a second St. Paul, a second St. John, we have not put ourselves in a position to fully grasp the genius of his poetry--of its ability to construct a textual metaphysics so enveloping that it prevents us from analyzing the conditions that give rise to the illusion that such a metaphysics is possible. In "The Irreducible Dove," Singleton answers the charges of critics who fear that his approach to the question of Dante's allegory puts him "in danger of succumbing so completely to the illusion of reality in Dante's poem as to forget that it is illusion." Although he did not realize it, preferring as he did to think in terms of restoring a medieval *forma mentis* that authorized such illusion, and thus being "allowed to recover from the Renaissance, if only for a brief reader's moment" (135), Singleton's attempt to locate the source of the illusion in the fiction that pretends it is not a fiction is a first step to dismantling the *Commedia's* textual metaphysics. His critics, precisely in proportion to their levelheaded and rational refusal to succumb to a preposterous theory about a preposterous claim, revealed themselves to be the more fully duped by an author whose cunning they had not begun to penetrate. What follows is an attempt to analyze the textual metaphysics that makes the *Commedia's* truth claims credible and to show how the illusion is constructed, forged, made—by a man who is precisely, after all, "only" a *fabbro*, a maker ... a poet. <>

### [Boccaccio's Dante and the Shaping Force of Satire](#) by Robert Hollander [University of Michigan Press, 9780472107674]

Before the publications of Robert Hollander and Attilio Bettinzoli in the early 1980s, there was little recognition of the surprisingly large debt owed by Boccaccio to Dante hidden in the pages of the *Decameron*. Boccaccio's knowledge and use of the works of Dante constitute a challenging topic, one that is beginning to receive the attention it deserves.

Among commentators, it had been an unexamined commonplace that the "young" Boccaccio either did not know well or did not understand sufficiently the texts of Dante (even though the "young" Boccaccio is construed as including the thirty-eight-year-old author of the *Decameron*.) In *Boccaccio's Dante and the Shaping Force of Satire*, Robert Hollander offers a valuable synthesis of new material and some previously published essays, addressing the question of Dante's influence on Boccaccio, particularly concerning the *Commedia* and the *Decameron*.

Hollander reveals that Boccaccio's writings are heavy with reminiscences of the Dante text, which he believed to be the greatest "modern" work. It was Boccaccio's belief that Dante was the only writer who had achieved a status like that reserved for the greatest writers of antiquity. Most of these essays try to show how carefully Boccaccio reflects the texts of Dante in the *Decameron*. Some essays also turn to the question of Boccaccio's allied reading of Ovid, especially the amatory work, as part of his strategy to base his work primarily on these two great authorities as he develops his own vernacular and satiric vision of human foolishness.

[Boccaccio's Dante and the Shaping Force of Satire](#) is a welcome addition to the field of Dante studies and to medieval studies in general.

Excerpt: The essays gathered in this book were produced during the past fifteen years. Most of them are rooted in questions that arose in the early 1980s, first in a course on the *Decameron* that I taught with Pietro Frassica in the spring semester of 1981 at Princeton. How significant is the textual presence of Dante's *Commedia* at certain moments in Boccaccio's *Decameron*? And how deep does this Dantean current run through Boccaccio's greatest work? It is fair to say that before the studies that Attilio Bettinzoli and I published independently in the volumes of *Studi sul Boccaccio* for 1981-82 and 1983-84, there was little recognition of the surprisingly large debt of Boccaccio to Dante hidden in the pages of the *Decameron*. That debt is now beginning to receive the attention it deserves. It had simply been a mainly unexamined commonplace among many of his commentators that the "young" Boccaccio either did not know well or did not understand sufficiently the texts of Dante. In an important study published seventeen years ago, Carlo Delcorno demonstrated, once and for all, that Boccaccio's *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* (ca. 1344) is filled with obvious borrowings from Dante, particularly from the *Commedia*.<sup>1</sup> If this is the case (and no one has come forward with arguments that would cast Delcorno's findings into doubt), those of us who believe that we frequently look on citations of Dante as we read through the *Decameron* are in possession of a major fact, the certainty that Boccaccio was closely familiar with Dante's texts by 1350. That may now be taken as a given, as even cursory knowledge of such works as the *Caccia di Diana*, *Amorosa visione*, or *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* should have made plain, even without Delcorno's convincing labor.

The overall similarities between the *Decameron* and its major vernacular precursor are too obvious to have gone undetected. They have come to be understood as commonplaces, requiring little in the way of supporting evidence or ingenious demonstration. The hundred cantos of Dante's "divine" *Commedia* are echoed in the hundred novelle of Boccaccio's engagingly human comedy. Both texts seem to celebrate their "Italianness," that is, their use of the vernacular in work that is obviously meant to be considered significant; yet most think of Dante's language, as did Boccaccio and most of Dante's readers, as being noble, lofty, even austere, while Boccaccio's seems typically to be streetwise, low-mimetic, and playful. Thus, each of these similarities is intrinsically conjoined with a distancing difference. In such a view Boccaccio is conceived to have had Dante very much in mind, but only as a general idea or as a rather distant model. His purpose is held to be so far from Dante's that no one seems prepared to argue the proposition that he not only is Dante's greatest champion<sup>3</sup> but is deeply involved in thinking about Dante's magnum opus as he creates his own. In such a view Boccaccio may emulate Dante in general terms, but he is not thinking of the poetry of the *Commedia* as an extended challenge to his own extended effort in prose. In short, in this view the *Commedia* is for Boccaccio a monument, a potential model, but not a pressing literary presence.

While I in no way desire to insist that the two works are not greatly different in many respects, I hope that there will be no confusion about the strength of my disagreement with the view that Dante served only as a distant model for Boccaccio. The Decameron is thick with reminiscences of the *Commedia*, the text that Boccaccio believed the greatest "modern" work and the only one that had achieved a status like that reserved for the greatest writers of antiquity. He can hardly make a move without thinking of how Dante had moved before him. The Decameron, we now realize, is dotted with not dozens but hundreds of citations of the *Commedia*. The only surprising thing is that it has taken us so long to acknowledge so obvious a phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this delay in perceiving what all must now admit to being only evident is fairly obvious. Since, in the traditional view of Boccaccio's relationship to Dante, Boccaccio was not writing a text that really had anything in common with Dante's *Commedia*, there was no reason to believe he was frequently thinking of that text. A countering view claims that Boccaccio was so totally involved in thinking of Dante's poem that, no matter how different his purposes might have been, he could not fail to cite Dante's text, which for him contained a sort of lingua franca, words that he heard again on the slightest pretext. For him to write in the Italian vernacular was, perforce, often to rewrite Dante. This view is currently becoming dominant. Nothing written by Boccaccio, from his earliest work of any length (*Caccia di Diana*) through the Decameron,<sup>6</sup> reflects the textual presence of any author so frequently as it does Dante. This is no less and no more than a fact. What follows is speculation.

If the Decameron is so filled with dantismi, why has their presence been so imperceptible to so many students of the work? The answer is, one might argue, simple. The tone of the Decameron is "wrong." That is, when Boccaccio considers Dante as promoter of a vision of the afterworld or as arbitrator of the moral behavior of humankind, Dante will always come out the loser. "That is beautiful, Dante," Boccaccio would seem to be saying, "but you cannot expect us to believe it, can you?"

Thus, at the strategic level, Boccaccio's references to Dante are frequently generic (a bourgeois gentleman who thinks he is in Purgatory [III.viii], a lady in the pine forest outside Ravenna who behaves like a denizen of *Inferno* 13 [V.viii], a friar who claims he has visited other worlds [VI.x] and gently, but firmly, derisory. Perhaps these two issues trouble Boccaccio most: Dante's granting himself visionary knowledge of the world to come and his unyielding belief that humankind can learn how to live in just political and religious communities. Boccaccio, man of the world, may admire Dante for his optimism yet knows in his all-too-human heart that these are impossible dreams. And so his fictive world is filled with much of Dante's, but these lovely bits and pieces tend to be deracinated from their contextual habitat. In the Decameron we hear nothing true of the world to come, only lies about it (often purveyed by friars); and we see little positive about the human family, which spends most, if not all, of its time seeking its own pleasures (sex, money, getting the best of another human being) or the avoidance of pain or blame. There is not much room for anything Dantean but words.

There will be occasion in the following essays for consideration of some of the numerous and arresting Boccaccian citations of Dante. Now we might begin at the beginning, the Decameron's subtitle, *Principe Galeotto*, an obvious reference to the verse "Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse" [a Gallehaut was the book and the one who wrote it] (*Inferno* 5.137), in which Francesca da Rimini blames a book for kindling passion in her and in her kinsman. No one will claim that this is not a reference to that text. Some will insist on rather implausible ideas about the reference, for instance, the notion that it has no negative sexual resonance or the idea that, if it does, it was only added by Boccaccio late in his life (thus necessitating credence in the notion that the old fellow had to make his way around northern Italy, sneaking into people's houses, to add the subtitle to the many circulated copies of the work). While there are many instances of Boccaccio's appropriating a phrase from Dante without necessarily being aware that this is what he is doing, there are some remarkable moments in which we can see him playfully and meaningfully pillaging his poet for a passage that enters his work with its full Dantean context. Since the first three studies of this book are devoted to this subject, for now let me conclude by saying that our work on this aspect of Boccaccio's keen awareness of Dante's text has only begun. There are few aspects of the Decameron that are as intriguing and as understudied.

If we continue, as I wager we shall, to discover still more evidence of Boccaccio's debt to Dante among the novelle of the Decameron, what will it tell us of the shaping force of so great a precursor on the prose masterwork? Such a question calls for only a speculative response, since we are at the beginning of an investigation that will take years and, most likely, will never reach a term at which someone will proclaim it finished. If the *Commedia* plays a role that frequently furnishes both models and antimodels for the Decameron, we are nonetheless more likely to find a radical disjunction between the effects of the two works than even a large similarity. The form of the Decameron, which has only once been examined in ways that seem essentially convincing to this reader, may or may not conform to a harmonious, Dantean model. The consideration of the Tenth Day that I wrote in collaboration with Courtney Cahill, with which this collection of essays concludes, sees Boccaccio as avoiding the temptation of a Dantean "comic" resolution, yielding, instead, to the exponents of a satirical vision of Roman men and women, Ovid and Horace. In a shorthand that may be guilty of oversimplifying, I argue that Boccaccio's fiction captures a Dantean literary world in a "Roman" reality and thus transforms that Dantean world, in which we are allowed to know the good guys from the bad and the universe that contains them in its harmonizing arc above us, into an uneven and disharmonious, quotidian "real world," in which nothing can be finally embraced with certitude, except a sort of human solidarity among those (few) of us who experience our frailty consciously. Boccaccio's Dante is not the writer to make such a vision possible, except by inversion; Boccaccio's Dante, in short, has got little that Boccaccio must have except a literary universe to react to. But it is no little help and no little stimulation to have under one's eyes, in all its magnificent articulation, precisely the way not taken.

The road Boccaccio did take, it now seems to me, was centrally involved with his large sense of the vision of Roman satire, most particularly the urbane and urban writings of Ovid and Horace. As I and some others have argued, the primary Ovidian texts for the Decameron are the early amatory works, not the *Metamorphoses*, the prime Ovidian source for almost all the earlier writings. These poems are formally elegies, but they are inspired by the spirit of satire that yields a picture of Augustan Rome, telling the Romans the truth about themselves: they are not fighters (or anything else) but lovers. The very titles cry Ovid's wares: *Amores*, *Ars amandi*, *Remedia amoris*. From the Colosseum to the lady's stone threshold, Romans pursue one another in the agon of "love." The three works form a triptych of Rome's decadence. Juvenal may be more stinging, but he is not necessarily more effective. The "amorous" Ovid was writing, at least in Boccaccio's estimation, brilliant satirical pieces to please and teach (even if he failed on both counts with the one who counted most, his emperor). Boccaccio, who most likely considered himself the Italian Ovid, thought of himself as such not only because he, too, voted early and often for sexuality, but because he, too, was holding the mirror up to an urbs (now Florence rather than Rome). What the Italians were to see in the Decameron was their nature in all its range, but for Boccaccio, as always for Ovid, mainly in its frequently petty self-seeking. The Decameron so pleases us that we tend to make it, in our own image (or in our image of our image), the portrait of the fullness of humanity that stands as our aesthetic progenitor, the first convincing description of what we now call "early modern Europe." Our laughter, however, comes mainly from our recognition of our failings, not our strengths. Boccaccio's Horatian task, then, following the *Ars poetica* (which, I have claimed, as the reader will see, furnished him with his first word as well), is to delight and instruct, but in a way that most resembles the tradition of urbane satire of which Horace is probably the major proponent.

These two subjects, Boccaccio's Dantean borrowings and his desire to shape his work as satire, will be found variously visited in the essays assembled in this book. With the exception of the first piece, which I have put first because of its summarizing bent, they follow the order in which they were written. This course seemed best since the reader may thereby sense the change in focus from Dante to the spirit of satire that first becomes evident in the essay on *utilità*. Thus the first three essays are primarily "Dantean," the last three mainly "Ovidian." These essays have been mostly left as they were when they were first printed. Parts of them would be different were they to have been written now. But they seemed to me better presented as they originally appeared, with only minor changes (e.g., excisions of some material that duplicated itself and additions [generally in square brackets] of a few bibliographical notes).

[Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust by Jennifer Rushworth \[Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs, Oxford University Press, 9780198790877\]](#)

This book brings together, in a novel and exciting combination, three authors who have written movingly about mourning: two medieval Italian poets, Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarca, and one early twentieth-century French novelist, Marcel Proust. Each of these authors, through their respective narratives of bereavement, grapples with the challenge of how to write adequately about the deeply personal and painful experience of grief. In Jennifer Rushworth's analysis, discourses of mourning emerge as caught between the twin, conflicting demands of a comforting, readable, shared generality and a silent, solitary respect for the uniqueness of any and every experience of loss.

Rushworth explores a variety of major questions in the book, including: what type of language is appropriate to mourning? What effect does mourning have on language? Why and how has the Orpheus myth been so influential on discourses of mourning across different time periods and languages? Might the form of mourning described in a text and the form of closure achieved by that same text be mutually formative and sustaining? In this way, discussion of the literary representation of mourning extends to embrace topics such as the medieval sin of *acedia*, the proper name, memory, literary epiphanies, the image of the book, and the concept of writing as promise.

In addition to the three primary authors, Rushworth draws extensively on the writings of Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes. These rich and diverse psychoanalytical and French theoretical traditions provide terminological nuance and frameworks for comparison, particularly in relation to the complex term *melancholia*.

Excerpt: Interpolating the Medieval and the Modern

*Melancholie species infinitas feront: alii lapides iactant, alii libros scribunt; huic scribere furoris initium est, huic exitus.*

[One hears of innumerable types of melancholy. Some throw stones, others write books. For one, writing is the beginning of madness; for another, it is the end.]

These lines, from Petrarch's handbook on how to deal with the cruel blows of fortune, provide a fitting preamble to this book, which explores a constellation of different melancholic positions through close attention to a distinctive set of poetic, narrative, and theoretical texts. This volume takes as its primary subject matter the work of three writers: two medieval Italian poets, Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), and a modern French novelist, Marcel Proust. What connects these three writers is that each has reflected profoundly on the experience of grief. The experience of loss occasioned by the death of the beloved is central to Dante's youthful *prosimetrum*, the *Vita nuova*, to Petrarch's poetic collection, the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (or *Canzoniere*), and to Proust's seven-volume novel, *A la recherche du temps perdu* [In Search of Lost Time]. Beyond

these three works, Dante's *Commedia* (the subject of Chapter 1) and Petrarch's *Bucolicum carmen, Triumphi, and Secretum* (introduced in Chapter 2) are equally vital texts for reflections on the inevitability of loss and on possible responses to this experience.

In this Introduction, the key terms of this investigation are firstly defined, starting with the twin titular concepts of discourse and mourning. Secondly, the shifting critical stances towards mourning and melancholia embodied by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva are elucidated, with a view to demonstrating the productiveness of these three distinct viewpoints for literary analysis. Thirdly, relevant comparative critical literature (especially on Dante and Proust) is reviewed. Finally, interpolation is proposed as a new approach to comparative literature.

## A DEFINITION OF DISCOURSE

The word 'discourse' is used principally in its etymological sense of movement, drawing on the writing of Roland Barthes, which is an essential, continuous point of reference throughout this project. Barthes reminds his reader at the start of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* [A Lover's Discourse: Fragments] that *Dis-cursus, c'est, originellement, l'action de courir ça et là, ce sont des allées et venues, des "démarches", des "intrigues"* [Dis-cursus—originally the action of running here and there, comings and goings, measures taken, 'plots and plans']. The 'discourses' of the title refer, then, to the movement between theories and texts and to the creation of pluri-linguistic textual dialogues.

This type of discursive movement is particularly well illustrated by the figure of the 'melancholy spaniel' which appears at the start of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. This seminal early seventeenth-century text is a sort of encyclopedia for the early-modern obsession with melancholy, and renders roving between a variety of texts paradigmatic of the study of this widespread emotional state. At the outset, Burton warns that he proceeds in fits and starts, digressively, and with a compendiousness that risks causing confusion:

This roving humour [...] I have ever had, & like a ranging Spaniell, that barks at every bird he sees, leaving his game, I have followed all, saving that which I should, & may justly complaine, & truly [...], that I have read many Bookes, but to little purpose, for want of good method, I have confusedly tumbled over divers Authors in our Libraries, with small profit, for want of Art, Order, Memory, Judgement.

Beneath the disarming *captatio benevolentiae*, this passage reveals a fundamental concern shared by the present book, that of the utility and validity of 'tumb[ing] over divers authors', and of the motivation behind choices and ordering of texts. While this concern is addressed in this Introduction, the 'roving humour' of the 'ranging Spaniell' moving from quarry to quarry remains a useful and dynamic image for the enthusiastic, discursive, multi-directional literary approach adopted throughout this book.

This discursive, roving movement between texts is ordered in two different ways. Firstly, the structure of this book is loosely pyramidal, and moves, cumulatively, to a more and more overtly comparative approach, with a focus on Dante in Chapter 1, Petrarch and Dante in Chapter 2, and Proust,

Petrarch, and Dante in Chapter 3 and the Epilogue. Secondly, the relationship between Dante, Petrarch, and Proust is established through a process of 'triangulation', borrowing a term used by George Steiner to advocate reading three texts at once in order better to understand what is at stake in each. The following diagram represents this relationship between texts in terms of two superimposed triangles, in a mobile, flexible framework that allows for different theoretical lenses to inform each author's oeuvre in turn. The base triangle consists of the primary ménage à trois, Dante, Petrarch, and Proust, while the upper triangle demarcates the main theorists involved, namely Freud, Kristeva, and Derrida. In the centre I place Roland Barthes as both theorist (of discourse, and of mourning in Dante and Proust) and aspiring author (of his own Dantean and Proustian *Vita Nova*).

I illustrate the pairing of primary and theoretical works that structures Chapters 1-3: Dante and Freud in Chapter 1; Petrarch and Kristeva in Chapter 2; Proust and Derrida in Chapter 3. Yet the star layout is significant, since each theorist also acts in part as a bridge or stopping point between two of the three primary authors. Thus, the discussion of melancholia in Chapter 1 is inspired as much by Kristeva as by Freud, and Chapter 3 brings together Proust and Petrarch through a Derridean interpretation of the proper name. Finally, Barthes is at the intermittent heart of this project conceptually (in terms of discourse) and practically (as demonstrated later in the Introduction), as an instigator of comparisons between Dante and Proust precisely in terms of mourning.

## INTERPOLATION AND THE 'MÆDIEVAL'

This book is broadly situated within comparative literature, a discipline which typically takes as its mantra the following observation by T. S. Eliot: 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.' Yet in this process of 'contrast and comparison', this project is consistently aware of Samuel Beckett's observation that 'The danger is in the neatness of identifications': 'Must we wring the neck of a certain system in order to stuff it into a contemporary pigeon-hole, or modify the dimensions of that pigeon-hole for the satisfaction of the analogymongers? Literary criticism is not book-keeping.' In any comparison, attention to detail and nuance is vital. As Bowie warns, 'If the comparison is to tell, the two writers cannot be allowed simply to merge'. Instead, as Petrarch himself recognized, juxtaposition of opposites can be as revealing as any move towards potential conflation: *Nulla enim clarius modo unaqueque res quam contrario admota cognoscitur* [The clearest possible means of understanding a thing is to place it next to its opposite]. In this regard, comparative literature must also be willing to venture into what Michael Palencia-Roth has called 'contrastive literature'.

My own specific approach is that of interpolation, a concept which is here offered as a figure for the intertwining of the medieval and the modern on which this study relies. 'To interpolate' is defined by the OED as follows:

1. trans. To polish or furbish up; to put a fresh gloss on. Obs. rare.

2. a. To alter or enlarge (a book or writing) by insertion of new matter; esp. to tamper with by making insertions which create false impressions as to the date or character of the work in question.

b. transf. To adulterate, temper, or modify, by new or foreign additions.

3. To introduce (words or passages) into a pre-existing writing; esp. to insert (spurious matter) in a genuine work without note or warning.

In this Introduction ample warning has been given of the insertion of modern texts amongst medieval ones, but the concept of interpolation remains apt. The first definition, though obsolete, captures a key aim of interpolation in this book, that of putting a new gloss (explanation and comment, but also lustre) on old or familiar texts. The second definition, interpolation as the anachronistic insertion of new material into existing texts, reflects well the yoking together of texts in different languages and from different time periods found throughout this study. It is, moreover, with this sense of insertion or embedding in mind that I propose the work of interpolation as a study of what might be called, in shorthand, the 'modieval'. Interpolation is, like Cary Howie's notion of *clausrophilia*, 'a critical practice that would rub medieval and modern texts together', yet this contact and confrontation is achieved not only through juxtaposition, but more specifically through the interleaving of medieval and modern texts that is at the heart of the bibliographical and codicological concept of interpolation.

In the pages that follow, interpolation enables the tessellation of modern and medieval texts, whether fictional or theoretical. Each chapter enacts the interpolation of modern theory (Freud, Derrida, Kristeva), modern literature (Proust), and medieval literature (Dante and Petrarch), not to mention medieval theory (in relation to the sin of *acedia*). Such an insistently and creatively interpolative critical practice is envisaged as a means of highlighting: the specificities of individual texts; the clarity and, at times, opacity provided by theoretical insights; and different ways in which medieval authors address their modern readers across the centuries. It is a way not only of speaking with the dead, but also of making the dead speak to one another. I thus concur with Shoshana Felman's argument that the entanglement of psychoanalysis and literature is about reciprocal interrogation and mutual involvement, rather than any attempt at a reductive application of one to the other:

The notion of application would be replaced by the radically different notion of implication: bringing analytical questions to bear upon literary questions, involving psychoanalysis in the scene of literary analysis, the interpreter's role would here be, not to apply to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to generate implications between literature and psychoanalysis—to explore, bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed implicate each other, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the other.

Felman's description of the interpreter as a 'go-between' recalls the essential movement of Barthesian discourse and of Burton's melancholy spaniel, which is that of an endless, questing to-ing and fro-ing. From these perspectives, the literary critic is deliberately an active and energetic interpolator, and a go-between for interlopers. Yet in this trespassing and transgressing of boundaries of language, genre, and periodization, the interloper becomes a destabilized category that is difficult to pin down. On the one hand, Barthes or Freud may appear like interlopers in Chapter 1 (on Dante), or Kristeva may be the interloper in Chapter 2 (on Petrarch). On the other hand, these identifications can also be swiftly turned on their heads: perhaps, after all, it is Dante and Petrarch who are the real interlopers? Such an extreme form of interpolation moves towards ideal equality between the texts under comparison. 'But my melancholy spaniels quest, my game is sprung, & I must suddenly come down & follow.' <>

### **Purgatory: Philosophical Dimensions** edited by Kristof Vanhoutte, Benjamin W. McCraw [Palgrave Macmillan, 9783319578903]

This book examines the concept of Purgatory. However, in contradistinction to the many monographs and edited volumes published in the past 50 years devoted to historical, cultural, or theological treatments of Purgatory—especially in proportion to the voluminous output on Heaven and Hell—this collection features papers by philosophers and other scholars engaged specifically in philosophical argument, debate, and dialogue involving conceptions of Purgatory and related ideas. It exists to broaden the discussion beyond the prevailing trends in the academic literature and fills an important intellectual gap.

Excerpt: Introduction: Purgatory's Religious and Philosophical Heritage(s) by Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte and Benjamin W. McGraw

There is a place in Rome, the Eternal City, that gives the concept of 'eternal' attributed to the present capital of Italy since antiquity—already in ancient times did the idea live that Rome would last forever: in *aeternum* a whole different meaning. In fact, upon leaving the Basilica of Saint Peter and strolling along Castel Sant'Angelo, we find, a couple of 100 m further along the LungoTevere—having passed Italy's Court of Cassation (this might be considered as a bit ironic) --something quite remarkable. In an often unnoticed neogothic church (the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Prati or, how the church is also known, the Church of the Sacred Heart of Suffrage)—it is not a typical tourist-frequented place to visit as it is situated on one of those incredibly busy city arteries that are always stuck with traffic—which seems like a miniature version of Milan's Cathedral, there is a tiny little gem that, as just mentioned, gives a whole new meaning to the Eternity as present in the name of the city that houses it.

The tiny little jewel we are talking about is the Museo delle Anime in Purgatorio (the Museum of the Souls in Purgatory). More than a museum, it contains a showcase in a side-room of a Church that is filled with references to Purgatory—even the main altarpiece portrays Joseph, Jesus's father,



interceding for those who reside in Purgatory, depicted as they are in the dark and doomed right corner at the bottom. Besides the image of a suffering face, scorched on the wall of what used to be the altar of the chapel and discovered after a fire that almost destroyed the same altar, [It was this fire (that raged on July the second in 1897) that was the originating event that gave life to the museum. The image of the suffering face is now not visible. I want to express great gratitude to the guardian who allowed me to also consider this image.] the museum itself contains only [The size or the quantity of items in the "permanent" exhibition should, however, not be considered as detrimental—the small number of heirlooms can, in fact, be considered as fruit of an excessively strict (but, obviously, necessary) selection process.] 16 pieces of cloth, paper, or wood, all of which, as is claimed, bear the signs of some of the inhabitants of Purgatory. These "relics" of Purgatory [Jacques Le Goff, in his pioneering volume on Purgatory, claims that similar "relics" were already known and preserved in the thirteenth century. For reasons of accuracy, the items preserved at the small museum in Rome date from the beginning of the seventeenth until the end of the nineteenth century.] are all hands and fingerprints, that is, what one sees are the images or reflections of scorched hands, fingers, and their prints—and, on a single occasion, a cross (drawn, as it seems, by one of the burnt or burning fingers). The touch, "the most demystifying of all senses" as Roland Barthes noted accurately, the burnt touch, as a trace of presence, a remembrance of presence of and made by those who dwell in the afterlife, in-between Hell and Heaven. It is as if, by some strange omen or foreboding, these "ghosts"—of whom we have the name and address (even the address of the apparitions)—were already aware that the essential data for identifying a person is contained (is considered as being contained) in the ink-black prints of the fingerprint.

Some might call these artifacts or tokens "exotic," as some remains of ancient popular culture, or even as simply belonging to folklore, but they are, besides being remarkably similar figuratively although deriving from four different European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy) they are also fully consistent with all the "theory" regarding purgatory, some aspects of which will also become clear in what follows, more than anything, extremely interesting and extraordinary (in its meaning of "out of the ordinary"). [According to the tradition (legend?) there is another place still that can be visited during one's lifetime that is supposed to bring a person in contact with Purgatory. In the north-western part of Ireland there seems to be, on a small island in Lough Derg, a hole where a person, if truly animated by the faithful spirit of penitence and contrition, can be purged from his sins. This place goes under the name of Sancti Patricii purgatorium (Saint Patrick's Purgatory) and can still be visited today. A monastery is still present on this tiny island, and the purgatory hole can still be visited. Neither of us both has, however, been able to visit this place during the preparation of this manuscript. As custom holds, the visitors of the purging hole were supposed to be locked up in it for 24 hours, after which, if the penitent was still present in the hole (if not he would have been lost forever to the pains of

Hell), his sins would have been forgiven. It might actually have been a good thing for us not to have tested this theory to its truth (maybe this volume would not have had any authors at all).]

## SOME TRACES OF PURGATORY'S CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Purgatory, foremost known for it being a Roman Catholic dogma regarding a third, middle, place in the afterworld that caused not a little bit of controversy, began its existence as one of history's ironies.

But, even as a historical irony, Purgatory is not just a (Roman Catholic or Latin) dogma. It is also, and this not only for those who believe it to be a dogma, (the name of) a place that dawned into the awareness of Medieval Christianity at a certain—for some almost exactly datable—time. In fact, according to Jacques Le Goff, the term or name "Purgatory" did not exist before 1170. Purgatory, the noun, a noun which, still according to Le Goff, indicates the coming into 'existence' of a new place and space in the topography of the afterlife, was coined (most probably) by a disciple of Peter Lombard named Peter Comestor

(also known as Peter Manducator or Pierre le Mangeur). Peter was the first to employ the neologism purgatorium in the years spanning 1170 and 1178-1179 (the year of his death) whilst he was working at the

Parisian cathedral school of Notre-Dame of Paris. [As Le Goff so cunningly remarks, Purgatory originates as a double paradox. (1) the two Church Fathers (Clement of Alexandria and Origen) who have been named as Purgatory's "founders" were Greek theologians, and Purgatory was never developed by the Greek Christian Church (the split between the Greek and the Latin Church is, obviously, of a much later date (mid eleventh century) than the one when Clement and Origen were effectively writing). In fact, it was, and remains, a bone of contention between the Greek and the Latin Church. (2) the theory on which the two Greek Fathers based their "foundation" of Purgatory was considered, by both the Greek and the Latin Church, as blatantly heretical. Also Jerry L. Walls shares Le Goff's opinion that it indeed regards one of history's many ironies In the second appendix of Le Goff's impressive research on Purgatory, this unique origin is somewhat enlarged. In fact, Le Goff writes: "[...] it would seem that the earliest use of purgatorium as a noun occurred shortly after 1170 in the writings of several men: the Cistercian Nicholas of Clairvaux, the Benedictine Nicholas of Saint Albans, and Peter Comestor, a secular master in the school of Notre Dame of Paris" (Le Goff 1984, 364). Considering the fact, acknowledged by Le Goff, that many twelfth century manuscripts have been lost over time, to identify precisely the first author and the date of conception of the noun 'purgatory' seems almost impossible...]

Relatively soon after the coinage of purgatorium did this place and concept give its acte de présence in the writings of Pontiffs (the first being Innocent IV in 1254) and, in 1274 (The Second Council of Lyon), became a dogma within the Latin Church, something which did spell "disaster." First of all, the dogma created a rift between the Latin Church and the Churches of the East (the Greek or Armenian, for

example) who refused Purgatory as it finds, according to the members of these Churches (something for which could be argued against), no base in Scripture, being founded thus solely on dreams or ravings if not, and even worse, on the long ago anathemized and heretical notions of, for example, Origen. Secondly, it also made the battle much fiercer with, at first, the heretical groups (the Waldensians or Cathari, for example, and just to mention two of the greater and better-known heresies) who actively fought the concept, noun, and even idea of Purgatory, and later, with the Reformation, Purgatory's existence, again, became a fundamental stumbling block. In fact, the Protestant Church(es) refused to have anything to do with the doctrine of Purgatory, simply eschewed its abuses, and refused to accept Purgatory being an actual place in the afterlife. For most of these Churches it was, and mostly still is, following the ironic subtitle of John Casey's chapter dedicated to Purgatory in his treatise on the loci of the afterworld, "[one of] Rome's happiest inspiration"—or less ironically and mostly cynically (although at times historically very accurate) Purgatory allowed for the infamous indulgences which were the "bingo of the sixteenth century". [It has to be added that there are also, even historically, some exceptional cases of Reformed theologians who look somewhat favorable to the doctrine of Purgatory.]

For as much as its "birth" in the last half of the twelfth century, Purgatory is not some *deus ex machina*. Its "pregnancy" or "incubation" period was long and tortuous, and it did not conquer all spirits in its process of growth. In fact, even though Le Goff's research is hard to dismiss, he is not the only one who has attempted to date the 'birth' of Purgatory. According to the Portuguese historian Isabel Moreira, just to mention one of the more interesting voices of recent scholarship on Purgatory, Le Goff's decade in the second half of the twelfth century is much too late for the advent of Purgatory. For Moreira, Purgatory is already a sheer fact by the middle of the eighth century (a special place is reserved for Bede the Venerable in her research), [It should not be left unsaid that the different dating is not solely a question of different interpretation of historical data. What is at stake as well is an almost completely different historical epistemology. Le Goff denies the history of Purgatory as being an "evolutionary" one which, still for Le Goff, could not be "farther from the truth". For him, the development of the 'idea' of Purgatory was "not uniform nor inevitable" and signed by "periods of stagnation which might have spelled an end for the doctrine once and for all", whereas Moreira, who is convinced that "it is a distortion to view earlier ideas about purgation simply as a prelude to a later high medieval ideology", defends a much more evolutionary understanding of history (the history of Purgatory), even though she has to acknowledge, something which not necessarily undermines her defense of a more evolutionary history, that there is no "clear, linear trajectory of belief in purgatory" in the still available sources.] "The idea of purgatory as a staging post in the afterlife," Moreira writes, "[...], burst on to the eschatological landscape in the eighth century". It would even not be completely wrong to claim that some sort of middle, or some sort of purgation, that did not belong to Heaven or Hell can

already be discovered in St. Augustine or in Tertullian's idea of a refrigerium.

However, whilst mentioning St. Augustine, it has to be acknowledged that even though most of the members of the Latin Church strongly defended Purgatory, [The official Church-powers cherished Purgatory as it was one of its most powerful weapons against the worldly powers and a fantastic source of income, and the "ordinary" lay and pious believer held Purgatory close as it was deemed to have created a more just subdivision in the afterlife (giving them the chance to avoid Hell; a place that most probably would otherwise have been their final destination in the hereafter).] there were sections within the Church who did not approve the theorization of Purgatory too much—before and after the concept of purgation became the locus and noun of "Purgatory." This group of people within the Latin Church was mostly composed of its great scholars. The Church's most rational thinkers, among them the already mentioned St. Augustine, but even St. Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, treat Purgatory only slightly, and mainly because they had to, as if it was something as a necessary evil with which to contend. Notwithstanding the (silent) opposition inside the Latin Church, and the very loud opposition from outside of it, Purgatory did resist all opposition and is still one of the more intriguing ideas, concepts, and dogma in the Latin Church.

#### THE PHILOSOPHICAL NATURE OF PURGATORY

So far, much we have said up until this moment remains within the religious realm; it has to be stressed that the current volume is not exclusively a work of theology: biblical, historical, systematic, or otherwise. Though it is important, if not absolutely necessary, to note the history and (specific) theological underpinnings of Purgatory (our reason also for holding still with this aspect), we should also address the topic in ways not indebted to any particular religious, historical, and textual context. Hence, in this section, we examine Purgatory from a philosophical perspective. We can use this perspective to inform the examination of a purgatorial state in religious traditions in later sections. Here, we shall not focus on the doctrine's history, basis in, or localized to any particular religious tradition (although these questions are interesting in their own right; just in a different context). Even with this caveat in mind, we should develop the concept of Purgatory so as to frame the philosophical discussion of what follows. We think it crucial to distinguish a philosophical from a (specifically) religious approach to Purgatory so as to avoid illicitly focusing on just the Abrahamic traditions in general but the Roman Catholic tradition in particular. Certainly, we can formulate something like a purgatorial state outside of both contexts, so we must begin to distill some kind of conception of Purgatory without assuming such a specific doctrine. Even if one wants to reserve "Purgatory" for a specific, formal doctrine, we think it best to have a broader conception at least for the purposes of a philosophical discussion. But we note that the philosophical concept and religious models are not separate (even if distinct): a philosophical model of Purgatory can help one examine Purgatory in a variety of religious traditions—even ones that may not use that term or any related one, as we'll see

below. The philosophical discussion of Purgatory that follows, thus, is expansive rather than restrictive.

For one in/from/considering the Western Theistic tradition, the concept of Purgatory is likely taken from orthodox Roman Catholicism. This is our point of departure and, within this tradition:

it is the state, place, or condition in the next world...where the souls of those who die in a state of grace, but not yet free from all imperfection, make expiation for unforgiven venial sins or for the temporal punishment due to venial and moral sins that have already been forgiven and, by so doing, are purified before they enter heaven.

Even if we begin by quoting the formal Roman Catholic doctrine, we can still utilize this specific model to develop a more general conception. In fact, we are convinced we can even draw two distinct lines of discussion: (1) what sorts of distinctively philosophical concepts are involved in Purgatory—this more general or abstract line of discussion is examined in this section; and (2) which notions rise above any specific and specifically religious theistic background and is shared in the manifold of religious discussions or convictions that are similar to the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory—this more specific line of examination is developed in the next section.

We can delineate four important clusters of concepts lurking in the definition provided above from which we can deduce a more general philosophical conception of something analogous to Purgatory outside of any particular religious tradition.

1. Purgatory as a state of being involving purgation or purification
2. Purgatory as an intermediate or tertiary state of being
3. Purgatory as a transitory or temporary state of being
4. Purgatory as a state of being involving judgment or punishment

(1), (2), (3), and (4) extend, we think, beyond the specifics of any religious tradition or creed, and yet they are specific enough so as to mark out an informative, non-trivial conception that can be used inter-religiously. Let's address each in turn.

First, and certainly what's the most obvious, we connect Purgatory to purgation and purification. If any component should be central it is the very root of the concept. In fact, as we already indicate, Le Goff's (1984) seminal treatment of the history of the concept takes the creation of "Purgatorium" as a distinct noun as the "birth" of the doctrine as itself; that is, Le Goff takes it for granted that the doctrine of Purgatory is essentially tied to the term/concept of a distinct location or state of purgation and purification. Obviously, the root is "purge" or "purgation" from the Latin "purgo." Hence, the place or state of purging just is what we come to call "Purgatory." These points aside, though, (1) makes no specific claims about what purgation is, involves, or the end of the purifying. So, though (1) may sound specifically tied to a Christian (maybe even Roman

Catholic) doctrine, the ambiguity of "purging" or "purifying" in general means that our use of the term(s) here actually leaves a wide philosophical, as well as a religious/theological, latitude.

How shall we characterize (2)? Most basically, an intermediate place or state is one that is in between two (or more) others. But between what? One obvious way would be to construe Purgatory as a state or place that is neither the best nor worst state of being (or place). For a Christian perspective, for instance, a purgatorial state would be one that is neither perfect bliss in Heaven nor miserable damnation in Hell. But we need not adopt only this view of being an intermediate. All that is crucial (for our purposes of philosophical analysis) is the notion that a purgatorial state is one that lies in between and is conceived of in contradistinction to other places or states of being. In this way, a Purgatory is defined, in part, by dual otherness; i.e., by some X and Y (or others) that the purgatorial state is not.

Relatedly, we construe Purgatory as a state that is temporary and/or transitory (3). Not only does a purgatorial state of being or location lie between (at least) two others, but Purgatory marks out a transition from one state/place to the other. Hence, to be in Purgatory—taken to be either a location or a state of being—just is to be in a process of transition or movement from (or in-between) the two "others" that mark out the intermediate-ness of the purgatorial state. Again taking the Roman Catholic doctrine as an instance (of the larger type), the movement from the mundane, pre-mortem state to the heavenly, post-mortem communion with God just is Purgatory. It is purgatorial simply by virtue of the transition between earthly life and one of heavenly blessedness.

Finally, (4) a purgatorial state involves judgment or punishment. We don't assume, however, that these concepts must necessarily overlap: it's possible to conceive of Purgatory as a place of punishment without judgment and, depending on your views on what constitutes punishment, one might view Purgatory as a place of judgment without punishment. The Roman Catholic view of Purgatory above clearly collocates both concepts: Cevetello and Bastian note that it "is intimately related to the biblical doctrines of divine judgment...and the temporal punishment due to sin". However, a Buddhist notion of reincarnation through "Hells" involves punishment for one's actions (i.e., one's kamma or karma), but there is no single divine being or set of divine beings that places one into these Hells via some judgment. Hence, we take our fourth point as a disjunction even if it may be an inclusive one (depending on the specifics of the Purgatory in question).

Discussing of the question of Purgatory in a purely philosophical way would thus compose these four diverse, but strongly interrelated, aspects. It necessitates acknowledging Purgatory as requiring a form of transitory and/or temporary purgation or purification that could be considered as a form of punishment, possibly based on or followed upon a judgement, in an intermediate or tertiary state of being.

## DESCRIPTIONS OF PURGATORY FROM PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Beyond these four conceptual families, we also want to address a few more points which can be added to the

families from the previous section. These possible additional aspects find their origin in particular religious traditions but, as they tend to arise in many of them, they can be considered as rising out of their specific tradition and heritage. As such these religious conceptions that are often aligned with a commitment to something like a purgatorial state or place can be added to the philosophical discussion of Purgatory. They certainly aren't necessary to the philosophical analysis offered in (1)—(4) above, but they can add an additional range of elements that are helpful in discussing Purgatory philosophically or theologically. We find six specific concepts that are often or importantly connected to a commitment to a purgatorial state (in general).

- (a) The transition in Purgatory is a positive one
- (b) Purgatory is an extra-mundane state/place
- (c) The purgation/purification or punishment in Purgatory involves (literal or metaphorical) fire
- (d) Purgatory is a response to sin
- (e) Purgatory involves divine grace, mercy, and/or forgiveness
- (f) Purgatory allows for or promotes a sort of relationship between the living and the dead—often expressed through masses or prayers for the dead (suffrages)

(a)—(f) require a brief discussion. We mean (a) very broadly: a concept of the purgatorial state satisfies this when there is some general sense of improvement or betterment in one's going through it. Purgatory is, in fact, a concept that is intrinsically related to the question of hope. Probably, this has a strong connection with (1) above: if Purgatory relates to purification or purgation, then it's likely a good thing for the person being purged or purified. But, just as the souls that Dante follows in Purgatory only go upwards on towards Heaven through different travails, the details of this purification can vary. For instance, Jerry Walls differentiates two different (Christian) models of Purgatory: "satisfaction" and "sanctification." The former works on a retributive justice account of punishment—i.e., the purgation through which one goes, atones, or evens out for the un- or under-forgiven sins one has committed premortem. Hence, Purgatory serves as the means for the satisfaction of divine justice. The latter model, however, takes the point of purifying to be the positive development of the agent as such—i.e., the point of one's time in Purgatory is to make one fit or suited for communion with God. Hence, the point of Purgatory is to sanctify the person. Whether one takes a "satisfaction" or "sanctification" model (or both), the end of the purgatorial state is the perfection of the agent. However, even though the various Christian traditions seem to see the only possible outcome of Purgatory to be Heaven, we should not make (a) into a necessary condition. If we see the Buddhist temporary "Hell" in between different lives as some kind of Purgatory, it won't be necessary that the state is positive. That's because some people enter the Buddhist Hell worse than when entering it due to deleterious karmic effects. So, we leave (a) amongst the common or important aspects rather than a philosophical necessary condition.

(b) seems fairly straightforward: the purgatorial state is often considered one that occurs after one's death. Yet we shouldn't make (b) into one of the four necessary conceptual components. The reason is that some Protestant Christians do not locate the purgatorial state postmortem. For this sort of view, "purgatory is a reality to be experienced in the course of the 'common troubles' that afflict us in this life, rather than a matter of punishment in the life to come" (Walls 2012, 40). But one need not necessarily turn to Protestantism to find instances of "earthly Purgatory." Before the tripartite separation existed in Christianity, it was a rather commonly held belief that life's tribulations were some sort of purgatorius. Le Goff goes even so far as to claim that even St. Augustine, often claimed of having been the "true father of Purgatory," was convinced that Purgatory was "in this world rather than the next".

(c) Another frequent, but by no means necessary, component of some views of Purgatory have fire as the purgative agent (see, for instance, Le Goff. The specifics of whether the fire is a literal fire that burns the skin or a metaphorical fire that connotes a refining of a person varies across different models of Purgatory. What remains is a certain relationship between Purgatory and pain, be it physical or not.

(d) Also plausibly connected with (1) but also with (2) and (c), the root source of the purgatorial state is often some kind of "sin" or bad (religious) state of the agent in need of an intermediate, purifying state. If Purgatory, then, responds to sin through purification, it's easy to see why (a) often accompanies the model—since the removal of sin would definitely count as a bettering for the person.

And, in line, we can see the motive for (e) as well. If God or whatever divinity there is organizes a purgatorial state for the purification of sin (through means of fire and possibly pain) leading for the betterment of the agent, then Purgatory is plausibly taken as an expression of grace, mercy, or forgiveness with respect to one's sins. At this point, again, the Buddhist model will diverge—there is no divine giver of grace or mercy for that tradition.

(f) Finally, a historically important connection with Purgatory (and religious practice in general) is a connection or relationship between the living and the dead. In particular, there is a strong historical component of the living praying for their deceased friends and family who are in a purgatorial state; presumably with the aim of easing or speeding up the purgation. Similarly, many Christian traditions especially offer masses or services for the dead by the living. But there are other important ways to think of how this relationship may play out. The infamous concept of an indulgence certainly hinges on the idea that the living just aren't connected to the dead but that they can affect those in the afterlife. Additionally, the strong Christian notion of a community of saints—including those that are alive and the dead—fits into our discussion at (f).

#### PURGATORY OUTSIDE OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Even though the concept of Purgatory (or its birth as a noun, for Le Goff) as well as with its controversial history of heresy and orthodoxy are interesting and have taken the forefront of much contemporary discussions, it should be stressed that it stands for much more than just a question of

dogmatics or a topos in the hereafter. Long before (and also well afterwards) Le Goff's dating of the place of purgation, and well beyond the borders of (Roman Catholic) Christianity, the idea that there is some sort of purging, or purification, during or after man's earthly life—be it in a different and circumscribed location or not—is well present and documented. We have already hinted at a wide reach of Purgatory or purgatorial states or phases in the previous section, but we deem it important to render this more explicit.

Although the Eastern Orthodox Churches eschew "Purgatory" (as a doctrine specific to Roman Catholicism), they do commit to a more general purgatorial state. First, Eastern orthodoxy includes, as an eschatological end, a process of divination, likeness, or unification with God (theosis). Furthermore, to Louth, if "the question about purgatory is broken down into its constituent parts, then the position becomes less clear" (2008, 243). Importantly, for the Eastern Orthodox Churches, "the notion of a particular judgment after death is far from unacceptable in Orthodox theology...the idea of an intermediate state, neither heaven nor hell, seems generally to be assumed, especially in popular in Orthodox belief about the afterlife" and any such "purification involves suffering is again readily accepted". We emphasize terms in the previous sentence to highlight how such a view accepts (1)-(4) above. What Eastern Orthodoxy rejects most vigorously is the claim that any such suffering is expiatory. Or, to utilize Jerry Walls' language of "satisfaction" and "sanctification," although the "satisfaction" model of Purgatory is excluded, a "sanctification" model doesn't seem at all ruled out. Notably, Orthodoxy rejects (c) but can affirm (f). Similar to the Orthodox Churches, Jerry Walls argues that also Protestant commitments don't exclude and, for him, positively supports a 'sanctification' model of Purgatory. Thus, if we take a purgatorial state generally so as to only require (1)-(4), non-Roman Christian traditions can affirm at least a state close enough to Purgatory to warrant the name.

And similar views appear for other Western theistic traditions—i.e., Judaism and Islam. During the last few centuries before the Common Era within rabbinical Judaism, the notion of a purgatorial state gained some traction: "the idea was current that some people would remain only for a time in Gehenna, ["Gehenna" is often translated as "Hell." Historically, Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom, just outside of Jerusalem. It is reputed to have been the site of child sacrifice to Moloch and, later on, became a burning trash pit for the city's refuse. The imagery and historical connotations are hard to miss. The Hebrew 'sheol' is another (but can also mean 'grave' or 'pit') and, depending on the rabbinical tradition or interpretation, can serve as the place of punishment or the eternal place of the damned.] where they would be purified. The school of Shammai attributed this purification to the eschatological place of torture, where certain people, through God's mercy and goodness would be prepared to enjoy eternal life." Thus, we have several elements from our discussion above: (1)-(4), (a), (b), and (e). Similar developments or interpretations in Islam lead toward purgatorial commitments.

The realms of the blessed and the damned are separated by a towering wall. There is also a hint of the existence of a purgatory or limbo for beings whose deeds are neither extremely good nor extremely bad. Both the Qur'an and hadith present a wide variety of reasons why a person may be condemned to a life of torment. In time, Muslim theologians began to emphasize God's grace and mercy and to downplay his anger and wrath. The belief arose that after a certain period of purgation the angel Gabriel would intercede on the sinner's behalf and release him from the fire.

Such an interpretation, thus, affirms (1)—(4) and (a)—(e). From this we could conclude that the Abrahamic religious traditions seem at least fairly amenable to something like a purgatorial state, even if it doesn't exactly match the formal Roman Catholic doctrine that may be most familiar to the use of Purgatory' in the West.

Yet non-Western religious traditions can have space for a purgatorial state as well. Obviously, we cannot and have no aim to discuss all or even many/most of the traditions outside of the Western. Abrahamic models, but a few instances can show that a general purgatorial state has a potentially wide religious geography. As mentioned above, Buddhism cannot affirm a judgment, but the notion of punishment in an intermediate state occurs in the tradition. Moreover, such states are necessarily impermanent. The conceptual connections between what are often called "Hells" in Buddhism and Purgatory is reflected in the translations: "[i]t is likely that therefore many of the early translators of the Buddhist Canon have preferred using the term 'Purgatory' rather than 'Hell'. Hindu traditions offer similar views; which isn't surprising given the historical connections between Buddhism and Hinduism. For them, Hell is not a permanent dwelling place, but a realm from which one returns after the punishment for moral impure deeds have been completed...Hell is like a prison. The prisoner does his time and is thereafter returned to society. Hell functions in binary opposition to heaven, svarga, but hell is not in binary opposition to the highest salvific goal, as in Christianity and Islam.

Again, we see various elements of above: intermediate and temporary state of purgation after judgement, especially reading (2) as "intermediate" rather than "tertiary" as well as (a), (b), and (d). We even see a purgatorial state in Oceanic religious traditions. The people of Wuvulu

hold that each hamlet is guarded by puala-spirits whose reactions to human behavior are interpreted by priests. The puala send bad people down to Mani Pino Pino directly below each settlement, where waste drips down and evildoers live in agony eating snakes and lizards, until the puala grant mercy and bring them up to the wonderful villages of the dead.

Again, we see (1)—(4) and a mix of the rest; i.e., (a) and (d).

Thus, we take it that a commitment to something like a purgatorial state occurs across a wide range of religious traditions—especially given the relatively general conceptions marked out in (1)—(4) and (a)—(f). We take this as even more evidence (beyond what's sufficient even if

only considering Roman Catholicism) that a discussion of Purgatory, especially a philosophical one, is timely, fruitful, and needed. It's to these aims that we think the current volume directs itself.

Through this introduction, we hope to have laid some of the philosophical, religious, cultural, and historical groundwork to provide context for this book. As the content of the volume will demonstrate, however, there is even much more to Purgatory than we have been able to outline in this introduction.

The collection is divided into three broad headings. Part I locates Purgatory in its more familiar philosophical and theological territory, Part II draws it into discussion with various historical considerations, and we end with Part III which consists of some proposals to extend the philosophical talk of Purgatory in ways that we may not have seen before or to draw out even familiar topics in perhaps new ways. Each chapter, though, takes the philosophical task of examining Purgatory, vague as that project may be, seriously and, through their diversity, it shows the depth of the concept of Purgatory; enlivening it along various philosophical dimensions.

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[The Professoriate Today: Languishing in Dante's Purgatory](#)  
by John J. Hampton [Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,  
9781475836486] [paperback](#)

Included here to offer how Dante's Comedy is useful as an extended analogy in this case for the denizens of academe.

The changing role and expectations of higher education have reached a crisis point. The heart of the problem is an isolation of the professoriate. An emphasis on obscure research and lack of accountability is undermining the academy. Creating a dissertation is usually an exhausting and frustrating task. New professors are not prepared for what is about to happen to them. Students are being shortchanged by professors who fail to facilitate learning. The effort to find a long-term academic appointment can be just as bad. This book tells the story of a period of suffering for new professors quite comparable to the description of purgatory in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This book documents the story.

Included here to offer how Dante's Comedy is useful as an extended analogy in this case for the denizens of academe.

Excerpt: What's All This Business about Purgatory? Do Professors Make a Stop Before They Reach Heaven?

Abandon hope all ye who enter here. —Dante Alighieri, Italian poet and politician

#### BELIEVE IT OR NOT

While working on his PhD at Stanford University, Theodore Streleski believed he was denied scholarly support by the professor directing his dissertation. He took a machinist's hammer and used it to beat his advisor to death. Shortly after the murder, he claimed it was a justifiable homicide based on the university's treatment of graduate students.

The murder occurred in 1978. Streleski was released in 1985. He spent nineteen years working on his degree while performing low-paying, part-time jobs. He spent seven years in jail.

#### Question

Did Mr. Streleski ever find a position as a full-time faculty member?

#### Answer

Apparently not. He was last seen in 1993 applying for a maintenance position with the San Francisco Municipal Railway. He was turned down for the job because of his crime.

#### Question

Does successfully completing a dissertation and finding a professorial

appointment bring an end to anger about delays in finishing a PhD program?

Answer

Apparently not. There are many stories. In 1992, Valery Fabrikant, an engineering professor at Concordia University, killed four of his colleagues after blaming them for his failure to get tenure. After receiving a life sentence for murder, he settled down to do research from his prison cell. In 2002, he was quoted, "I ... had enough courage to fight lawlessness with deadly force and I hope to encourage others to do the same."

## STAGES OF LIFE

A human being goes through a process of birth, childhood, early maturity, later maturity, decline, and death. These stages have been studied and documented by scholars, philosophers, and others. We are keenly aware of the behaviors at different chronological ages and issues that affect happiness, sadness, anxiety, and satisfaction.

The exact same development applies to college professors or would-be professors. Birth precedes and death follows:

Early Maturity. Matches graduate school.

Later Maturity. Refers to becoming tenured and advancing in rank.

Decline. Describes the aging process where research and teaching drop in quality.

#2. Purgatory. Here we can be more specific. Dante survived the depths of hell and reached purgatory, a temporary stopping point on the way to heaven. He climbed an allegorical mountain through the seven levels of deadly sins—pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. It was a process of suffering and spiritual growth.

#3. Paradise. Finally, Dante reaches a place where everyone can live in the perfect happiness and joy of the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude) and the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity).

Question

Why is Dante's poem identified as a comedy?

Answer

The term "comedy" had a different meaning in the Middle Ages. To Dante, as well as the ancient Greeks, it was the opposite of a tragedy. The comedy ended in a person's triumph while a tragedy ended in downfall or death. Today it is entertainment with a goal to make the audience laugh.

Question

Is the choice to become a professor a comedy or a tragedy?

Answer

It can be either.

## PURGATORY DANTE'S JOURNEY TO PARADISE

From this premise, we arrive at one of the great works of modern civilization. The *Divine Comedy* is a fourteenth-century epic poem by Dante Alighieri that describes his travels through hell, purgatory, and paradise. A professor's journey parallels the journey by Dante:

#1. Start of the Journey. Dante begins in hell, allegorically a recognition of sin and the negative consequences of it.

Professors may not be guilty of horrible sins, but something must happen that causes a person to consider spending his professional life outside the "real world." We can only speculate on this choice. In Christian theology, purgatory is an intermediate state after physical death that people who are not quite yet ready to enter heaven go to. Sinners must atone for their misbehavior through a process of purification. The level of suffering varies from religion to religion but generally requires meeting specified beliefs or behavioral standards. After undergoing purification, they can achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. Living relatives and friends pray for them to leave purgatory and reach the heavenly gates without delay.

The concept of a temporary place of atonement has its roots in ancient cultures and religions. Christian texts picked it up in the twelfth century. Today it is used in a general sense to refer to any place or condition of suffering or torment, especially one that is temporary.

Question

Who prays for the success of a struggling dissertation candidate or an assistant professor who was rejected for tenure?

Answer

Maybe living relatives and friends?

## THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* are both classic stories that include descriptions of the devil. Dante was nothing if not creative in his portrayal of Satan, a giant demon with grotesque physical attributes. By contrast, Milton's Lucifer was the most beautiful of all angels prior to leading a rebellion against God and being expelled from heaven.

The two poets also disagreed on the ambient temperature in hell. While Dante had it as a frozen land of ice and blizzard winds, Milton claimed it was a place of horrible fire.

The disagreement between the two epic poets continued on many levels. Milton, for example, explained the path as a choice among heaven, hell, or chaos. He had no purgatory at all.

Question

Should the absence of purgatory in *Paradise Lost* trouble us as we examine a possible purgatory in higher education?

Answer

Not at all. Synonyms for "chaos" include disorder, disarray, confusion, mayhem, and bedlam. From the perspective of a person suffering in purgatory, it may appear that chaos is ever present.

## PROFESSOR'S JOURNEY TO PARADISE

Generations of Americans have used college as a ticket to a better future. This can be measured in terms of a higher quality of life often, but not always accompanied by financial enrichment. Compared to individuals who cease education after high school, participation in a college experience once offered great social mobility, job security,

and higher lifetime earnings. Today's students hope this continues to be true.

For some of these individuals, the path leads to a career in higher education. The most respected route leads to the status of "professor." Getting there can involve a long journey.

### ACADEMIC PURGATORY

In Dante's Divine Comedy, purgatory had seven levels. In the academy, we find a strikingly similar situation with five levels.

- Graduate School. To be a professor requires more than a college education. The individual must pursue much more knowledge to participate in a community of scholars. It usually consists of achieving a master's degree and doctoral coursework. The search for knowledge ends with a status recognized by the letters ABD (all but dissertation).
- Dissertation. After finishing coursework, the doctoral candidate displays the ability to perform and share research. She writes and defends a serious research inquiry in a specific field. A final document, identified either as a thesis or as a dissertation, is the output of this effort. If successful, a university confers a doctoral degree such as a PhD or EdD.
- Full-time Position. Once the degree is obtained, the newly minted graduate attempts to start a career in the academy. This involves finding faculty vacancies in the area of the degree, filling out applications, arranging interviews, receiving an offer, and accepting it.
- Probation. Once a faculty position has been obtained, the individual engages in teaching, scholarship, and service to prove worthy of being a lifelong member of the academy. This is often a maximum seven-year process in advance of tenure and promotion to associate professor.
- Permanency. This is a period of holding a secure and long-term position in an academic hierarchy. It normally starts as an associate professor with tenure and may include a promotion to full professor.

#### Question

Is purgatory an accurate comparison for a person stuck on a dissertation or unable to obtain tenure and promotion?

#### Answer

Yes. In both cases, the situation is temporary. Finally, the successful individual may reach paradise in the form of a tenured professorship. However, some people will not make it. Not enough purification. They go to hell. What are you gonna do?

#### Question

Under Dante's formulation, purgatory was not a voluntary assignment. People had no choice. Some went directly to hell. Others were good and obtained purification while still on earth. Heaven was their nonstop destination. Only middle-of-the-road sinners went to purgatory. What is the situation for would-be professors?

#### Answer

Apparently most of them are sinners. Only a few rather famous scientists, politicians, and artists go directly to academic permanency.

#### Question

Do all professors finally reach heaven, which might be described as a promotion to full professor with tenure?

#### Answer

Unfortunately, not. The end of purgatory can lead to heaven or hell. Some professors join the gods and live comfortably among the angels. Others find themselves in Dante's frozen wasteland or Milton's raging flames for a period that feels like eternity. Even with tenure, no promotion to full professor. No recognition of teaching skills or research.

### HELL AFTER PURGATORY

Dante warned us to abandon all hope when we enter hell. What will we find when we fail to be purified and are thrown to the devil? Professors in hell suffer from one or more recognizable emotional traumas:

- Hatred for Students. Occurs when students stop responding to their teaching, even when it is the professor's fault because he refuses to change or simply becomes bitter at the students' lack of motivation or interest in what he's saying.
- Hatred for Administration. Happens when the senior administrators display a pattern of conceit and superiority that they, no more talented than the average professor, make it out of the classroom and into a more exalted place.
- Hatred for Colleagues. Develops over time spent in worthless meetings with individuals who criticize everything in their environment including him personally.
- Hatred for Teaching. May develop quickly if he is not effective in the classroom and does not improve.
- Hatred for Duties. Ranges from department or committee meetings, registering students, or performing a series of mind-numbing tasks required by the administration, accreditors, or others.

### CONCLUSION

The journey into or through purgatory has been taken by hundreds of thousands of individuals in recent years. Many successful. Many not. In subsequent chapters, we will see the factors that determined success or failure and shaped opportunities and obstacles for individuals who have yet to take the journey or who are in the middle of it. Some of us



may avoid purgatory completely and go directly through to the pearly academic gates.

All we can say is, "God bless them."<>

**Dante: Convivio: A Dual-Language Critical Edition by Dante Alighieri, translated and edited by Andrew Frisardi [Cambridge University Press, 9781107139367]**

Dante's *Convivio*, composed in exile between 1304 and 1307, is a series of self-commentaries on three of Dante's long poems. These allegorical love poems and philosophical verse become the basis for philosophical, literary, moral, and political exposition. The prose is written in Italian so that those who were not educated in Latin could take part in what Dante called his 'banquet of knowledge'. In this edition, eminent Dante translator-scholar Andrew Frisardi offers the first fully annotated translation of the work into English, with an extensive introduction, making Dante's often complex writings accessible to scholars and students. The parallel Italian text is also included for the first time in an English translation of the *Convivio*. Readers of this work can gain a strong understanding of the philosophical themes across Dante's work, including the *Divine Comedy*, as well as the logic, politics and science of his time.

Excerpt: The *Convivio*: A Portrait

At the start of the *Convivio*; Dante sets a supreme value on the place of knowledge in human life, echoing Aristotle's teaching that knowledge is the "ultimate perfection of our soul, in which our ultimate happiness resides." This, Dante affirms; is why all human beings naturally desire to know. One apparent contradiction to this claim, of course, is that people often seem much more inclined to wallow in ignorance than to seek knowledge and understanding. Dante divides into two categories the causes for this gap between essential reality and everyday experience: impediments to knowledge that come from outside individuals, and impediments that come from inside individuals. The latter include physical defects and mental addictions or false attachments; the former "civic and domestic concerns" and the accidents of destiny.<sup>1</sup> Since so many people are kept from knowledge by at least one of these four impediments, there are few remaining "who sit at the meal where the bread of angels is eaten"; most are reduced to sharing their food "with sheep."

The good news, Dante adds, is that those who have achieved some degree of knowledge "are not without compassion toward those they see going around eating grass and acorns on the feeding grounds of animals," the ordinarily ignorant and sense-bound multitudes. Since Dante is one who has achieved some knowledge, having earned it the hard way and been there himself when it comes to eating the grass and acorns of ignorance; he in fact feels this compassion and wishes to share what he has learned. He mentions that some time earlier he had already started on this project of sharing knowledge, but what he offered to others at that time - doctrinal or ethical poems written years before the *Convivio* prose - "left them wanting more" because the canzoni (long lyrical poems) were not especially easy to understand; couched as they were in allegory. He realizes that he has to explain and elaborate

upon them. His plan for this work; then; is to compose fifteen *trattati*; or treatises (usually referred to in English as "books"), including an initial introductory book. Each of the fourteen principal books - only three of these would actually be composed - was to be based on a different Dante canzone, which would be interpreted and commented upon.<sup>5</sup> Like his youthful work the *Vita nova*, in other words, the *Convivio* is a *prosimetrum* or combination of prose and poetry - a form well suited to Dante, who as much as any author imaginable orchestrated how his readers would respond to and understand his writing.<sup>6</sup> The work is called a *convivio*, or banquet, because Dante pictures it as a communal meal of knowledge; each book will be a separate course in this banquet, where the poems are the food and the self-commentary the bread. The banquet will not be for professional philosophers or theologians, but for human beings who simply wish to realize human nature, which desires to know. Dante himself is not one of the learned elite, but a man who gathers what falls from the table of the learned, to share it with those still mired in "the wretched life ... I left behind." In modern terms, Dante intends this work to be for a "non-academic" audience, for whom "merely academic" means of restricted intellectual interest and having little relation to the real world. As we will see, the *Convivio* aims for an integration of knowledge that is difficult to imagine from the post-Enlightenment perspective, for which knowledge generally is partitioned into areas of specialization with little epistemological common ground.

But before Dante can continue with his project, he has to clarify a few things about himself and this work, a common procedure in medieval commentary, known as the *accessus ad auctores*, where the commentator of classical, biblical, or legal texts placed an introduction before the main work to provide information about the author and the work itself.<sup>9</sup> First, Dante says, he must "purify" the bread of his commentary by explaining two incidental flaws in it: that he will be talking about himself in the course of the text (medieval convention generally discouraged this); and that although this work is supposed to be explaining certain things, the text itself will need some explaining (as the annotations to this book abundantly attest).<sup>10</sup> As Dante states in chapters ii to iv of Book I, both of these characteristics of the text are meant to defend him as a man and poet whose reputation has been compromised by the ignominy of exile, and who has been forced to wander from court to court after having lost his possessions and his formerly high social standing.

The rest of Book I is a defense of using vernacular Florentine for the commentary - a "blemish" in the bread, Dante says, that is more substantial than the two he has just explained." For his contemporaries such a defense would have been necessary, since the *Convivio* was the first extended original work in a European vernacular to treat philosophical subjects in depth. There are three fundamental justifications, says Dante, for choosing the vernacular instead of Latin. First, it would not have been appropriate to write a Latin commentary on a vernacular poem, since Latin is superior in terms of nobility, virtue, and beauty. Second, to use the vernacular is an act of generosity, since not everyone who

can understand the Florentine can read Latin, so the use of vernacular is more consistent with Dante's aim in the *Convivio* of spreading the love of knowledge. As an act of liberal giving, he wants to make this philosophical work accessible to those who desire knowledge and learning but are too busy with social responsibilities to seek them out. And third, it is good to use the vernacular because every person naturally loves his or her mother tongue.

I should note here that Dante's mode of discussion in this passage, as often in the *Convivio*, is argument by analogy, rooted in Aristotelian theory. Dante says that since he loves his vernacular tongue, he can explain why he chose to use it for the *Convivio* by specifying the three things that natural love always motivates a lover to do: "the first is to aggrandize the loved thing; the second is to be fearful for it; the third is to defend it, as one sees happen repeatedly." And these are the very three things that made him "choose it - our vernacular - which I love and have loved naturally and incidentally." Similarly, in chapter xi of Book III, where Dante has established that the philosopher is a "friend" of wisdom, he says that some insight into the activity of the philosopher can be gained by considering the general principles of friendship, gleaned from Aristotle and Cicero. And there are many other instances of this line of thinking: a procedure that aims to clarify an argument by expanding references through qualitative correspondences (or analogies) between things that are unrelated from a modern, quantitative perspective.

In any case, with Dante's use of the vernacular in the *Convivio*, he is at the forefront of a cultural shift whereby the knowledge of the schools is being reoriented toward a project of ethical-political reform. This historical detail is consistent with Dante's specifying of ethics as the highest of sciences apart from theology; just as Roger Bacon, who was engaged in a moral and cultural reform of Christian society fifty years earlier, had placed ethics at the highest position. Dante in the *Convivio* assumes the authority of the university magistri; even as he intentionally aims for an audience outside the university culture. Book I concludes, referring to the "non litterati" for whom Dante is writing: "This will be a new light, a new sun, which will rise where the customary sun will be setting, and it will give its light to those who are in darkness and obscurity, because the customary sun does not shine for them." As already mentioned, Dante himself tells us who these people are: individuals who are kept from learning by the impedimenta of physical disabilities, bad habits, or lack of initiative, and above all those whose time and energy are taken up with civic and family duties. This last obstacle, the exigencies of life, is one that was generally neglected in university culture, as it often still is, and Dante's emphasis on it separates him from the professional magistri. As he puts it polemically in Book I: "For the mind's goodness, upon which this service attends, dwells in those who, due to the world's evil neglect, have left learning up to men who have made a prostitute out of a lady; and these nobles are princes, barons, knights, and many other noble people, not only male but female, among whom there are many in this language who use the vernacular and are not learned." His aim is practical: to make his banquet "as useful as possible throughout." Dante's project in the *Convivio*, then, similar to that in the *Divine*

*Comedy*, is a restoration of the just order of *humana civilitas*, with a collaboration between imperial authority and philosophical wisdom as its basis. At the same time, his own personal regeneration and exoneration are figured in the social vision, just as Dante's personal, earthly exile is referenced when the pilgrim souls in Purgatorio sing the opening of the psalm *In exitu Israël de Aegypto*, "When Israel went out of Egypt."

Books II and III form a unit focusing on Dante's new love for philosophy after Beatrice's death, which had been narrated about ten years earlier in the *Vita nova*. At the beginning of Book II, Dante discusses his use of allegory, explaining that he will give a literal interpretation for each canzone before the allegorical one. In connection with the literal sense or evident subject matter of the canzone *Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete* (All you who, knowing, make the Third Sphere [heaven] move), Dante discusses such subjects as astronomy; angelology; the conflicting thoughts between his old love for Beatrice and his new love for the so-called Donna Gentile (Noble Lady) or Philosophy; and the immortality of the soul - all of these subjects deriving from the need to explain and amplify the poem's literal content.

The discussion of the soul's immortality arises in connection with Dante's last mention of Beatrice in the *Convivio* - the last, in fact, until the *Divine Comedy*. Book III is a polyphonic hymn of praise for Philosophy, occasioned by an interpretation of Dante's great canzone *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona* (Love, who speaks to me in my mind). The dialogue of conflicting thoughts between the old love and the new love, examined in Book II, has resolved into considerations that are focused on Donna Gentile-Lady Philosophy alone. On the literal level, this canzone is a love poem about a lady whose beauty and nobility are beyond words or even the mind's ability to conceive her qualities. The sun in its daily trajectory over the earth sees nothing as noble as she is, the celestial Intelligences gaze down upon her admiringly, and a divine influx of emanatory power flows into her. The literal exposition of the canzone, then, includes a discussion of the nature of love; the noble powers of the soul; the ineffableness of the beauty and virtue of the beloved, Philosophy, as well as the inability of Dante to do justice to them in words; the astronomy of the sun's apparent motions and the resulting providential cycles of light and dark; the theophanic emanation of the creation; and other mighty themes.

In both these books, the first two-thirds of the exposition are taken up with the literal commentary on their respective canzoni, while the final third is given to the allegorical meanings of the poems. As Dante explains, the literal level of the poem is "fictive" ("fittizia") and so needs to be interpreted for its real sense; just as, in life, outward appearances have to be "read" for their inward significance. For example, in his commentary on *Voi che 'ntendendo*, Dante must explain whom he is addressing when he says, "All you who ... move the third heaven" (he is addressing the angelic Intelligences), as well as the Ptolemaic cosmology implied by "third heaven" (which refers to the sphere of Venus). On an allegorical level, near the end of Book II Dante states that these movers of the heaven of Venus, which he associates with the persuasive

power of rhetoric, are none other than Boethius and Cicero, whose *parola ornata* (finely crafted language) and high themes had moved Dante to the love of philosophy. In addition, the art of rhetoric, which these authors exemplify, is represented by the "rays" of Venus, which shed light on any subject that is artfully addressed, "so that in each field of knowledge writing is a star full of light which manifests that field of knowledge." In the allegorical exposition for *Amor che nella mente* in the final third of Book III, Dante elucidates what the name philosophy actually signifies and what constitutes a true philosopher. He also explains that the image of the sun in the poem is a figure for God, that the figure of Love represents the study which the philosophical seeker is committed to out of love for Philosophy, that the eyes of Philosophy are philosophy's demonstrations or proofs while her smile is her persuasive arguments, and other details.

The subject of Book IV, by far the longest of the *Convivio*, is the nature of nobility. This book opens with the canzone *Le dolci rime- d'amor ch'i' solia* (Those sweet love poems which I used to), which, rather than being allegorical like the other canzoni in the *Convivio*, is expository and explicit. This canzone, as well as all of Book IV, is written in the form of a scholastic *quaestio*, or formal discussion and analysis *pro* and *contra* a given thesis. The first half of Book IV's thirty chapters is dedicated to debunking the false idea of nobility as "*antica possession d'avere / con reggimenti belli*" ("old possession of wealth along with refined bearing"), while the final fifteen chapters delineate what true nobility consists of and how nobility manifests in people at various stages of life.<sup>3°</sup> As Dante writes about his procedure: "This is the manner followed by the master of human reason, Aristotle, who always first opposed the adversaries of truth; then, having prevailed over them, he presented the truth."

More will be said about the contents of these three books later in the introduction, but it should be mentioned here that some scholars have argued that there is an ideological, stylistic, and thematic gap or caesura between Books III and IV, as well as an interval of a year or so between their composition, during which time Dante wrote his unfinished linguistic treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia* (On Eloquence in the Vernacular). In this view, the textual change is symptomatic of a departure for Dante from earlier opinions he had held when he wrote the first three books: Dante has become more Thomist in Book IV, more skeptical about the possibilities of fulfillment through purely natural knowledge. Certainly, since Book IV is in the form of a *quaestio*, with much less allegorical material, there is a marked change in tone between it and Book III. But there is more continuity between the books than the foregoing interpretation suggests. The themes of contemplative felicity developed in Book III are taken to the next level in Book IV by considering "the effects of that felicity, the moral and intellectual virtues through which the human *summum bonum* can be recognised and defined." In other words, Book IV can be read as an indirect praise of Philosophy and her effects on the lover of wisdom. In fact, Dante's commentary on the canzone for Book IV opens with a restatement of his love for Philosophy, a follow-up to the praise of Philosophy in Book III; and the end of Book IV states that the association between

philosophy and nobility is so intimate that "Philosophy casts not her sweet glance anywhere else" but at her friend, Nobility.

Not only is the *Convivio* unfinished in terms of the contents that Dante had projected for it, but its text was probably never fully polished for a reading public. It is likely that the manuscript remained among Dante's private papers during his lifetime, finding its first readers only in the decade after his death in 1321. Since there are scattered references to it in some of the earliest commentaries to the *Divine Comedy*, and there is a verified Trecento codex of the *Convivio*, it is certain that this early audience existed, however small. The three canzoni in the *Convivio* were widely known, separately from Dante's commentary on them in this book - Boccaccio, for example, includes them in the order in which they appear in the *Convivio*, in his influential compilation of Dante's fifteen canzoni *distese*, or extended canzoni.<sup>37</sup> All three of the fourteenth-century commentators who cite the *Convivio* - Dante's son Pietro, the notary Andrea Lancia, and the anonymous author of the so-called *Ottimo commento* - had close personal ties to Dante.<sup>38</sup> It has been suggested that the return of the *Convivio* manuscript to Florence, where two of these commentaries were written, was due to Pietro's return to the city a couple of years after Dante's death. It is possible that someone made a copy of the work from Dante's scribbled draft, which would have been difficult to read in many passages because of the provisional state of the text. This flawed text in turn would be the basis for all subsequent copies and editions, which have numerous lacunae and other defects.<sup>4°</sup> This early history of the *Convivio* means that it never reached the audience for which it was originally intended: Dante's contemporaries who did not know Latin but who could read and write. Forty-four of the forty-five extant *Convivio* codices are from the Quattrocento, especially from the period 1440 to 1470. The high number of Quattrocento copies is due to Marsilio Ficino's Neoplatonist circle having made it canonical as a work of self-commentary and of philosophy for a general audience, pertinent to Florentine politics - as well as a model for the vernacular. For this reason also it was the first of Dante's "minor" works to be printed, in Florence in 1490; its popularity a short time later is attested by the fact that it is the only opera minore that was printed in more than one edition in sixteenth-century Italy. Leonardo da Vinci made use of the *Convivio* in his manuscript notes from the 1490s onward, especially for descriptions of nature.

The generally accepted dates for the composition of the *Convivio* are circa 1304 to 1307 - in other words, starting about two years after Dante was exiled from Florence. Many have pointed out, then, that Dante must have composed the *Convivio* under circumstances that would be unusually challenging for any scholar. Books were unwieldy and would have been difficult to carry around by mule, especially in the mountainous territory of the Apennines. And they were very expensive. All of Dante's possessions were confiscated when he was exiled, so he would not have been able to afford many books. The books that he actually carried around with him necessarily would have been limited in number: perhaps a dozen or so

authors, classical and Christian; an epitome of history and one of geography, or a combined historical-geographical overview; a small collection of Provençal, French, and Italian poets; and maybe the *Razos de trobar* (Lives of the Troubadours), by Raimon Vidal de Bezaudun, and the *Summa de viciis et virtutibus* (Summa on the Vices and Virtues), by the Bolognese author Guido Fava. In his travels in the Veneto and in Verona, soon after his exile from Florence in early 1302, Dante may have had access to monastic libraries with various philosophical and theological texts; in Lucca in 1308 he could have had at his disposal numerous ecclesiastical and monastic manuscripts, since the city was so rich in them. Many scholars conjecture, too, that Dante visited Bologna on a number of occasions, where (because of its great university) he would have had access to a vast quantity of texts. Although resources would have been far more limited in the Lunigiana, a region in northern Tuscany far from the centers of learning, where Dante probably stayed from the second half of 1306 until the end of 1307, some have speculated that he composed the later parts of the *Convivio* there.

The *Convivio*, then, is a bridge-text between Dante's years in Florence, where he became famous as the author of lyrical poems and the *Vita nova*, and the culmination of his life's work in the *Divine Comedy*. In the *Convivio*, Dante translates themes which occupied him from the start - love, knowledge, and nobility - into a new conceptual language. He establishes two fundamental features of his masterwork: the expressive use of the vernacular and the providential mission of the Roman Empire. Significantly, a key mentor for Dante in the *Convivio*, Brunetto Latini, also wrote in exile to defend his position in relation to the Florentine commune, trying to regain authority with his reading public. Brunetto's *Rettorica* (Rhetoric), a translation and commentary on Cicero's *De inventione* (On Invention) addressed to a non-university audience, discusses not only rhetoric itself but also the themes of philosophy and, as Dante does in Book II of the *Convivio*, the seven liberal arts. For Brunetto as for Dante, man can realize his nature only as a member of a political community, and the medium for accomplishing this is language - so that rhetoric, as Brunetto learned from Cicero, is an aspect of a "civic science." With eloquence, provided it is associated with knowledge and virtue, comes civilization and community. This realization is behind Dante's groundbreaking turn to vernacular prose in the *Convivio*, and throughout his poetry, where, as he states in the *Convivio*, he is conscious of "stabilizing" and establishing his mother tongue by "binding" it with meter and rhyme.<sup>52</sup> And in fact history bears out his claim, since Dante's Florentine would become the basis of modern Italian.

In the *Convivio*, Dante often seems at pains to present himself to the reader as a man of learning - citing authorities in order to assume for himself the function of an *auctoritas*. As he states early in Book I, justifying

why his text, which is meant to explain things, is so difficult at times: "it is fitting that through a higher style in the present work I give it a bit of gravitas, by which it may seem to have an air of greater authority." Since "the *Convivio* is ... permeated by a polemic against university intellectuals; Dante assumes *auctoritas* precisely to undercut

their authority. He views the knowledge on offer in universities by his time as having been compromised by the drive for lucre and power. He expresses his authority by using scholastic techniques in his argument, as he will continue to do in the *Divine Comedy*. These include the scholastic *quaestio*, referred to above; the *divisio textus*, those enumerated divisions of the text for the purpose of discussion which he also used in the *Vita nova*; the syllogisms that he inserts into his exposition;<sup>58</sup> and vernacular calques of standard university-Latin phrases. The latter are pervasive in the prose of the *Convivio*. For example, Dante uses the verb *dichiarare* to mean "to explain, demonstrate; as in scholastic treatises' *declarare*; and "al principale intendimento tornando," from *redeuntes autem ad principale intantum*, which means "to return to the main discussion." Expressions such as the very frequent "è da sapere che" ("it should be understood that"), and variations on this such as "è da vedere che" and "è da notare che" ("it should be perceived that," and "it should be noted that"), with which Dante often introduces an observation, echo the Latin formulaic phrases *est sciendum*, *est videndum*, and *est notandum quod*. Likewise, Dante expresses himself as someone endowed with *auctoritas* when he writes, "Alla question rispondendo, dico" ("In answer to the question, I say"), which is a calque of *Ad quaestionem respondendo dico* - a stock expression used by university *magistri* who had the power and charge of responding to any question raised by students or colleagues. While technical terms and expressions from scholastic Latin are present also in the *Vita nova*, and in Brunetto's *Rettorica*, "in the *Convivio* they become a constant factor." Importantly, Dante differed from other writers in the vernacular at that time, who expressed regret at having to use common speech to reach their intended audience, since the vernacular for these authors did not have the precision or prestige of Latin for expressing ideas. But Dante does not doubt that his mother tongue is capable of being a medium for the technical language of scholastic philosophy, even if the grammar in the *Convivio* - for example, in its imitation of Latin syntax - is often remote from spoken Florentine. At other times, however, the language is down-to-earth; the *Convivio*, like Dante's writing in the *Divine Comedy* although not to the same extent, is "plurilingual"; he does not hesitate to juxtapose a technical lexicon with a popular one. The vocabulary of the *Convivio* is notably rich compared to that of Dante's other "minor" works; the technical-scientific lexicon that Dante employs constitutes one of the first attempts in the Italian vernacular to appropriate such language. For Dante, in short, establishing himself as an *auctoritas* is inseparable from instituting the authority and expressive power of his mother tongue. The link with the *Divine Comedy* in this regard is obvious, since the great poem was meant to comprise a massive range of human knowledge and experience and was also written in the Florentine vernacular.

In his discussion of the etymology of *autore* (Italian for *auctor*), Dante glosses *auctoritas*: "*autore* in this derivation is used for every person worthy of being believed and obeyed. And from this comes the term which is under discussion here, *autoritade* [Italian for *auctoritas*], authority; thus, we can see that *autoritade* has the sense of 'a

declaration worthy of faith and obedience: "66 The reasons for Dante's careful attention to his standing as an auctor include, not only his position as a man who was undeservedly exiled and socially humiliated, but his aim of making his mother tongue a vehicle that is able to hold its own against Latin as a subtle medium of expression. This in turn is related to Dante's practice of self-commentary. To write a commentary on vernacular poems that brings out their philosophical meanings is to place them, implicitly, on a par with the most authoritative classical and medieval authors.

At the same time, the authorities that Dante draws on in the *Convivio* are various, although his citations are often imprecise and apparently from memory, or drawn from anthologies, commentaries, and other secondary sources. It has been well known for decades that it is impossible to reduce Dante's philosophical-theological doctrine to that of St. Thomas Aquinas, as some critics had done. Dante was receptive to the many currents of thought in his time; he changed positions and innovated on his sources - he was a creative thinker, in short, whose works were hybrid. From the opening sentence of the *Convivio*, Aristotle's influence is central in this work. But Dante blends what he learns from Aristotle with his gleanings from other sources. For example, in Book III, Dante's treatment of the theme of love and knowledge is heavily influenced by the Neoplatonic thought of Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, and the so-called *Liber de causis*, or *Book of Causes*, as well as by the biblical books attributed to Solomon. And Dante's reading of Aristotle comes partly through the filter of St. Albert the Great's work, which has a Platonizing flavor. Besides Aristotle, foremost among classical authors cited in the *Convivio* are Cicero and Seneca, as well as the poets Virgil, Ovid, Statius, Lucan, and Juvenal. Other sources referenced by Dante include St. Augustine, who, along with Boethius, provides a precedent for the confessional thrust of the *Convivio*; Isidore of Seville and Ugucione (or Huguccio) da Pisa, who composed important etymological compendia; Muslim philosophers and scientists such as Alpetragius, Alfraganus, Averroes, Algazali, and Avicenna;<sup>76</sup> and Dante's contemporary Aegidius Romanus, whose treatise *De regimine principum* (*On the Rule of Princes*) influences Dante's political thought in Book IV. Also in Book IV, Dante mentions by name the *Summa contra Gentiles* (*Summa against the Nonbelievers*) of Aquinas, from which he draws the idea of naming the third canzone in the *Convivio* "Contra-li-erranti; or "Contra-the-mistaken." The Bible is often cited and alluded to, especially *Wisdom* and *Proverbs*, the *Psalms*, and the *Gospels*.<sup>78</sup> And one can never underestimate the constant and profound presence in Dante's thought of Christian liturgy, daily prayer, and ritual. Further likely sources for Dante are the encyclopedia by Vincent of Beauvais and the compendium on the virtue and vices by William Perault, as well as *La composizione del mondo* (*The Composition of the World*), by Ristoro d'Arezzo, the first astronomical treatise in vernacular Italian. Brunetto Latini has already been mentioned. And as the notes to this book document, there are many other possible sources and influences besides.

Given the great range of references and content in the *Convivio*, it has been common to refer to it as an

encyclopedic work similar to others in that genre during the Middle Ages: a *summa* of Dante's cultural references. Certainly his immersion in the Peripatetic tradition stemming from Aristotle, who wrote on nearly every subject imaginable, is already an encyclopedic pursuit. The encyclopedic ideal was an *imagines mundi*, where books, in their very order and organization of knowledge, were meant to mirror the "book of the universe." We find this mode of thinking in the *Convivio*, for example, in Book II, where human knowledge is seen as analogous to celestial realities, in terms of the correspondences between the planetary spheres and the individual fields of knowledge.<sup>87</sup> However, multiple-topic "encyclopedic" digressions in the *Convivio* are mostly restricted to Books II and III, which in the total plan of the work were probably meant to be introductory expositions. Already in Book IV the digressions are far fewer, so that we might wonder if this would have characterized the work as a whole if Dante had finished it.

In Dante's time, there were four recognized categories of producers of texts: the scriptor, compiler, commentator, and auctor (scribe, compiler, commentator, and author) each fabricated texts in different ways and with varying degrees of creative input. The compiler went beyond the passive role of the scribe by rearranging, shaping, and imposing *ordinatio* or organization on others' materials, but he did not innovate. He was responsible only for the form he gave to the texts of his auctoritates, while the auctor was responsible for both the content and the form of the written work. The commentator's role was somewhere in between these two: obviously bound to the text he was commenting upon, but much more active and creative in relation to it than the compiler was. As explained above, and as the notes in this book will show, Dante in his composition of the *Convivio* is decidedly innovative and active in his use of auctoritates. He was not content with merely using and citing the established authorities; rather, he draws on them to establish his own authoritativeness, living proof of which is the inventive freshness of his "convivial" *compilatio*.

A number of medieval genres have been identified in the *Convivio*. It is not adequate or accurate simply to categorize it as a philosophical treatise; the *Convivio* is too dispersive, especially in the first three books, to fit that description. Other genres that Dante employs include *artes poetriae* (treatises on poetry and poetics), autobiography, literature of exile, the scholastic *quaestio*; compendia on the virtues and vices, literary criticism, and more. Even satire is represented, particularly in Book IV, with passages characterized by blunt directness; simple, harsh language; and a derisive attitude toward perceived offenses to justice and morality.

As suggested by the above outline of categories of medieval text production, an established genre of the epoch which would have allowed Dante the freedom to discuss a potentially endless array of topics and to use a plurality of genres was the *comentum*; or commentary.<sup>88</sup> Dante himself refers to the *Convivio* as a commentary.<sup>89</sup> His great innovation is that he is an auctor (of the canzoni) who is also his own commentator - a novel combination in the commentary dominates so much that the reader is often

likely to forget about the canzoni that occasioned it, until Dante himself explicitly mentions

classical and medieval letters. In addition, he reverses the conventional hierarchy in literary commentary by emphasizing the importance of the commentary itself, rather than presenting it as a humble adjunct to the poems. As he writes about the "food" and "bread" of his banquet: "The food of this banquet will be arranged in fourteen courses, that is fourteen canzoni on the themes of love and virtue, which without the present bread were obscured in shadow, so that many appreciated their beauty more than their goodness. But this bread, the present exposition [i.e., commentary], will be the light which will bring out every color of their meaning." The *Convivio* prose is bold in a number of ways: by including personal elements of the author, by being in the vernacular, and by being voluminous. Indeed,

the poems. At the same time, all the attention given to the commentary implies that the poems are well worth the labor involved, so the value of the poems is enhanced indirectly. As Dante states in the passage above from Book I, the purpose of the commentary is to inform his readers, who had "appreciated their [the poems] beauty more than their goodness," The tradition of commentary on poetry had long been an important way of affirming the "truth-value" of poetry - its ability to be a source, not only of beauty and emotion but of knowledge and wisdom - so that Virgil, for example, was renowned as a philosopher-sage.

Not only commentary in general but a specific tradition of medieval commentum has been shown to inform the *Convivio*: commentaries on Solomon's Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, and especially the *Canticum canticorum* or Song of Songs. It is not surprising that these books in particular, and their commentaries, would appeal to Dante. The conjunction of love and knowledge, which commentators such as St. Bernard searched for in the Solomonic texts, is a central concern of Dante's oeuvre from start to finish. Sixteenth-century editions of the *Convivio*, such as the one whose title page is reproduced for the frontispiece of this book, acknowledge this aspect of the *Convivio* by adding the word *amoroso* to the title, making it a Solomonic-Platonic banquet of love and knowledge: an *amoroso convivio*. The particular combination of *scientia* and *sapientia* that characterizes the *Convivio* is embodied in Dante's love for Philosophy-Wisdom personified as a woman. <>

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