

# Dante and Aquinas

September 18/20, 2006

## Week Five: Divine Comedy I

The first thing to notice about the Comedy is that unlike the Vita Nuova and Il Convivio it is pure poetry, no prose commentaries. This is not to say that Dante does not refer early and often to his oeuvre or that he had lost his sense of informing the reader of his preeminent status as a poet. In Il Convivio, Dante had raised the question of talking about himself, and resolved it to his satisfaction. But why the switch to pure poetry?

All kinds of reasons could be, and have been, advanced. One attractive one is that immersion in the Aeneid and a deepened love for Virgil, the poet of Rome, of empire, emboldened him to emulate the great Roman poet. It is clear that Dante invites the comparison, not least by having Dante the pagan serve as his guide through Hell and almost to the pinnacle of Purgatory. When they arrive at Limbo Virgil will introduce him to the shades of the great classical poets, and include Dante in their ranks. Dante set out to write a poem of magnitude and excellence. That he succeeded few would deny. If he had not, his claims for himself would long since have been forgotten along with the poem itself.

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What I propose to do over the next few weeks is (a) say some general things about the great poem and then (b) concentrate largely on the geography of the three cantiche.

The poem is divided into three parts, each called a cantica or canticle, these are subdivided into cantos. The Inferno has 34 cantos, the first of which sets the scene, and the other two have 33 cantos each, for a total of 100. Dating Dante is not easy but the following years of composition may be accepted:

Inferno, 1304-1308

Purgatorio, 1308-1312

Paradiso, 1316-1321

There are 14,233 lines or verses. In each canto, the stanza consists of three lines, except for the final one that has four lines. The poem is written in terza rima, with the first and third lines rhyming, and the middle line provided the rhyme for the first and third lines of the next stanza, and so on to the end where the four line stanza provides closure with an ab ab rhyme

scheme. As for the length or metrics of the lines, Dorothy Sayers employs in her translation the iambic pentameter with which you are familiar from Shakespeare and any number of other English poets.

The action of the poem takes place over a week, probably Holy Week of 1300—which was also a Jubilee year. Dorothy Sayers tracks the time line with great precision.

What is the poem about? *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*... In midlife, age 35, Dante finds himself in a dark wood, lost, frightened, menaced by three beasts, unable to climb out of trouble. Now as it happens, Dante died at 56, so his invocation of the biblical span of three score and ten has unintended irony.

Dante's plight is a moral one, a religious one; he is lost in sin and has wandered far from his vocation as a Christian. The over all plot of the Comedy is Dante's salvation. The Blessed Virgin urges Beatrice, in heaven, to provide help for her wandering lover, and she does, aided by St. Lucy (a saint, Dante's son tells us, to whom his father had a special devotion). Thanks to this intercession, Virgil is assigned as Dante's guide.

If the poem is the story of Dante's conversion and salvation, it is addressed to a reader in a similar condition to his. Dante speaks of the midway point of our life and then switches to the first person, I found myself. . . . We are thus implicated in the message of the poem from the first line. When Dante, in the letter to Can Grande, surprisingly assigns the Comedy to moral philosophy, we can understand this to mean, not the method and discourse proper to the moral philosopher, but rather his aim, which is to enable us to become happy as we are meant to be.

The moral instruction of the Comedy is in a mode appropriate to poetry. Nonetheless, this is a philosophical poem and Dante is a philosophical poet, two phrases that do not wear their meanings on their faces, and that we shall want to discuss. But let me give us first clarification here.

George Santayana, in a little work called *Three Philosophical Poets*, discusses Lucretius, Dante and Goethe. Lucretius, in his *De rerum natura*, is the poet of philosophical naturalism, Dante is the poet of supernaturalism, and Goethe the poet of Romaniticism. Santayana distinguishes the methods and styles of the philosopher from those of the poet. So how can they be put together? As T. S. Eliot observed, the philosophical poet does not develop a philosophy ab ovo, he presupposes an already developed philosophy and incarnates it in his poetry. The 30 month study that Dante devoted himself to amounted to the assimilation of vast amounts of philosophy, chiefly that of Aristotle, and of theology, chiefly that of Thomas Aquinas. (Chiefly is contrasted with exclusively).

There is a dreadful cliché that the Comedy is the setting of Thomism into verse. Dreadful because it skates over the powerful rethinking and imagining that the poet undertakes. Dreadful because it suggests something analogous to our own reworking a poem into English. Not that translating a poet into the poetry of another language is a pedestrian affair: it can be a new work of art. But however inventive the translator must be, his inspiration is that of his source. We will be noticing the philosophy and theology behind the Comedy and see that it can almost never be likened to translating, or setting of prose into verse.

In the essay on Dante to be found in his *Collected Essays*, T. S. Eliot begins by telling us that he first read Dante in Italian before he knew that language, at least knew it very well, and adds that Dante is one of the poets who can be appreciated even when he is not understood. Now this is far from typical of Eliot's developed views, particularly in his lecture on philosophical or metaphysical poets to which we will return; it suggests the poetic of Jules Laforgue where the music of the lines dominates the meaning of the words.

Still, as a beginning of our appreciation of Dante, the remark has its force. But clearly this can be only a beginning. What I would suggest is that one first just read the poem, skipping the difficulties it raises, and achieving a first response to it. Once that is given—and of course it is impossible to find a contemporary translation that does not, like Dorothy Sayers', ride on notes and comments of varying degrees of length and depth. Think of reading the Bible. We first want to immerse ourselves in the text. The New Testament speaks to us fairly directly. The *lectio divina* is not as such a scholarly effort; rather it seeks to find guidance and inspiration in the sacred text. Now, *salva reverentia*, something of this can be applied to Dante. The next step, a baby step, might be consulting the notes in, say, The New Jerusalem Bible. The Sacred Text has been the object of voluminous commentaries over the ages, and it may be that we will want to consult those more and more as time goes on, those of the Fathers of the Church such as Augustine, those of the great medievals, such as Thomas Aquinas, and so on to our own day to, say, those of Paul Claudel. Of course we live in an age of biblical criticism that has become highly technical and philological. All too often, that scholarship can seem to substitute itself for the text itself, which under the hands of some scholars all but evanesces. There is a kind of biblical scholarship that can make us wonder if there is any text worth taking seriously, save as an excuse for more scholarship.

As I said at the outset, criticism should be in aid of enhancing our appreciation of a text already loved. Dante has been commented on and

interpreted to a farethewell. In the centuries after his death, there were many commentaries (including those of his sons). Then Dante went into eclipse until the 18th century and since then there has been a crescendo of studies. There is a six volume *Enciclopedia dantesca* (1970-78) that incorporates much of the commentary tradition. The Dartmouth and Princeton Dante projects supply some of these as well as a wealth of later insights and precisions. The Notre Dame Dante collection, begun by Father Zahm, is one of our glories. As you might expect, the scholarly discussions seldom arrive at unanimity on the points raised. But one who loves Dante will, if only as a velleity, resolve to absorb that vast literature. Only such students as Patrick Gardner will have made progress in that direction, and that is why from time to time you will see him wince at what I say. I myself am an amateur, one who has made sporadic and hasty forays into the vast literature of commentary and discussion of Dante.

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Under Virgil's guidance will begin his long journey of conversion. Since he has been unable to climb, Dante must first descend. Remember the literal meaning of the Comedy: the state of souls after death. There are three states—that of the damned, that of the saved but not yet purged, that of the blessed in heaven. Nor should we forget the allegorical meanings. Dante, and we, are to reflect on our own lives in the light of what we will meet on the journey. The descent into hell is meant to acquaint us with souls who have freely determined their eternal condition, and doubtless we are to draw a moral lesson from their plight. There but for the grace of God go I.

Virgil's selection for guide here is partly to be found in Book Six of the Aeneid. The pious Aeneas, the man devoted to his father, is granted his request to be reunited with his father in the netherworld. The passage is a powerful one, and aspects of it will be echoed in the Inferno. (You may want to read the Virgil chapter in Gilbert Highet's *Poets in a Landscape*.) Horace, a quite different poet than Virgil, referred to the latter as *dimidium animae meae*, half my soul. One of Virgil's Eclogues was often taken in the Middle Ages to contain a prophesy relating to Christ, but this was an interpretation Dante rejects as false. Apart then from the great model the Roman poet was for Dante, it seems that Book Six of the Aeneid played an important role in selecting Virgil as guide.

Nor should we overlook the political implications of the choice. Virgil is the poet of the Roman Empire. Dante will plead and pray for a restoration of the empire (the Holy Roman Empire) as a balance to the political power of the popes. In his work on Monarchy (unfinished) he will argue that both

pope and emperor derive their authority from God directly, the emperor is not empowered by the pope.

The Sybil responds to Aeneas when he asks to see once more the father he rescued from the encircling fires of Troy and despite his age taken his father on the long voyage. The answer:

...easy is the descent into hell; all night and all day the gate of dark Dis stands open; but to recall thys steps and issue to upper air, this is the task, this is the burden.

There follows a sketch of the perils before him and many elements of the underworld will show up in the Inferno.

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The Inferno is a great cone shaped depression formed by Lucifer when he was cast from heaven because of his pride. He hit the earth and sank to its very center; the materials from the infernal cone have caused a mountain to form on the far side of the earth, Mount Purgatory. So Dante and his guide must find their way downward through the circles of hell, across several rivers and finally to the lake of ice that is the lowest region and where Lucifer will be found frozen in the ice of Cocytus. On the downward journey, they will encounter shades and souls of the damned, and as they descend the sins that have earned damnation will gorw worse and worse, so here is a hierarchy in hell, degrees of evil and damnation. The element we see least is fire.

There are three rivers as well as the iced Cocytus at the bottom. The first to be negotiated is the Acheron which will take them to the first level, what we might call non-hell, limbo, where are to be found the good pagans. Here we will find Aristotle and Plato as well as poets, and this is the place from which Virgil was summoned in order to guide Dante.

The theology behind this is as follows: because of Original Sin men have lost their friendship with God, but as Augustine called it, Adam's sin was a *felix culpa*, a happy fault, because the remedy for it is not simply a restoration to natural perfection but a call to a bliss incommensurate with man's nature, hence supernatural, entry to which is by one means only, the grace Christ won by his incarnation and passion. Christ came in the fullness of time. Prior to that time, there were two classes, the chosen people who lived in the promise of the Messiah, and everyone else. That the great biblical figures, thanks to their yearning for Christ, anticipated in and shared in his eventual salvation, is one thing, but pagans could not have lived their lives in such expectation. To say that the good pagans

are damned is equivocal. They are deprived of supernatural bliss but enjoy natural happiness. Why then the somberness of limbo. In their present state, however naturally happy, they know what they missed, and this seems to affect their condition.

Of natural happiness it can be said that, since it is commensurate with human nature, it is, given certain condition, like living virtuously, it is owed to men. This cannot be said of supernatural happiness. No one is owed that. It is gratuitous, however dependent on our response to grace. There is nothing unjust in the condition of the good pagans.

Over the gates of hell is written that memorable inscription (canto 3):

Through me the way to the city of woe,  
Through me the way to eternal pain,  
Through me the way among the lost.

Justice moved my maker on high,  
Divine power made me,  
Wisdom supreme and primal love.

Before me was nothing but things eternal,  
And I endure eternally,  
Abandon all hope, you who enter here.

However devoid of hope, the good pagans are not in eternal pain, save in their awareness of a bliss they cannot achieve. Their lot, like that of those beneath, the sinners who spurned the grace they were offered, is permanent. But it too is just.

Eternal damnation has been regularly resisted as incompatible with divine justice. We must not imagine that Dante shares the belief of so-called universalists, who maintain that eventually everyone will end up blissful, as if this were owed to all. We must never forget the allegorical meaning of the Comedy: damnation is a free choice, not something arbitrarily doled out by God.

In the light of Vatican II, we might want to amend Dante's notion of limbo. *Lumen gentium*, the council's dogmatic constitution on the Church, allows for the salvation of pagans, though always thanks to the grace of Christ. *Nulla salus extra ecclesiam*, but entrance into the Church can come about in standard and non-standard ways. One who lives his life according to his best lights effectively participates in the grace of Christ, baptism of desire, so to say. Such concessions do nothing to question the permanence of hell. On the universalist understanding, there is a trivialization of the

importance of human freedom. No one can be damned or saved against his will.

Between Limbo and the river Styx are four levels devoted to sins of Incontinence: lust, gluttony, avarice, anger and sullenness. Once across the Styx and through the gates of the city of Dis they find a circle of the heretics. Another river, the Phlegeton and then the violent are found. The descent continues into lower hell with the 8th circle further calibrated into malebolges, or pockets, containing those whose sin has been simple fraud of which there are ten grades. And then they are lowered onto the circle of ice where the sin of treachery is punished.

### **The Structure of Hell**

It is not until Canto XI that Virgil explains to Dante the arrangement of hell and the rationale of its inverted hierarchy. He refers to the "other time" he went down into hell, referring not to the Aeneid but to an episode related in Canto IX 22-27.

Aristotle's division: incontinence, bestiality, malice.

The three most discussed episodes:

\* Paolo and Francesca, Canto V

\* Ulysses, Canto XXVI

\* Ugolino, Canto XXXIII

(Farinata da Rimini, Canto X)

(Pier delle Vigne, Canto XIII)