

A  
BEGINNER'S  
GUIDE TO  
DANTE'S  
*Divine Comedy*  
Jason M. Baxter

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# Introduction

## *Dante as Poet, Prophet, and Exile*

### Dante's Cathedral: Reading the *Comedy* on Multiple Levels

The *Comedy* (*Divine Comedy* is a title created by Dante's Renaissance admirers) is the greatest work by the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321)—some would say the greatest work of the Western imagination.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not this is true, Dante indubitably keeps company with Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky. And yet, although the *Comedy* is an undisputed masterpiece, it has a peculiar medieval flavor to it, which makes it taste quite different from a Homeric epic, a tragedy for the stage, or a realistic novel. And this strong medieval flavor can sometimes spoil our appreciation. I have had students confess to me that they had eagerly looked forward to the *Comedy*, but when they actually got to it, they were put off by the work's difficulty and confused by its poetic form. I would like, then, to mention some of the obstacles that the *Comedy*'s medieval form poses to first-time readers.

More than once, the *Comedy* has been likened to a medieval cathedral.<sup>2</sup> If you've ever stepped into an old-world Gothic cathedral, then you know that the vault soars overhead, rising sometimes to 150 feet, and that everywhere you look your eye finds harmony and graceful order. Medieval cathedrals have a sweeping grandeur as well as an all-encompassing design: every part has a place, and every part has a corresponding part across the aisle. The face of the church, the façade, is divided into hierarchical

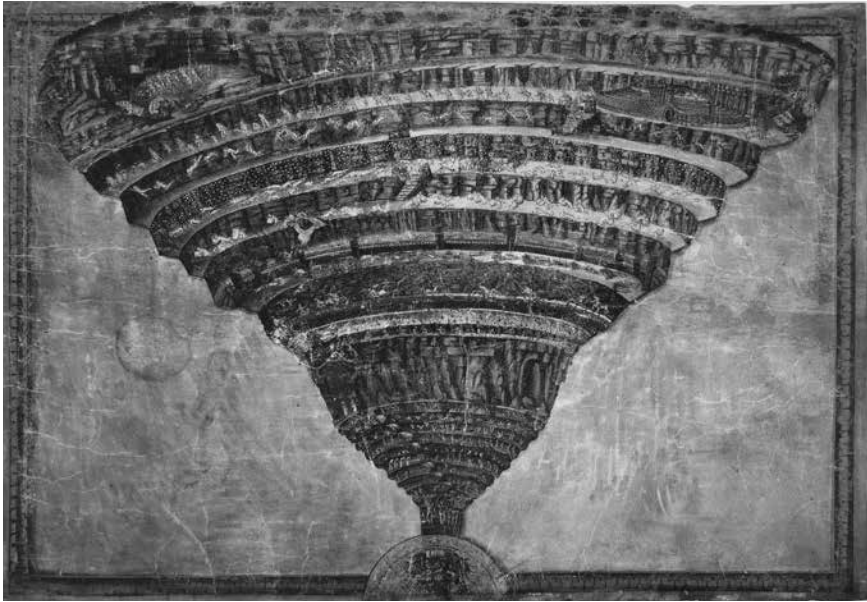


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Figure 1. The vault of the Laon Cathedral.

layers and orderly portals.<sup>3</sup> In a similar way, Dante's poem is famous for its architectural order.

At the most basic level, the *Comedy* relates the story of a man lost in a dark wood and saved by the ancient Roman poet Virgil, who had been commissioned by a whole hierarchy of saints. The pilgrim—Dante himself—travels through hell, climbs the mountain of purgatory, and rises through the spheres of heaven on his way to see (and be seen by) God. All of these realms and landscapes through which the pilgrim passes are neatly ordered. Each terrace or descending level corresponds to and gives flesh to the moral philosophical principles of Dante's day.<sup>4</sup> In fact, one of the great readers of Dante in our time, Roberto Antonelli, has argued that Dante had the basic blueprint of the whole work in his mind even before he began writing!<sup>5</sup> The poet spent almost fifteen years working on the poem, but he was able to write lines for *Inferno* that would anticipate verses he would write over a decade later for *Paradiso*, because he had a framework for his imaginative world provided to him by the moral philosophy of his day. It is this palpable and concrete architecture of the afterlife that Florentine artists for centuries after Dante loved to try to map out as accurately as they could.<sup>6</sup>



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Figure 2. Botticelli's *Map of Hell* (1480–95).

But it's not just Dante's imaginary landscape of the afterlife that is so well ordered; Dante also meticulously crafted the formal structure of his poem. After the gripping first canto of the *Comedy*, thirty-three more canti come in *Inferno*; we then get thirty-three more for *Purgatorio*, and the same number for *Paradiso*, for a total of three sets of thirty-three "little songs" (canti) plus an introductory canto, adding up to a perfect one hundred. It's not just the number of canticles (three) and canti (one hundred) that displays Dante's obsession with the harmonic perfection of his formal craft, though; he also used a complex and fascinating rhyme scheme, the so-called *terza rima* (which English translators after Dorothy Sayers do not try to reproduce). What you will see if you look at the Italian page are groups of three-line stanzas (each known as a *terzina*). The first line of the *terzina* rhymes with the third line: *vita* in *Inferno* 1.1 rhymes with *smarrita* (*Inf.* 1.3). The middle line of the *terzina* introduces a new rhyme, which will be repeated twice in the following *terzina*: thus, *oscura* (1.2) / *dura* (1.4) / *paura* (1.6). But then at the end of 1.5, we have a new rhyme (namely, *forte*), which will again be repeated at the end of verse 7 (*morte*) and verse 9 (*scorte*). The rhyme scheme, then, is a/b/a, b/c/b, c/d/c, in which the unrhymed word in the middle line of each *terzina*



becomes the outside rhymes in the following *terzina*. This forms a chain of rhymes, in which each *terzina* is linked to the previous and following stanzas. Thus, from the very beginning of the poem we have stepped into a world of extraordinary mathematical beauty. All of the drama, all of the action to come, all of the individual personalities will unfold in the midst of this linguistic world, regulated by patterns of threes and tens. For Dante, this order was a clear and evocative sign of the Trinity. God is, as it were, everywhere present within the literary cosmos of the poem.<sup>7</sup>

The action unfolds not just within sacred space but also within sacred time. Through his periphrastic allusions, Dante establishes with exactitude when his journey takes place. His descent into hell begins precisely on Good Friday, 1300, and continues until he arrives on the shores of Mount Purgatory at dawn, Easter Sunday. The pilgrim will spend three nights in purgatory until he rises to see the souls of heaven. In the very liturgical season in which the medieval church celebrated Christ's descent into hell and resurrection as a pattern for the Christian life, so too does the pilgrim—seemingly not entirely aware of the sacred time in which he moves—undertake his own journey of descent and rising to renewed life.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the pilgrim passes through an imaginary landscape mapped out into dozens of distinct regions, terraces, and circles, on a journey divided into distinct phases that have been carefully synchronized with liturgical time. And the *poet* narrates each step of this journey in particular *canti*, all of which have a specific place carefully assigned to them within the numerical ordering of the poem. Indeed, Dante's world is so architectural that the *Comedy* has been called “the last Gothic Cathedral.”<sup>9</sup>

And yet there is more to a medieval cathedral than its geometrical order. Indeed, over the walls, ceilings, and floors we can watch a riotous variety of forms at play within the sober, governing architectural patterns: carved stones (of saints, flora, and fauna), interlacing rib vaults, bundles of differently sized stone columns, ornate friezes, windows of different sizes, polychromatic stained glass, and intricate patterns laid into marble floors.<sup>10</sup> Analogously, the pilgrim does not just journey from region to region but holds conversations with a bewildering number of very particular, very different, historical and mythological people. And so, in addition to the well-ordered architectural space, all readers of the *Comedy* are struck—perhaps even overwhelmed and confused—by the poem's extraordinary abundance. In fact, there are nearly 1,500 proper names throughout the *Comedy*: names of rivers in obscure parts

of Italy; names of geographical regions (woods, mountains, cities, neighborhoods) from history and mythology; classical heroes; mythological beasts; and a host of medieval Florentines (Guido Cavalcanti, Brunetto Latini, Pier della Vigna, Guido da Montefeltro, Cacciaguida, and on and on). Dante intentionally employs a huge cast of characters, drawn from every era of history, right back to Adam and the biblical patriarchs and up to Dante's contemporary Italy. There are 210 characters who make an appearance in *Inferno* alone! Try to imagine a play or a film that contained so many actors.<sup>11</sup>

Both Dante's *Comedy* and the medieval cathedral, then, are constructed analogously to the cosmos created by God. On the one hand, you have constellations, stars, and seasons that move in recurring patterns; you have seas and oceans and continents that stay put within their assigned boundaries. On the other hand, you have millions of unique faces, people, minds, languages, and local histories that live and die within the midst of that governing architecture of time and space. Even though I said that Dante stands in the company of Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, and Homer, it's understandable why he's difficult to get into.

This rich complexity, which calls forth such ardent admiration, can also account for why this poem is so difficult to appreciate on a first or even second read. It is also for this reason that this book has been written: to build a bridge from where we are, over the difficulties, so that we can enter into the poem with greater appreciation. In chapter 1, I will talk about how Dante zooms out to give his readers a view of the architectural whole (using a kind of poetic telescope), but only after he has zoomed in to give a close-up of particular human beings (a literary microscope). In the remainder of this introduction, though, I want to explore how these key features of the poem have their roots in the author's biography. In particular, I will focus on two major moments in Dante's life: his early love poetry (produced when he was in his twenties) and his failure in politics (the experience of his early thirties). Both of these experiences shaped the horizons for the book he would later write.

### Dante before the Dark Wood (1): Love Poet

Dante was born into a minor aristocratic family.<sup>12</sup> Scholars think that in the early 1280s—that is, when Dante was the equivalent of a freshman

in college—he began to write his first poems, which he deferentially sent around to the established poets of Florence. These poems were not like the poetry he would later write in the *Comedy*—that is, they were not narrative poems but rather sonnets or *canzoni* (“little songs” of around one hundred verses). All of Dante’s youthful poems dealt, in one form or another, with falling in love, being in love, suffering when the one you love doesn’t return your love, and so forth. The young poet’s short, powerful, melodious verses quickly gained the admiration of the aristocratic, practicing poets of Florence.

Of course, we all know something about the experience of love: those first exciting and awkward moments when you were attracted to someone and that person was attracted to you (or not); how you worried and talked endlessly about it to anyone who was interested (or even to those who weren’t); the pain of being dumped. Similarly, medieval love poets for centuries before Dante had written about these things, but they had also tried to get all of these phases and elements of the experience of love down to a precise, poetic science.<sup>13</sup> Each lyric poet had his trademark specialty. Some wrote on the pain of love (e.g., Guido Cavalcanti); Guinizelli specialized in praise of beauty. But all these “faithful servants of love” (*fideli d’amore*) agreed that the experience of love, even when one of sweetness, is so psychologically intense that it can best be described in terms of violence: it is an aching or longing that is so passionate it threatens death; it is an arrow that shatters the heart; it is a hurricane gale that breaks a stone tower. The experience of earthly love outweighed any other possible experience; thus, the man or woman in the servitude of love had a quality of “knowledge” higher than that of ordinary existence. In his sonnet “Tanto gentile,” Dante states the ineffability of love concisely: referring to the unspeakable sweetness that comes from Beatrice’s eyes, he says that “none can understand but he who experiences it” (v. 11).<sup>14</sup>

Although every stage of love is marked by such intensity, it remains true that the experience of unreciprocated love is the most painful experience of all; or, as a friend of Dante’s once put it, “He who loves unloved has the greatest pain; for this pain holds sway over all others and is called the chief one: it is the source of all the suffering that love brings” (Dante da Maiano).<sup>15</sup> Thus, love poets also had a particular interest in discovering the mechanics of the process by which one is infected by the contagion of love, because, if you could figure out the physiological process by which

you were struck by love, then you could reverse engineer it and make the lady you fell in love with love you in return. The lyric poet thus tried to create a reading experience that would make his reader sigh, weep, feel warmth, and eventually show compassion. The reader is made to enter into the poet's experience of messiness, confusion, or rage, or of melting, burning, sweetness, and peace. In other words, lyrical poems are "performative"; they are the poet's tool for creating in you what is happening in me.

By the time he was in his late twenties, Dante had already written several dozen such poems. However, around the year 1293, Dante gathered up thirty-one of these poems and arranged them in a little anthology of his own work. He also did something unprecedented: he added an autobiographical and theological commentary to explain the occasions of the poems and hint at their deeper meaning. He called his work *Vita Nuova*, or *The New Life*. The reason this strange, experimental little book (you can read it in under two hours) is so interesting is that it shows Dante's early desire to elevate a popular form of writing—the vernacular love song—to the level of a theological treatise. Dante did not use the learned language of law, science, or the university (Latin), but rather he took the ordinary language of Italian (although highly stylistically refined) and the common experience of love as the tools for looking for something of that philosophical depth that had largely been the pursuit of the learned, Latinate literary culture.<sup>16</sup> And so, the story of how he came to compose these poems takes on powerful overtones.

Dante's poetic story of his "new life" begins with a description of a childhood experience, in the ninth hour, of the ninth day, of his ninth year, when he first laid eyes on Beatrice. Recalling this event almost eighteen years later, Dante writes:

At that very moment, and I speak the truth, the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the most minute veins of my body were strangely affected; and trembling, it spoke these words: "Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi [Here is a god stronger than I who comes to rule over me]." (*Vita Nuova* II, 3–4)<sup>17</sup>

As Dante explains, he knew from that moment that he had been elected the servant of love and that he would remain in servitude forever. There would never be a moment in which he would try *not* to be in love. In the medieval courtly tradition (for example, in *The Romance of the Rose* or

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*), the experience of love is as enlivening as it is terrifying. Everything else now seems flat, boring, and dull. In love, you are braver and see the world with a new vigor, but the experience of love can also be extremely dangerous and, as we have seen, painful. For instance, it just so happened that the next time Dante saw Beatrice was exactly nine years later: "She greeted me so miraculously that I seemed at that moment to behold the entire range of possible bliss. . . . I became so ecstatic that, like a drunken man, I turned away from everyone and I sought the loneliness of my room, where I began thinking of this most gracious lady" (III, 5). From then on, Dante nervously anticipated these encounters. When he did see Beatrice, his heart was so full of love that "[he] could not have considered any man [his] enemy" (XI, 16). And yet, at one point in his narration, Dante says that seeing his beloved almost killed him, because as he stared at the miraculous apparition of beauty in front of him, his other vital functions began to fail. Dante plays on the Italian pun of *amore* (love) and *amaro* (bitter) to evoke how such intense joy was painful.

And so things might have continued, but Dante, as he relates, had an epiphany, which began the second phase of his "new life." In the exact middle of *Vita Nuova*, Dante says he realized that all his previous poetry had merely focused on his response to Beatrice when he received her greeting, but then he "felt forced to find a new theme, one nobler than the last" (XVII, 30). This new theme was not his own suffering and rapturous condition in love but the praise of the beauty of his lady, even if he didn't feel ready to sing this praise yet. Beatrice was too great for his words at that time, and so he wrote a poem about how he wished he could write an adequate poem. In this famous poem, which will be explicitly cited in the *Comedy* ("Ladies who have understanding of love"), the young Dante wrote that, wherever his lady goes, "love drives a killing frost into vile hearts / that freezes and destroys what they are thinking; / should one insist on looking at her, / he is changed to something noble or he dies" (XIX, 30). Beatrice, then, is a kind of "burning bush," an epiphany that causes conversion or freezes the hearts of the wicked on sight.

We can see how Dante is trying to unite the two literary cultures of his day: the secular, chivalric court culture, which wrote about romance and this-worldly love; and the theological and monastic culture, which wrote about a joy you had to wait for. But in the *Vita Nuova*, Dante is trying to overcome this division, and for this reason his story, although similar

to other stories of courtly love, is nevertheless adorned with rich theological language. For example, in his dreams, love speaks to him in Latin, the medieval language of the Bible. Dante calls the times he saw Beatrice on the street not “meetings” but rather Beatrice’s “apparitions” to him. Those moments in which he is caught up and overwhelmed by the strong feelings of love are “transfigurations.” Even Beatrice’s name means “she who Beatifies.” Thus, the poet uses a language steeped in theology to describe his experience of earthly love.

If Dante’s poetic career had ended here, he would be admired, but read only by a few graduate students at an Ivy League university, like any one of his largely forgotten contemporaries (Guido Guinizelli or Guido Cavalcanti). Rather, a disaster took place that changed everything. In the early 1290s (just a few years before Dante began to write the *Vita Nuova*), the woman he had written about, who he thought was a physical sign of the presence of God in Florence, died; that is, in Dante’s words, Florence was deserted and orphaned of this transcendent beauty. Dante uses the strongest possible language, quoting what the prophet Jeremiah had said about Jerusalem (Lam. 1:1): “How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! She that was mistress of the nations is now become as a widow!” (XXVIII, 60). The language is heightened all the more because this text was chanted in the liturgy of Holy Week to describe man’s orphaned state without the presence of Christ!

In the months that followed Beatrice’s death, Dante sought consolation through writing about his grief and, later, in writing love poems to other women (XXXI–XXXIX), but nothing served as an adequate substitute. Dante’s disconsolate “waylessness” continued until, one night, he had a visionary dream in which he saw his soul leave his body, pass through the heavenly spheres, past the stars, until it came to heaven and saw Beatrice among the saints of heaven. There Dante was struck by the radiance of Beatrice, more beautiful now than she had been in life. After relating this extraordinary dream, Dante concludes his *Vita Nuova* with an exceptional promise that, after a period of intense study, he would write something about Beatrice that no man had ever said about a woman before—or in his words:

After I wrote this sonnet there came to me a miraculous vision in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this blessed one until I would

be capable of writing about her in a nobler way. To achieve this I am striving as hard as I can, and this she truly knows. Accordingly, if it be the pleasure of Him through whom all things live that my life continue for a few more years, I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman. (XLII, 86)

It seems clear that this dream is the distant ancestor of what would become the *Comedy*, although we don't know what form it would have taken if Dante had had the leisure and libraries of Florence, and the next decade, to work on it. Although it's fun to speculate about what this poem would have been like (perhaps just a canzone?), it doesn't matter, because Dante's goals and plans were rather interrupted.

### Dante before the Dark Wood (2): Failed Politician

If Dante spent his early twenties writing love poems, he spent his early thirties as a soldier and a politician in Florence. By the year 1300, Dante's political career in his republican city was advancing nicely, and had he spent the rest of his life engaged in Florentine political affairs, he never would have made an attempt to fulfill that promise at the end of the *Vita Nuova*, in which case you would not be reading this book. But something happened to cut Dante's political career short and make him return to the poetry of his youth. In fact, it was the single worst thing that happened to him after the death of Beatrice: he was exiled from Florence (from wife and children, family, friends, and possessions) by his political enemies, for life. In 1302, while Dante was away on a diplomatic mission, the pro-papal faction seized control of the government (assisted by the politically savvy Pope Boniface VIII) and took their chance to get rid of a number of enemies in the opposing faction. Dante received news on the road that if he returned, he would be executed.

In some ways Dante was the victim of large, powerful, international political movements, which had been grinding against one another for centuries, like two huge tectonic plates. I will try to summarize these world events very quickly, to give a sense of how deep the problem went. After the fall of Rome, the Roman Empire was carved up into little bits, which were managed by local chieftains. And yet, over the next several centuries, these chieftains slowly began to consolidate power, adding surrounding regions to their control through marriage and war, until the

point that a descendant of one of these tribes had put together a big chunk of land on the borders of modern France and Germany. His name was Charlemagne. On Christmas Day, 800, he was in Rome, and he was crowned the Roman emperor by Pope Leo III. Then he went back up north of the Alps and continued to rule the newly reconstituted “Roman Empire” from his palace at Aachen. This practice of a German emperor, nominally head of the Roman Empire but ruling from north of the Alps, with exceptions and interruptions continued down to Dante’s day. These Holy Roman emperors, as they were later called, really thought that they were the rightful successors to Caesar Augustus, Trajan, and Constantine, but they remained physically absent from Italy. As a result, the Italian city-states grew accustomed to ruling themselves, and the church, which had to weather centuries of cultural instability, also grew accustomed to being the center of orderly society.

Thus, it is not too great of a surprise that when the Holy Roman emperors began creeping back down into Italy in the 1200s, there was conflict. Frederick II, grandson of Frederick Barbarossa, moved his court to Palermo, Sicily, and thus had a foothold on the Italian peninsula. His illegitimate son, Manfred (mentioned in *Purg.* 3), tried to continue the legacy of his father. He began moving into central Italy, to bring it under more direct control, but the Italian city-states allied with the pope; together, they in turn invited Charles of Anjou from France to counter Manfred. Manfred was defeated at the battle of Benevento in 1266, the year after Dante was born. Thus, in a way similar to how Southerners for years lived with the memory of the Civil War, even if they had not experienced it, or how my kids know about 9/11, even though they were not alive when it took place, Dante was born into a world that had been shaped by these long-term, international forces that served as a framework even for local politics. Just as politicians of even a small city in the United States will still ally themselves with either Democrats or Republicans, so too did the local political disputes in Dante’s day sort themselves out into factions of imperial supporters (Ghibellines, mainly aristocratic families) and papal supporters (Guelphs, mainly new-moneyed, mercantile families).

What does all of this have to do with Dante? Clearly, Dante became the victim of these old disputes, like one caught up in the middle of some immense, indifferent machine, and his exile was the great unjust calamity of his life. What is extraordinary is that Dante himself later described



this disaster as one of the secrets of his success as a poet, because this was the event that transformed him from politician to prophet. Being in political exile meant that he had to become “a party unto himself,” or, in other words, he was forced to leave the polarizing world of politics. He was forced to ask questions not about short-term solutions but about the long-term conditions of why partisanship existed in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

### From Politician to Prophet

Against this background of his exile and early love poetry, we can begin to appreciate the unique intensity of Dante’s great poem, as well as its desire to encompass the totality of the world. If you’ve ever spent a long time away from home in a foreign country, then you know that, even if that place is as delightful as Tuscany, after a while you start aching for home. You miss the effortless life, ease of conversation, shared memories. Similarly, but with much more intensity, Dante ached for home the whole of his adult life. Even years later, when writing the *Comedy*, Dante had this sorrowful sense of the wayfarer in exile (for example, see *Par.* 25.1–9). At the same time, though, when Dante returned to writing after his tumultuous political years (1295–1305), he increasingly wanted to fulfill that old promise at the end of the *Vita Nuova*, the promise to write a love poem that would be greater than anything that had been written before. But now his understanding of love had been forced to get deeper and broader. Now he was writing not for himself and a few Florentine friends but for the world—a world that was so bruised, broken, and divided that it might not even be able to hear a love poem. But what if, just what if, he could write a poem that, by drawing on his own sense of pained exile, could awaken a spiritually sleepy world to what it chooses to forget? What if he could make people feel that they too were in exile, in exile from the Source of Love? What if he could shock, startle, scandalize, and violently shake them wide awake? And then, what if he could give a picture of love that was so beautiful, so stirring, and so deep that they would desire once again to know that love?

Thus, to put it starkly, Dante did not think he was writing literature for entertainment, like a novel, but rather that he was writing a kind of prophetic, visionary treatise—like a Jonah or Jeremiah who came into

the city from the desert to rebuke and condemn the inhabitants. His own political exile turned out to be the key to discovering humanity's spiritual exile. This discovery of spiritual exile, in turn, proved to be the key to writing a vision of love ever so much bigger—indeed, cosmic—than even what he had hoped to undertake at the end of *Vita Nuova*. To this end, Dante set about to develop a prophetic sensibility, the power to look down into the root causes of society's problems. And so the wayfarer (the man with the pilgrim's spirit, who lived his life in longing for home, knowing that he would never return), the politician (who labored for a just society), and the poet (who lost sleep at night in the lovesick effort to get just the right music into his language) united to write an intense and ambitious poem that would transform the world: the *Comedy*.

Part 1

*INFERNO*

# Zooming In and Zooming Out: How to Read *Inferno*

(*Inferno* 1–2)

## From Architecture to Nightmare: Reflecting on *Inferno* 1

Although the *Comedy* is, as I have argued, a poem of impeccable order, the poet is careful to make sure that our first impression is not of the poem's architecture but of its emotional power. In *Inferno* 1 we are immediately seized and carried away by some of the most gripping and dramatic imagery of the *Comedy*. Later, Dante will get philosophical (*Purg.* 25), talk about the moral principles that make up the boundary lines within hell (*Inf.* 11), and argue fine points of doctrine (*Par.* 2). But the reader of *Inferno* 1 doesn't feel he has stepped into a classroom; he has walked into the world of dreams.

The whole of *Inferno* 1 is an extraordinary poetic achievement in its ability to create the feeling of a nightmare. The reader feels the pilgrim's irrational fear, as if both were locked in a terrible dream. And yet the poet insists that his pilgrim is *not* sleeping. In fact, it was sleep that got him into the dark wood in the first place:

I cannot well recall how I came there.  
 I was so full of sleep at the time,  
 I abandoned the true way. (*Inf.* 1.10–12)

How he got there, he does not know, but he can remember clearly the disoriented terror that came over him, like a child who has woken up from a bad dream and can't remember where she is. The poem dramatically begins by recalling the memory of that restless and disorienting experience:

Midway in the journey of our life  
 I found myself in the midst of a dark wood—  
 the true way was lost.  
 Ah! How hard to tell!  
 How savage, harsh, and difficult was this wood,  
 so much so that in my mind my fear returns.  
 It is so bitter that death is barely worse.  
 But to treat the good that I found there  
 I will speak about the other things I saw. (*Inf.* 1.1–9)

After the introductory lines, the dreamlike narration continues: the pilgrim wanders through a vague landscape; he sees a hill that is illumined by sunlight on its crown; he stoutly resolves to climb the hill, but then his way is blocked by three strange beasts who refuse to give way; and, finally, having come to the point of absolute desperation, he sees a stranger walk out of the shadows and begs him for help. Again, like a story unfolding within a dream, the narrative seems so rich and full of meaning that it's difficult to pin it down to a single interpretation, and this elusiveness of meaning is in part how Dante gives *Inferno* 1 its psychological power. Meaning keeps slipping through your fingers.

Dante also uses harsh words to reinforce rhetorically this sense of fear and confusion. For example, listen to the Italian words in verses 4–5: *esta selva selvaggia* (a wood “savage, dense, and harsh”) has a roughness communicated by sibilant syllables, but then the poet stacks up a number of adjectives (the wood is *selvaggia e aspra e forte*, 1.5). This is a rhetorical device called “polysyndeton,” the stacking up of conjunction upon conjunction, as if rhetorically approximating a breathless description: “It was savage and dense and harsh . . .”

Dante also uses two similes to help convey the desperation of the pilgrim's first moments:

And like one who, with labored breath,  
just escaped from the sea onto the shore,  
turns toward the dangerous waters and stares,  
  
just so did my mind, still in flight,  
turn back to gaze at the pass  
that never yet let out a man alive. (*Inf.* 1.22–27)

Many of my readers will have had a brush with death, perhaps in a car, in which you saw how close you were to having your life ended. Likewise, Dante describes a swimmer immersed in water so rough and stormy that he doubts he will escape drowning. But somehow, against all odds, the swimmer makes it to shore, completely drained of all energy and strength. He stands up wearily and looks back at the raging water. In this way, the poet says, the pilgrim turned to look back at the wood that “never yet let out a man alive” (1.27).

When the weary pilgrim slowly turns and looks up, he sees the “mountain of delight” (*Inf.* 1.77). Along with him, the reader feels a momentary surge of hope. The pilgrim sees the peak, whose “shoulders / [are] now clothed by the rays of the sun” (1.16–17). His fear is momentarily calmed, and he resolves to climb to safety: “I took up the way again through the deserted slope, / in this way: the firm foot was always lower down” (1.29–30). Commentators explain that the mountain is covered in shale-like scree: every time the pilgrim takes a step up, his planted foot slides down. And so, though the pilgrim has good aspirations, the way up is not easy. Then he meets a wild beast: a leopard, which refuses to give way. You can imagine the pilgrim yelling at it, intimidating it, trying to frighten it away, but the beast simply refuses to move. Then a lion appears and roars so loud that “it seemed that the air trembled because of him” (1.48). Finally, a skinny, mongrel wolf, hungry and mangy, forces the pilgrim back down the hill. This is when Dante's second simile comes. The pilgrim is like

he who wins with joy,  
but then the moment arrives, and he loses all,  
and then is miserable and weeps in all his thoughts. (*Inf.* 1.55–57)

Anyone who has experienced bitter loss knows the feeling. Dante was on the verge of achieving, through sweat and labor, a real good that his heart desired, the radiance and bliss of a mountaintop experience—and just as he thought he was near enough to grasp it, it slips through his fingers and is gone. His heart burns for the memory of what could have been.

And so we have a dreamlike landscape, with action described with the psychological intensity of a nightmare; we hear about the pilgrim's fear, good intentions, obstacles, and failure. We feel Dante's poetry deeply. But in terms of what it means, Dante has left us in the dark: What is this wood? What is the "mountain of delight"? What are the three beasts? Why can't Dante overcome them? And why is it Virgil who comes to save the pilgrim? Why not Saint Patrick? Or Aristotle? Or an angel? Dante's poem is like a journey whose horizons continually recede even as you approach them.

### Dante and Wonder: How to Read *Inferno*

Although many of the details are meant to initially elude us, we can still note that, even from the first canto, Dante has begun to coach us in how to read his poem. There are at least two lessons. The first is that the reading experience of the *Comedy* works on multiple levels; we can, for example, get inside the poem and see with the pilgrim's eyes, or we can zoom out, considering the scene from the author's perspective. When these two views overlap, as in *Inferno* 1, we sense a distinct dramatic irony. The very words of the lost pilgrim in *Inferno* 1, unbeknownst to him, are expressed and framed in those groups of threes and tens the author built into his poetry. Thus, from the author's perspective, God is very close and present through the fabric of the poem, even if the character speaking within that poetry is blind to him in whom he lives and moves and has his being (Acts 17:28).

The second lesson is that, although we can consider the poem from that zoomed-out perspective, we have to begin with our immediate reading experience—that is, how Dante's rich and sensuous poetry evokes in us a complicated range of responses (horror, awe, pity, contempt, glee, relief, dread, reverence, and fear). For this reason, it would have been a great mistake to have begun an introduction to the *Comedy* by outlining the moral system that accounts for the architecture of Dante's imaginative world. Beginning with an explanation of the "system" would erect a

philosophical or theological scaffolding that could obscure the experience of reading the poetry. Indeed, Dante's most original achievement lies not so much in coming up with that hierarchical order of sins and virtues as in his ability to give flesh to that system of thought, to create a series of individual literary experiences to illustrate those thoughts. This insight should guide how we read the *Comedy*: we have to begin by being moved by the sensible and the sensuous in Dante's poem, and then proceed to a discussion of the tradition of thought that, like a skeleton, informs it.

On a similar note, scholars have had a lot to say about the role of allegory in the *Comedy*,<sup>1</sup> and it is certainly true that you find many allegorical moments: like the three beasts in *Inferno* 1, the tempestuous winds in *Inferno* 5, or the highly symbolic dreams of *Purgatorio* (all discussed below). Allegorical figures are scattered throughout the poem. At the same time, Dante wants the poem to feel real, intense, and personal. The pilgrim is not an allegorical figure but a man who has powerful interior responses. This is what is meant by Dante's "realism."

The *Comedy* (and *Inferno* in particular) is the great poem of interiority, and it is this interiority that popular culture overlooks. In the popular imagination, *Inferno* is a place of fire with a bunch of demons with pincers. The truth is, Dante himself identifies *interiority* as the essential component of his pilgrim's journey: "And I, I alone, / was there, arming myself to endure the war, / both of the way and of the pity of it" (*Inf.* 2.3–5). Dante's language here is powerful: he, he alone (*e io sol uno*), was making interior preparations for the "war" (*la guerra*). Here, he prepares himself not just for the hardships of the journey but also for a war of *pietate* (pity). Obviously, along the way, the pilgrim will encounter difficult landscapes and malicious demons. Along the way, he will suffer extreme fatigue, breathless from arduous climbs. He will experience fear when he thinks he has been abandoned. He will suffer despair when the demons block his forward progress. He will be lied to, chased, screamed at, insulted, threatened, and confused. In the end, he will emerge from hell, his face covered with grime and stained by tears (*Purg.* 1.95–99, 127–29). But even more than these physical trials, the pilgrim will have to undergo feats of the interior life. He will have to undertake a journey of interiority: something he, and he alone, must do. This explains the mystery of why the poet says, "Io sol uno," even though Virgil is standing right next to him, having just rescued him from miserable isolation!



*Inferno*, then, is the poem of interiority. It aims to crack the crusty shell of the heart and gain access to its secret, guarded places. It aims to use horror, wonder, and terror as ways to create afresh the possibility for transformation; or, to change the image, Dante's poetic violence is meant to melt down the hard heart so that it can be reforged into something new. Not surprisingly, then, the *Comedy* is packed full of "wonder" words: the pilgrim has visions of the *nuovo* and *novitate* (the frightfully new and bizarre); that which is *strano*, *orribile*, and full of *stupore* (strange, horrifying, and that which causes stupor); the pilgrim stops to *ammirare* (wonder) and stare at the *mirabile* and *maraviglia* (the miraculous and the marvelous). Words like this appear hundreds of times throughout the poem.<sup>2</sup> In Dante, these "wonder" words refer to instances of the bizarre, the harrowing, the unexpected, the previously inconceivable: severed heads, disemboweled bodies, backs broken by huge rocks. There are poisonous forests made up of "eerily strange," gnarled trees (*Inf.* 13.15), which resound with whispers; there is the "strange" experience (31.30) of the looming giants, who fill the pilgrim with fear; and there are the mangled bodies of the schismatics, or the headless Bertrand de Born. All of these visions are so startling that Dante can barely believe his eyes (28.113–20). The pilgrim, because his heart is opened up by these phenomena of surprise and fear, desires to stare fixedly (21.22) and to "inebriate" his eyes (29.2). These scenes of wonder are important for Dante, because *admiratio* (wonder) produces the desire to "look closely at" (*mirari*). As Mary Carruthers has pointed out, in the ancient world, rhetoricians worried that their audiences could become "sated," which could lead to *taedium* (boredom); that is, if the speech grew too predictable, then the audience could start to tune out.

In the Middle Ages, these rhetorical concerns were fused with spiritual concerns: monastic writers worried that the soul itself could arrive at a dangerous point of *satietas* (being sated) or *taedium*. And thus medieval spiritual masters recommended a vigorous reading program to keep the heart fresh. For this reason, they illustrated their books lavishly, built cathedrals with all kinds of surprising side chapels and variously colored marbles inlaid in the floor, and constructed cloisters with capitals carved with wildly exuberant images of monsters and fishes. Such diversity, color, and grotesque artistic wonders "surprise us—they did then, they do now. Their very diversity and discord shocks one from the

temptation to *taedium*. . . . Experiencing them in itself routs the noonday devil, for the variety they produce relieves tedium and refreshes a wearied mind. They may even strengthen the virtue of inner *hilaritas* [joy], healing a dangerous sadness or melancholy.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, getting the blood flowing again through wonder or even horror could heal the spiritual heart. As Gregory of Nyssa put it, “Tears are like blood in the wounds of the soul.” Carruthers explains that they are “hot, moist, and restorative of cold, deadened, scarred flesh.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Dante does not just describe the wonder the pilgrim experiences on his “way”; as a poet, he also tries to produce it, in *you*. Such *admiratio* temporarily destabilizes the mind, shakes its usual certainty, and in this moment of suspended judgment, the one caught up in wonder (the *admirans*) has an opportunity to take in the familiar, as if for the first time. The wondering “reader” becomes what I would call “affectively vulnerable,” because in a moment of suspended judgment his or her reason—that impulse to categorize, to put something in its appropriate box, without taking the time to marvel at it—has temporarily let down its guard.

But how does the poet use his craft to make this happen? Among other things, he uses what scholars call “deictic rhetoric”—that is, the language of “pointing.” Indeed, Dante pokes and prods us with his words, frequently addressing us and telling us, “Now look here” or “Note that, over there.” Many spiritual treatises in Dante’s day tried to paint vivid pictures in the mind, so that the reader could “see” and “hear” the suffering of Christ and “feel” the sorrow of Mary. Such writers, too, used deictic rhetoric, saying, “And now imagine that . . .” or “Look, now, how the blood flows from the wounds . . .”<sup>5</sup> In a similar way, we hear Virgil, at one point, yell at Dante: “Drizza la testa, drizza e vedi” (“Raise your head! Raise it and look,” *Inf.* 20.31). Just as Virgil directs the pilgrim’s attention, so Dante the poet becomes *our* guide. The narrator’s voice interrupts the story to poke at us and tell us to look deeper into a matter: “Look deeply for that teaching that lies hidden / underneath the veil of these strange and wonderful lines” (9.62–63). This isn’t an isolated case. Rather, the poet constantly tries to involve the reader, addressing him, begging him to look: “Think now, reader,” he says early on in *Inferno* (7.94); “Be sharp now, reader,” he says later in *Purgatorio* (8.14); “Now, reader, remember,” he patiently pleads (*Purg.* 17.1); “Reader, I promise you . . .” (*Inf.* 16.128; see also 25.46; 34.23). Dante never forgets his reader.

In addition to this deictic rhetoric, the poet often tries to get his reader not just to pay attention but also to enter the text and look through the pilgrim's eyes. For example, in *Inferno* 20 Dante says:

Of strange, shocking, new punishments I now must make verses. . . .

I saw a people, coming through the rounded valley:  
silent and lamenting, moving at the pace  
that stately processions move in our world.

And as I let my gaze descend down upon them,  
it struck me that, wondrously, each one was wrenched around—  
between the chin and the base of the chest,

because the face had been twisted around toward the kidneys,  
and thus they had to make their way backwards. . . .

Maybe, at some point, by some paralysis  
someone has become this wrenched about;  
but I, at least, have never seen it, nor do I think it could it be.

Reader, so that God can let you gather fruit  
from this reading, think, now, think for yourself:  
How I could possibly have kept my cheeks dry?

When from up close I saw our image  
so twisted . . .

Yes, I wept. (*Inf.* 20.1–25)

We see, then, an extraordinary sight: badly deformed human beings, more terribly mangled than any person you might see begging on the streets. This horrifies the pilgrim, causes him to freeze and stare. They appear to him *mirabilmente* (miraculously, 20.11). But then Dante the poet asks us to borrow the eyes of the pilgrim for ourselves: “Pensa per te stesso” (“Think now, think for yourself,” 20.20). Look within your own imagination and see if *you* could refrain from weeping. Dante does not just paint a Claude Lorraine–like panel, with characters scattered throughout a sweeping landscape, but aims to get his readers to see and feel as if they had become characters within the painting. Or, to use a metaphor from cinema, Dante asks readers to look through the point-of-view shot, that camera angle you would see if the actor himself were holding the camera. On a couple of occasions, the poet only describes the sounds of hell, so that, like a film when the screen has gone blank, the reader has to focus

on the mere acoustic experience of the staccato words. In this way Dante gives the reader a kind of firsthand experience.

One last example. In *Inferno* 17, when Dante climbs on top of Geryon, the beast that will ferry him through the air from upper hell down into its depths, the poet gives us an extraordinary description, as if inviting us, once again, to look through the pilgrim's eyes for ourselves:

I saw that I was  
in the air—it was all around—and I saw that  
every view of anything but the beast was gone.

It keeps on moving, swimming slowly, slowly,  
wheeling and descending, but I notice nothing  
but a breeze from below on my face. (*Inf.* 17.112–17)

Notice that the poet begins by narrating the event about the pilgrim in the past tense but then switches suddenly into the present, using a series of rich, descriptive words for the flight, but momentarily without reference to the pilgrim, as if trying to create a brief poetic space for us to move into the poem and feel, palpably, the twisting turns of the descent. He wants us to feel ourselves in the saddle, with the wind in our hair. The poet also lyrically evokes the rolling, rocking rhythm of the flight through the internal rhymes and assonance of the line: “Ella sen va notando lenta lenta; / rota e discende” (17.115–16). In moments like this, we are meant momentarily to look through the pilgrim's eyes as if they were our own. In sum, it is this sensitivity to the imaginary power of the poet that we have to bring, first and foremost, to the poem. Once we have done that, we can ask questions about the structure and the symbols. With this in mind, we are now in position to return to our questions about *Inferno* 1.

### The Wood and the Beasts

If Dante had wanted us to decode with ease what it was that blocked his way, or what he was looking for, he could have told us! For some reason, the poet has chosen to leave these things veiled. In part he must have done so in order to allow a more universal application to his poetry. Keep in mind how the poem opens: “Midway in the journey of *our* life . . .” (*Inf.* 1.1). That is, although this journey does imaginatively take place precisely in

the year 1300, beginning on Good Friday and moving into Eastertide, and although the journey involves a real historical person, Dante Alighieri, the poet still wants us to recognize that the pilgrim's journey is also *ours*. We can all relate to the experience of being morally and spiritually lost, or of suddenly coming to our senses and wondering why we do what we do. You keep a routine, you go to work, you play with the kids, and then all of a sudden you wake up and ask why. Sometimes these periods of questioning and confusion can extend over days or months. We often call them periods of depression, but it's a kind of spiritual "waylessness." For so many writers, from classical antiquity to the Brothers Grimm, being lost in the forest is one of the most frightening experiences imaginable, because you don't know if you are making progress. Have you already walked here? Are you going away from your destination? Are you walking in circles? You don't know, if you have no path to guide you. In a similar way, we can sometimes wake in our lives and wonder why we are pursuing the goods we have committed ourselves to. Whatever happened to the big dreams? Those impossibly heroic goals? How did you get stuck in this dark wood?

One of the greatest Italian scholars of Dante, Guglielmo Gorni, has said that this is how we should understand Dante's *selva oscura* (dark wood): as "the public life in which it is easy to lose the sense of true values, easy to lose that 'hope from on high.'" Gorni continues, "Virgil saves Dante from an existence dominated by the contingent, by accidents, by the vanity of things."<sup>6</sup> In other words, being lost in the dark wood is not necessarily connected to sinful living or neglecting duties. It's a loss of the deep, inspiring memory of why you are doing those things you must do. It's a forgetfulness of the big dream and the clarity of the way to achieve it. If you further remember the imaginary date of the poem, 1300, then note that the story is set five years after Dante had written those impassioned words at the end of the *Vita Nuova*, in which he promised to say something about Beatrice that had never been uttered by a man about a woman. Gorni suggests, then, that this failure to begin the poem promised at the end of the *Vita Nuova* is associated with the dark wood: Dante had lost that vision, the animation, the inspiration to do it. He had lost the vision of love, the sense of the palpable nearness of God.

The deserted landscape of the poem also helps us visualize this area as a spiritual wasteland, devoid of the presence of God. In fact, Dante builds in a powerful reference to the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 5:3, 6,

the prophet laments that, try as you might, you cannot find a righteous man in the world:

O LORD, are not thine eyes upon the truth? thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved; thou hast consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction. . . .

Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased.

Dante's own beasts seem to come directly from Jeremiah, with an important difference. In Jeremiah they are agents of destruction: violent and bloodthirsty animals, which creep back into the semideserted city when it begins to fall into ruins. In Dante, though, they also have an allegorical element, as if the greatest punishment of the wicked is not necessarily to receive external chastisement but rather to be left to the desires of their own hearts. Some scholars speculate that the three beasts might represent envy (in the leopard), pride (in the lion), and cupidity (in the wolf). In Virgil's mysterious prophecy, in which he cryptically refers to the "hound" who will bring justice and righteousness to the world (*Inf.* 1.97–102), we do get a clearer sense of what the wolf embodies—that is, the avaricious, lustful, and gluttonous appetite that, even though it gets what it wants, cannot but desire more. In light of this, it is probably best to understand the wolf as corresponding to the sins punished in circles 2 (the lustful), 3 (the gluttonous), 4 (the avaricious), and 5 (the wrathful) of hell; the lion, with its tremendous, violent roar, to circle 7 (that is, the realm of the violent); and the leopard to circles 8 and 9 (the fraudulent and traitorous). But Dante's art is such, as I have suggested, that one interpretation does not have to exclude the other: both of these sinful triads (cupidity, pride, and envy, as well as cupidity, violence, and fraud) could be present in the mysterious beasts simultaneously.

I like how canto 1 concludes on an almost humorous note. After Virgil has just described the alternative path that the pilgrim will have to take, given the fact that the road up the mountain that gives delight is blocked by the beasts, Dante responds: "Poet, I beg you / by that God you did not know, / so that I may escape this evil—or something even worse—, / please, lead me to that place you just described!" (*Inf.* 1.130–33). As if to

say, sure, sure, anywhere but here! But this first response, based on fear, will not be enough. The pilgrim will have to commit himself to a more difficult journey, not merely flee the threat of harm, as we shall see now.

### The Hero and the Coward in the Dark Wood (*Inferno* 2)

The action of *Inferno* 2 can be divided into four narrative blocks: (1) the pilgrim rethinks his decision to go on the arduous journey, doubting his worthiness to undertake this adventure; (2) Virgil accuses him of *viltade* (cowardice); (3) Virgil, to encourage his charge, tells him the backstory of all those who helped to set up this journey; and (4) Dante is once again infused with the desire to undertake the journey.

It is in this canto, too, that we get hints of why Virgil has been selected to lead Dante through hell. First and foremost, Virgil was the Roman poet of the *Aeneid*—that is, he who described the painful journey of the mythological Aeneas, the hero forced to flee from his native Troy when it was burned to the ground by the Greeks. For ancient man, as historians of religion have pointed out, the destruction of a city was an even greater disaster than it would be for us. Your history, family, and economic well-being would all, of course, be lost, but in the ancient world, at the center of all cities were the sacred shrines where divinities had initiated communication with mortals. These were places where the gods chose to make themselves manifest, where (in the words of Mircea Eliade) the “sacred irrupt[ed] into profane space.” All the rest of archaic man’s life and society was oriented around these points of revelation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when Aeneas is forced to flee Troy, he wanders in search of not only a suitable site for a new city but also a place where the presence of the divine, beyond his control, wills once again to make itself manifest. Aeneas is indeed, then, a man of devotion (to family, gods, and followers), but his special strength is his ability to resist any kind of mediocre settlement in which he would capitulate and found a city on a site that could provide mere subsistence. What he seeks is to found a city centered on divine revelation again.

This is at least one aspect of Virgil’s importance to Dante. Dante’s own pilgrimage has to be understood as a new *Aeneid*, in which he too has to journey to the land appointed him, and he has to resist the temptation of growing content with anything less. Appropriately, canto 2 begins by

establishing a high, Virgilian tone from the first verses. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil often describes sleep and rest in a highly poetic way. In a world of war and struggle, the poet says, sleep comes like refreshment from the gods:

It was night, and through all the land, deep sleep gripped weary creatures, bird and beast, when Aeneas, the leader, lay down on the river-bank, under the cold arch of the heavens, his heart troubled by war's sadness, and at last allowed his body to rest. (*Aen.* 8.26–29)<sup>8</sup>

Compare that with the opening of *Inferno* 2:

Now the day slips away, and the dark air  
frees the souls of the earth  
from their fatiguing tasks. (*Inf.* 2.1–3)

Thus, *Inferno* 2 begins with a Virgilian flavor, which, as we have seen, is appropriate, for Dante is about to begin a kind of double Virgilian journey: the journey of the pilgrim, in which he undertakes a heroic quest analogous to that of the great mythological hero; but also a poetic journey, in which the author of the *Comedy* rewrites the ancient epic, the *Aeneid*, seeking language that can sufficiently arouse and awaken the reader to be moved by what the pilgrim endured. We all know how little good words sometimes do, words about what we ought to do but then don't really put into practice. Dante here announces his intention to write beauties that demand action, that cut like swords and burn like fire. And thus, like a poet from antiquity, he empties himself out and calls for the divine assistance of the Muses:

O Muses! O lofty genius! May you help me now!  
O you mind! You have recorded what I saw.  
What nobility you have will now appear! (*Inf.* 2.7–9)

The main drama of the canto begins immediately after the first lines of *Inferno* 2. The pilgrim, who in the previous canto was overjoyed to find anyone in the dark wood who was willing to help him, now has second thoughts. He starts to think about this journey, and, in particular, he starts to ask himself who, if any, has accomplished such an enormous task: Who has walked through the land of the dead, still in flesh? Well,



according to sacred and classical tradition, both Saint Paul and Aeneas had experiences of the afterlife before their deaths (and it is for this reason that I call canto 2 “The Canto of Saint Paul and Aeneas”). This is what underlies the pilgrim’s expression of his doubt:

“You declare that the father of Silvius,  
still corruptible, nevertheless went  
to the immortal realm, and did it in the flesh!  
.....

“And then the Chosen Vessel went there,  
to bring consolation back to the faith. . . .

“But I? Traveling there? Who would grant that?  
I am no Aeneas, nor am I Paul.  
For that, neither I nor any other thinks me worthy.” (*Inf.* 2.13–15,  
28–33)

Look, Virgil, I’m just some guy in modern America with a family, a mortgage, and a job. I respect the old heroes, the old saints, but that’s not me. I don’t have that kind of superhuman power and strength. Perhaps you should just leave me here in the woods.

It’s an extraordinary moment, isn’t it? The pilgrim, now that he has been removed from the imminent danger posed by the beasts, announces his contentment with remaining where he is, because of his fear of taking on a great journey. It is at this point that Dante’s guide issues some stinging words:

“If I have well understood your words,”  
replied the shade of that magnanimous spirit,  
“you are plagued by a small-souled cowardice,  
  
“which so encumbers a man  
that it has often turned him back from enterprises of honor,  
just as a false vision among shadows frightens a beast.” (*Inf.* 2.42–47)

You are like a beast that shies from its own shadow. Ouch. Virgil is not very gentle here. The Roman poet, significantly called “magnanimous” (“great-souled,” 2.44), accuses Dante of *viltade*—that is, cowardice, lack of nobility, baseness. In courtly culture, this is the greatest insult one knight could give another. *Viltade* is the opposite of that noble self-forgetfulness that the warrior or the lover possessed—that is, the opposite of that noble self-abandon

that inspires the one who sees what must be done and charges at the enemy or the monster to do it. In contrast, the cowardly soul waits to see which way the battle turns before he either joins or runs away. He doesn't have that kind of inner strength that nobly casts off fear of harm to self and engages.

But Virgil, like a physician, does not just use his scalpel to expose corruption; he also tries to treat the underlying condition. And so, rather than just accuse the pilgrim of this baseness, or *viltade*, he tells him the story of his commission from Beatrice. Beatrice herself, of course, had been commissioned by Saint Lucy, and before that, in verses 94–96, we find that a “noble lady”—notice here, too, the language of the medieval court—saw Dante's need and set the whole process in action. If you have read the *Aeneid*, you will remember that, at one of the most dramatic moments of the poem, Aeneas goes down to the underworld to find his father, Anchises, who will give him words of counsel to guide him on the final stages of his journey. And so Aeneas seeks out his father among the shadowy souls of the dead, and when he finally sees Anchises, his father shows him a vision of all the heroes who will be Aeneas's offspring. It's a kind of Abrahamic moment, in which Anchises promises Aeneas not just that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars, but also that they will be famous, heroic, and virtuous. Thus, Virgil managed to get Aeneas to move toward Rome by a vision of what was to come; here in the Christian poet, Virgil inspires the pilgrim Dante by a vision of what has already taken place. He says to Dante that long before you even arrived at this juncture, heaven had so ordained things that you would have strength and assistance, provided that you did not reject them through cowardice. Virgil then asks Dante a series of short, impassioned questions:

“I saved you from the savage beast that stood before you,  
the one that had stolen from you the easy path to the mountain of  
delight.

“Well then: What? Why, why do you stay?  
How can you harbor such base cowardice in your heart?  
Where is your boldness and strength?

“Given that three such blessed ladies  
from the court of heaven take care for you,  
not to mention my words that move you toward the good?” (*Inf.*

2.119–26)

We are beginning to see why Virgil was selected. Beatrice told him, “Or movi” (*Inf.* 2.67)—that is, “Go and *move*” Dante with your words. Virgil is the poet who writes about heroism, but he writes with words that prick, stir, and move. He is the poet of magnanimity and eloquence, who uses the *parola ornata* (“the well-adorned word,” 2.67). The result is that the pilgrim’s heart is filled, once again, with “desire” (2.136). As the simile at the end of the canto points out, the pilgrim’s inner virtue and strength, which had been sleeping, is woken up by the words of Virgil. An epic poet is needed to call out an epic hero.