

How to Read Dante

by John Ciardi

In the opening allegory of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante finds himself lost and in darkness:

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
From the straight road and woke to find myself
Alone in a dark wood.

These are familiar allegorical devices and no sensitive reader will fail to understand that “the straight road” has something to do with rectitude (i.e., “the straight and narrow”), that “the dark wood” has something to do with error/sinfulness/loss of purpose, and – by extension – that the proper course must lie in finding the light.

Having “something to do with” is not close enough, however. Dante demands more careful reading. Because of that demand, because of the immense and minute scholarship that has been expended upon Dante, and because too few English readers have been pointed in the right direction to him, Dante has acquired a reputation as an immensely difficult poet.

It is true that Dante writes in depth. Though his language is normally simple, his thought is normally complex. But if the gold of Dante runs deep, it also runs right up to the surface. A lifetime of devoted scholarship will not mine all that gold, yet enough lies on the surface – or just an inch below – to make a first reading a bonanza in itself. All one really needs is some first instruction in what to look for. Thereafter he need only follow the vein as it goes deeper and deeper into the core of things.

The instruction may properly begin with those opening lines. “Midway in our life's journey,” writes Dante. The reader must understand that Dante is not tossing off a poetic generalization. “Our life's journey” means specifically the “three-score years and ten” of the Biblically-allotted life span. “Midway,” therefore, means that Dante was thirty-five years old at the time of which he writes. Since he was born in 1265, it follows that the poem opens in the year 1300. And from a number of statements that can be culled from the poem, the careful reader can learn that the exact time is just before dawn of Good Friday.

By culling certain other statements, most of which are made at once, the reader may further learn that the sun is at the vernal equinox, that it is in the sign of Aries (the zodiacal sign in which God placed it at the Creation), and that the moon is full. These elements, added to the fact that it is the hour of the dawn and the season of Easter, clearly compound a massive symbol of rebirth. All things are at their regenerative peak when the lost soul realizes it has gone astray, for that realization is itself the beginning of the soul's rebirth.

Scholars have since shown that there was no Friday in the year 1300 on which all these conditions obtained. Dante, moreover, was a close student of astronomy and astrology. He knew that no such conjunction of sun, moon, zodiacal sign, and Easter season had taken place. He invented that conjunction as a full-swelling introductory theme in what amounts to a symphonic structure. The poem sounds its first chords with first light striking through darkness. In what follows, the darkness must grow more and more absolute to the very depth of dark (Hell); the light must then

begin to overcome the darkness (Purgatory); and finally the “music” must mount from light to light to the ultimate indescribable glory of the all-blazing presence of God at the peak of Heaven.

As soon as Dante recognizes that he is lost and in darkness, he looks up and sees the first light of the new day glowing on the shoulders of a little hill. Throughout the *Divine Comedy*, the sun (“that planet/whose virtue leads men straight on every road”) is a symbol for God, for Divine Illumination. In the *Purgatorio*, for example, souls may climb online in the light of the sun; once it has set, it is possible for them to descend, but they lack the power to move upwards even so much as an inch. Only in the light of God may one ascend that road, for that is the light to which the soul must win.

Another allegorical theme begins immediately. Dante, in his passion to reach the light (God), races straight up the hill to it. He uses a grand and typical synecdoche to describe his speed, saying that he raced up that slope at such a pace “that the fixed foot was ever the lower.”

Synecdoche is that figure of speech in which a part is taken to represent the whole. A less certain writer might have reached for all sorts of great metaphors to describe the speed of his climb. Dante focuses on a single detail that does for all. If the feet of a man climbing a steep slope move in such a way that the moving foot is forever above the one that is pausing, it follows that the climb must be taking place at a blurring speed – in fact, at an impossible rate, whereby hyperbole must be added to synecdoche as a reinforcement of the poetic effect. The point for the reader to remember is that it will not do to slide over Dante’s details. They will take thinking about because they took thought to find.

There is perhaps nothing so entirely impressive about the *Divine Comedy* as its power of mind. The true mark of any writer is in the choices he makes. Having written three words, he must choose a fourth. Having written four, he must choose a fifth. Nothing happens into a good poem; everything must be chosen into it. A poem may be thought of as a construction for making choices, and it is in the quality of his choices that Dante makes his greatness known. His language and his prosody can be rough and awkward. Anyone who reads the original will wonder at times if this is really “poetry.” Very well, then, let it be prose, if one insists on folly. But if it is prose, it is a prose of a previously unknown order, for the depth and multiplicity of mind that seem to function at every choice have not been matched in any piece of Western writing.

Meanwhile, back at the narrative, Dante is racing up the slope to what would be immediate salvation, could he manage to reach that light. The sinner has realized he is in darkness, he has seen the light, he ardently desires it, and he races to be received by it. But salvation is not to be had that easily: Dante finds his way blocked by three beasts. There is a She-Wolf that represents the sins of Incontinence, a Lion that represents the sins of Violence and Bestiality, and a Leopard that represents Fraud. The beasts themselves are derived from Jeremiah; the three categories of sin are derived from Aristotle. Into these three categories fall all the sins of the world. The Three Beasts, therefore, represent the total blindness of which the world is capable. Symphonically, they also foreshadow the three divisions of Hell through which Dante must journey. In the Hell of the She-Wolf are punished the sins of excessive animal appetite. In the lower Hell, the Hell of the Lion, are punished the sins of bestial violence. In the lowest Hell, the Hell of the Leopard, are punished the sins of fraud, worse than the sins of bestiality because they involve the perversion of the higher gift of intellect – a

beast, that is to say, can murder; but only a rational being, by perverting the gift of rationality, can commit a fraudulent act.

These three beasts drive Dante back into the darkness, blocking the direct and easy way to that light. In that darkness, when all seems to have been lost, and when Dante can find no way around those beasts of worldliness, there appears to him the figure of Virgil.

Virgil is a complex figure, combining within himself, among other things, the classical heritage, genius, magic powers, and Dante's personal devotion. On the first level, however, it will do to take him as representing Human Reason in its best development. More subtly, he may be taken as Aesthetic Wisdom, the knowledge of the true poet. For present purposes let him be taken simply as representing Human Reason. In that role, he points out that there is no such express road to God as Dante had imagined in racing up the hill: "He must go by another way who would escape / this wilderness."

The other way – the long way round – is the total journey into ultimate darkness and out again to ultimate light. Such is the arduous road of the *Divine Comedy*. It is the painful descent into Hell – to the recognition of sin. It is the difficult ascent of Purgatory – the renunciation of sin. Then only may Dante begin the soaring flight into Paradise, to the rapturous presence of God. God, that is to say, may be found only on the other side of the total self-searching experience of a zealous life. There are no shortcuts to that totally encompassing experience. Salvation must grow out of understanding, total understanding can follow only from total experience, and experience must be won by the laborious discipline of shaping one's absolute attention. The object is to achieve God, and Dante's God exists in no state of childlike innocence: He is total knowledge and only those who have truly experience knowledge can begin to approach Him.

Virgil, as Human Reason, is the first guide to that ultimate knowledge, but Virgil cannot guide Dante all the way. Reason is finite and God is infinite. The greater guide, in the medieval concept, was Faith. Reason was merely the handmaiden of Faith. Virgil can guide Dante to the recognition of sin and to its renunciation, which is to say, through Hell and to the top of Purgatory. But once at that summit, the soul has achieved purity. It has risen beyond Reason. It is ready to enter the Divine Mysteries. And there Beatrice (call her Divine Love) must take over.

It was in her infinite wisdom as Divine Love that Beatrice sent Reason to the man's soul in his hour of darkness, that Reason might serve as his guide to bring him into her higher presence. One may not simply wish himself into that higher presence. That presence must be won by devout labor.

That devout labor is what might be called the basic plot and the basic journey of the *Divine Comedy*. All that follows, once the journey has begun, is an amplification of themes that have already been established. That much understood, the writing itself will best explain itself as it unfolds – always, of course, with the help of those indispensable footnotes.

When, however, one has read all the way through the poem and has returned to reread those first Cantos, he will find many other themes rooted in them. There are four such themes that any beginning reader will do well to grasp as particularly able to enrich his first experience.

The first has to do with Dante's sinfulness. What sin was it that had brought him into the Dark Wood of Error? Dante was expelled from Florence on charges of having been a grafter, and some commentators have tried to identify his guilt in that charge. In the *Purgatorio* Dante himself recognizes that he is guilty of Pride, and to some extent of Wrath. He has both these offenses to pay for when he returns to Purgatory after his death. But the charges against Dante were certainly trumped up by his political enemies, and no specific act of Pride or Wrath can be cited to account for Dante's opening mood. His offense was, rather, Acedia. Let it serve to label this first theme.

The Seven Deadly Sins for which souls suffer in Purgatory are – in ascending order – Pride, Envy, Wrath, Acedia, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust. Acedia is the central one, and it may well be the sin the twentieth century lost track of. Acedia is generally translated as Sloth. But that term in English tends to connote not much more than laziness and physical slovenliness. For Dante, Acedia was a central spiritual failure. It was the failure to be sufficiently active in the pursuit of the recognized Good. It was to acknowledge Good, but without fervor.

The spiritual awakening to which Dante comes in the Dark Wood – the enormous rebirth – is the awareness of the fact that he has not been sufficiently zealous in his pursuit of the Good. The *Divine Comedy* is the zealous journey from the man's recognized spiritual torpor (neglect of God) to the active pursuit of his soul's good (love of God). Every step of that journey may simultaneously be understood as the man's active embrace of his Godly experience, as the soul's active pursuit of the love of Good, and as the artist's pursuit of form.

The second theme – perhaps it is not so much a theme as a method – is inseparable from the others. Call it the Five Levels. In a letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala, Dante explicitly names four levels of meaning that he intends all the way through the *Divine Comedy* – *narrative*, *allegorical*, *moral*, and *anagogical*. That letter may, as many scholars contend, be a forgery. Whether genuine or not, what it states explicitly is clearly implicit in the writing. And to those four stated levels may be added a fifth: the journey seen as *progress of the soul*.

Dante was a parochial man. He was persuaded that the One Truth had been revealed to him, and he was intolerant of all non-Catholic views. He refused, for example, to think of Mohammed as a religious leader but dismissed him as schismatic and assigned to him a particularly grotesque punishment in Hell.

But if the man was parochial, the artist was universal as only art can be. The *Divine Comedy* is a triumph of art over creed. And that triumph – to paraphrase terms that Dante himself might have used – arises from the force of the Esthetic Mysteries, which is to say, the power of form in the interplay of its structures and its levels of meaning.

The first obvious level, for example, is narrative: a travelogue. But that journey is through a country populated by second meanings. On one level Dante writes of Hell as a literal place of sin and punishment. The damned are there because they offended a theological system that enforces certain consequences of suffering. But part of that theological system has also decreed that salvation was available to all men. Christ in his ransom had procured endless mercy. One need only wish to be saved, need only surrender his soul to God in a last gasp of contrition, and he will be saved. He may have to suffer at length in Purgatory, but, once there, his place is reserved in heaven and he will in time arrive there. Purgatory is like our modern colleges: no one can flunk out of them.

It follows, then, that the only way to get into Hell is to insist upon it. One must deliberately exclude himself from grace by hardening his heart against it. Hell is what the damned have actively and insistently wished for.

Thus, allegorically, Hell is the true goal of the damned. On the surface the state of the sinners is described in terms of sin. The wonder and the universality of it are that a reader who does no care for those terms may restate them in terms of behavior, and the *Inferno* remains entirely coherent as a dramatic treatise on self-destructive behavior. Like addicts, the damned both hate and love their self-destruction. "They yearn for what they fear," says Dante.

Thus Hell is not only a specific place but a moral and anagogical allegory of the guilty conscience of the damned. It is the projection into a physical reality of the inner state of the damned. As Purgatory is such a projection of the inner state of those who suffer towards grace. As Heaven is such another projection of the inner state of those who have achieved grace. Each environment is an allegory and a moral and anagogical commentary on the essential nature of the souls one finds in each. Hell exists from within.

In a detailed discussion in the *Purgatorio*, Dante reinforces these levels of meaning by pointing out that though mortal man may deceive by hiding his true nature under false semblances, the dead, by the very nature of their aerial bodies, can only appear to be exactly what they are. The dead cannot dissemble. *What* they appear to be and *where* they appear, they are.

The third theme – let it be called the Moral Universe or the Sentient Universe – is the vast, overriding concept of the total universe that makes the *Divine Comedy* the massive vehicle it is. Every artist seeks the vehicle that will best engage all his possibilities, just as every actor seeks the perfect role for himself. So, any actor would rather play Hamlet than Uncle Tom. Hamlet gives him more chances to act.

Dante's vehicle is nothing less than the total universe. Where in all poetry is there an equivalent subject-structure? Dante not only draws a map of his universe; he walks it from end to end. But his map is both of a physical geography and of a structure of values. That universe exists on all five levels of meaning.

For Dante, as for classical man, there was no real distinction between moral and physical law; between, say, the moral law against incest and the physical law of gravity. All of matter was a projection of God's will, and what we call physical law and what we call moral law derived equally from that will. When Oedipus, though unknowingly, transgressed moral law by killing his father and marrying his mother, a plague descended upon Thebes. It would not have occurred to the Greeks that to think of a flight of locusts as a consequence of what happened in the king's bedroom was to cross categories.

Dante's physical universe is Ptolemaic. It consists of nine concentric circles (spheres) with the Earth as the center. In ascending order those spheres are: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Fixed Stars, and the Primum Mobile. Beyond the Primum Mobile lies the Empyrean, which is the dwelling and presence of God. God is an essence that entirely surrounds and contains creation.

If God is the circumference of this nine-layered sphere, the center is the greatest distance one can travel from God. That center is the Earth, and the center of that center is the bottom of Hell. Inevitably, it is there, at the Ultimate bottom of the universe, that Dante places Satan.

Satan is a powerful symbol. He is described as an unholy reverse-Trinity with three foul heads and three pairs of wings. He has been flung from Heaven to the farthest distance one can go from God. To his dark center drain all the waters of the earth, bearing all the filthy sediment of all sin and uncleanness. Satan's six wings beat madly in his efforts to escape from that foul lake but they succeed only in whipping up a freezing gale that turns all to ice, fixing him ever more securely in the bottom ice-tray. From the top of Purgatory, moreover, there flow down to him the waters of Lethe, in which the finally purified souls bathe and are washed clean of every memory of sin. That memory, too, is frozen into the filthy ice about Satan.

Thus that center is the center of all weight, of all sin, of all darkness, and of all cold. And to it flows all the filth of time. Weight, sin, dark, cold, and filth are, of course, the five things farthest from God. And thus the universe becomes a scale of precise values: the closer a thing is to the center, the lower it is on the scale; the closer a thing is to the circumference, the higher it is.

The existence of that scale makes possible an enormous economy in Dante's writing. Dante need only place his finger on that map and say what he saw there. The very act of placement becomes the value judgment.

That economy is further assisted by the firm laws of the other world. As one sins, so is he punished; as he strove for grace, so is he rewarded. In Hell, then, each punishment is a symbolic analysis of the nature of the sin and of the state of the sinner's soul. The reader need only be told, for example, that the punishment of the Lustful is highest in the Infernal scale, and that it consists of being buffeted eternally round and round by a dark whirlwind. The reader knows at once that this sin, though sufficient for damnation, is the least weighty of all the sins of Hell proper, and that the nature of the sin is to allow one's soul to be buffeted round and round by the dark winds of immoderate passion. Love is a sweet human state, but by excessive physical love these sinners shut their souls from God, surrendering "reason to their appetites."

Dante's Cantos average about 140 lines. As a general thing he requires no more than twenty or thirty lines to identify the sinner and describe the punishment. Since the value judgment is already established by the map, and since the punishment is a symbolic analysis of the sin, these essential matters are settled in short order, and Dante has the rest of his Canto available for all sorts of matters that attract his ranging mind.

Dante had once set out to be an encyclopedist. His *// Convivio* – never finished – was an effort to set down in Italian all human "science." There is nothing that does not interest him. As a poet, moreover, he would naturally look for chances to use his dramatic, lyric, and didactic powers. So, with his structure firmly determined by its basic economy, Dante is free to range at will, packing every rift with those fascinating details that add so much to his poem. He has time for gossip, for prophecies, for marvelous dramatic interplays, for treatises on history, for analyzing the French monarchy, the corruption of the Church, the decay of Italian politics. He has time for all sorts of metaphysical treatises on such matters as the nature of the generative principle, literary criticism, meteorology – in short, for his whole unfinished encyclopedia. And he still has time to invent a death

for Ulysses, to engage in a metamorphic contest with Ovid, to make side remarks to his friends. He can give full rein to his powers because he has found the inexhaustible vehicle.

The fourth principal theme will inevitably reveal itself to the careful reader, but he will lose nothing by having it in mind from the start. Call it the Architectonics. The *Divine Comedy* has often been compared to a cathedral, and, whether or not the comparison is finally apt, it is certainly true that Dante's details keep acquiring significance as one goes on and learns to look back at them from some corresponding point in the later structure. The structure, that is to say, produces a *back-illumination*.

Charon, for example, is the boatman of the damned, ferrying them across Acheron into Hell proper. He is a memorable figure. Later, one meets the Angel-Pilot who ferries souls to Purgatory. He, too, is a memorable figure. But no reasonably careful reader can fail to see that one ferryman stands in meaningful relation to the other. Thus, the Angel is not only himself, but an opposite figure to Charon, and Charon seen backwards from the figure of the Angel acquires a dimension he did not have as an isolated figure. The development of these structural correspondences – of an endless number of them – is an everlasting and ever-enlarging source of the power of the *Divine Comedy*.

The supreme art of poetry is not to *assert* meaning but to *release* it by the juxtaposition of poetic elements. Form, in its interrelations, is the most speaking element. Because in any extended poetic structure these juxtapositions will fall into difference perspective when looked at from different points of vantage, that release of meaning is subject to endless meaningful reinterpretation. The inexhaustibility of the *Divine Comedy* is a consequence of this structural quality. It is for that reason that no one can ever finish reading it. There will always be a new way of viewing the elements. But if no man can finish the poem, any man may begin it and be the richer for having begun. The present imperfect gloss – skimming though it be – is really about all one needs to start with. And, having started, all he needs is to pay attention. The poem itself is the rest of the way, and the way is marked.