

Introduction to *The Inferno* **by Archibald T. MacAllister**

The Divine Comedy is one of the few literary works which have enjoyed a fame that was both immediate and enduring. Fame might indeed be said not to have awaited its completion, shortly before the author's death in 1321, for the first two parts, including the *Inferno* here presented, had already in a very few years achieved a reputation tinged with supernatural awe. Within two decades a half-dozen commentaries had been written, and fifty years later it was accorded the honor of public readings and exposition – an almost unheard-of tribute to a work written in the humble vernacular.

The six centuries through which the poem has come to us have not lessened its appeal nor obscured its fame. All of them have not, of course, been unanimous in their appreciation: for a fifteenth-century Latinist, Dante was a poet “fit for cobblers”; eighteenth-century worshipers of Reason could not be wholly sympathetic to a poet who insisted on the limitations of reason and philosophy. It was the effete mid-sixteenth century which, in spite of certain reservations, first proclaimed “divine” the work its author had called simply his “Comedy.” The significant fact is that *The Divine Comedy* has demanded critical consideration of each successive age and every great writer; and the nature of their reaction could well serve as a barometer of taste and a measure of their greatness.

By that standard the present age should prove truly great, for its interest in the *Comedy* has rarely been matched. Credit for the nineteenth-century rediscovery of Dante in the English-speaking world belongs to Coleridge, who was ably seconded in this country by Longfellow and Norton. Contemporary enthusiasm was touched off by T.S. Eliot's *Essay on Dante* and has grown, in some quarters, to the proportions of a cult.

What is this work which has displayed such persistent vitality? It is a narrative poem whose greatest strength lies in the fact that it does not so much narrate as dramatize its episodes. Dante had doubtless learned from experience how soporific a long narrative could be. He also firmly believed that the senses were the avenues to the mind and that sight was the most powerful (“noblest,” he would have said) of these. Hence his art is predominantly visual. He believed also that the mind must be moved in order to grasp what the senses present to it; therefore he combines sight, sound, hearing, smell, and touch with fear, pity, anger, horror, and other appropriate emotion to involve his reader to the point of seeming actually to experience his situations and not merely to read about them. It is really a three-dimensional art.

The Divine Comedy is also an allegory. But it is fortunately that special type of allegory wherein every element must first correspond to a literal reality, every episode must exist coherently in itself. Allegoric interpretation does not detract from the story as told but is rather an added significance which one may take or leave. Many readers, indeed, have been thrilled by *The Inferno*'s power with hardly an awareness of further meanings. Dante represents mankind, he represents the “Noble Soul,” but first and always his is Dante Alighieri, born in thirteenth-century Florence; Virgil represents human reason, but only after he has been accepted as the poet of ancient Rome. The whole poem purports to be a vision of the three realms of the Catholic otherworld, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and a depiction of “the state of the soul after death”; yet it is peopled with Dante's contemporaries and, particularly in the materialistic realism of *The Inferno*, it is torn by issues and feuds of the day, political, religious, and personal. It treats of the most universal values – good and

evil, man's responsibility, free will and predestination; yet it is intensely personal and political, for it was written out of the anguish of a man who saw his life blighted by the injustice and corruption of his times.

The Divine Comedy is classically referred to as the epitome, the supreme expression of the Middle Ages. If by this is meant that many typically medieval attitudes are to be found in it, it is true: the reasoning is scholastic, the learning, the mysticism are those of the author's time. But if from such a statement one is to infer (as is frequently done) that the poem is a hymn to its times, a celebration and glorification of them, as Virgil's *Aeneid* was of Rome, then nothing could be more misleading. The *Comedy* is a glorification of the ways of God, but it is also a sharp and great-minded protest at the ways in which men have thwarted the divine plan. This plan, as Dante conceived it, was very different from the typically medieval view, which saw the earthly life as a "vale of tears," a period of trial and suffering, an unpleasant but necessary preparation for the afterlife where alone man could expect to enjoy happiness. To Dante such an idea was totally repugnant. He gloried in his God-given talent, his well-disciplined faculties, and it seemed inconceivable to him that he and mankind in general should not have been intended to develop to the fullest their specifically human potential. The whole *Comedy* is pervaded by his conviction that man should seek earthly immortality by his worthy actions here, as well as prepare to merit the life everlasting. His theory is stated explicitly in his Latin treatise, *De Monarchia*:

Ineffable Providence has thus designed two ends to be contemplated of man: first, the happiness of this life, which consists in the activity of his nature powers, and is prefigured by the Earthly Paradise; and then the blessedness of life everlasting...which may be symbolized by the Celestial Paradise.

To us, reading his masterpiece at the comfortable distance of six hundred years, it may well seem that few men have better realized their potential than Dante; to him, a penniless exile convicted of a felony, separated under pain of death from home, family, and friends, his life seemed to have been cut off in the middle.

It was Dante's pride – and the root of his misfortune – to have been born in the free commune of Florence, located near the center of the Italian peninsula, during the turbulent thirteenth century. It is important that we remember to think of it not as an Italian city, but as a sovereign country, a power in the peninsula and of growing importance internationally. It had its own army, its flag, its ambassadors, its foreign trade, its own coinage; the florin, in fact, was on its way to becoming the standard of international exchange, the pound sterling or dollar of its day. Its control was a prize worth fighting for, and the Florentines were nothing loath to fight, especially among themselves. Internal strife had begun long before, as the weakening of the Empire had left its robber-baron representatives increasingly vulnerable to attack and eventual subjection by the townsfolk. They had become unruly citizens at best in their fortress-like houses, and constituted a higher nobility whose arrogance stirred the resentment of the lesser nobility, the merchants and artisans. The history of the republic for many years is the story of the bloody struggle among these groups, with the gradual triumph of the lower classes as flourishing trade brought them unheard-of prosperity. Early in Dante's century the struggle acquired color and new ferocity. In 1215 the jilting of an Amidei girl was avenged by the murder of the offending member of the Buondelmonti family, which, according to the chronicler Villani, originated the infamous Guelph-Ghibelline factions. But the lines had already

long been drawn on the deeper issues, with the Ghibellines representing the old Imperial aristocracy and the Guelphs the burghers who, in international politics, favored the Pope. In 1248, with the aid of Frederick II, the Ghibellines expelled the Guelphs; in 1251 the latter returned and drove out the Ghibellines, who were again defeated in 1258. In 1260 the Ghibellines amassed a formidable army under the leadership of Farinata degli Uberti and overwhelmed the Guelphs at Montaperti, where the Arbia ran red with the blood of the six thousand slain, and sixteen thousand were taken prisoner. The very existence of Florence hung momentarily in the balance as the triumphant Ghibellines listened to the urgings of their allies from neighboring Siena that they wipe out the city; only Farinata's resolute opposition saved it. Gradually the Guelphs recovered, and in 1266 they completely and finally crushed their enemies at Benevento. Thus ended the worst of this partisan strife from which, as Machiavelli was to write, "there resulted more murders, banishments, and destruction of families than ever in any city known to history."

Dante Alighieri had been born the preceding year, 1265, toward the end of May; he was a year old when his family (a typically Guelph mixture of lesser nobility and burgher) must have joined in the celebration of their party's victory. His whole impressionable childhood was undoubtedly filled with stories of the struggle so recently ended. The fascination it had for him is evident in the *Comedy*, where it is an important factor in *The Inferno* and the lower, "material" portion of *The Purgatorio*.

Our actual knowledge of Dante's life is disappointingly small, limited to a few documents of record. The biographies, beginning with Boccaccio's about fifty years after his death, are largely hearsay, legend and deductions based on his works and the meager references scattered through them. We know that his mother died when he was very young, that his father remarried, and that Dante was completely orphaned in adolescence. This is thought to account for a certain hunger for parental affection which can be noted in the *Comedy*. He doubtless received the normal education of the day for his class, and perhaps more, for his bent must have been clearly intellectual and literary. That he took an early interest in the vernacular lyric only recently borrowed from the Provençal is demonstrated by poems dating from his middle or late teens. It was through this activity that he made his closest friendship, that with Guido Cavalcanti, who was a gifted poet some years Dante's senior.

Most of our impressions about his youth are gleaned from his first work, in the planning of which Cavalcanti had a part. Called *La Vita Nuova* ("The New Life"), it was deliberately written in the vernacular in 1292 to celebrate the most important influence in Dante's life, his love for Beatrice Portinari. It is made up of sonnets and longer lyrics interspersed with prose passages which explain and narrate the circumstances under which the poems had been composed years earlier. An astonishing feature of the book is the careful symmetry of its arrangement where the balance of three, nine, and ten foreshadows the elaborate design which will be worked out in the *Comedy*. Very briefly, it is the story of a boy of nine suddenly awaking to love at the sight of a girl almost the same age; of a second encounter at the age of 18 when a greeting is exchanged; of tribulations and misunderstandings leading to her disapproval; of her sudden death when the poet was 25, his grief and attempted consolation by another girl; finally of a "marvelous vision" of his Beatrice when he was 27, thus completing the trinity of "nines" and determining him to write no more of her until he could do so worthily. Although it is autobiographical, the *Vita Nuova* is not an autobiography; it is a

delicate and sensitive analysis of emotions. Such facts as enter into it assume an air of strange unreality.

From our small array of factual data we learn that Dante's life in this period included other things than tremulous sighs and visions. In 1289 he took part in the Battle of Campaldino and the capture of Caprona. In 1295 appears the first record of his political activity. In the same year he made himself eligible for public office by enrolling in a guild, the Apothecaries', where the books of that day were sold. In the following year it is recorded that he spoke in the "Council of the Hundred." By 1299 he had advanced to fill a minor ambassadorship. In the meantime he married Gemma, sister of his friend Forese Donati and of the hot-tempered Corso. As the mature but still youthful Alighieri was playing an ever more prominent role in politics, familiar tensions were once again building up within the republic. Thirty years without a serious threat from their common enemy put too great a strain of Guelph unity; and again it was a murder, though in nearby Pistoia, which precipitated open conflict. The Florentines took sides and in the spring of 1300 the two parties, called "Blacks" and "Whites," fought in the streets. It was at this particular moment that Dante's political career was crowned with the highest success and he was elected one of the six supreme magistrates, called priors. Himself a moderate White, he found it necessary during the two-month term to join in banishing his brother-in-law, Corso Donati, and his "first friend," Guido Cavalcanti, as ringleaders respectively of the Blacks and Whites. (Cavalcanti died very soon of an illness contracted during his banishment.) As friction continued, the Blacks conspired for the intervention of the Pope, Boniface VIII, who was delighted with the chance to strengthen the Papacy's claim on Tuscany. In spite of frantic White opposition he sent Charles of Valois ostensibly as impartial arbitrator and peacemaker. What the Pope's secret orders were became instantly apparent when Charles was admitted in November 1301, for he set upon the Whites, admitted the banished Blacks, and stood by as they gave themselves over to murder and pillage. The matter was then legitimized by a series of "purge trials" of the sort only too familiar to us. Among those accused, and of course convicted, of graft and corruption in office was Dante Alighieri. Fortunately he had been absent and had stayed away; but from early in 1302 his voluntary absence became exile under penalty of being burned alive.

We know even less of the remaining 19 years except that they were spent largely with a series of patrons in various courts of Italy. The exile had no funds, no reputation as yet, no powerful friends. He stayed at various times with the Scala family, then with the Malaspinas; tradition has it that he studied at Paris, and even at Oxford. As time passed and his reputation grew, his way became easier and his last years were spent in relative comfort at Ravenna as the honored guest of Guido Novello da Polenta, nephew of Francesca da Rimini. On the way back from a diplomatic mission to Venice he fell ill and died soon after his return. In *Paradiso XVII* he left one of the most poignant descriptions of life in exile ever written: "Thou shalt prove how salty tastes another's bread, and how hard a path it is to go up and down another's stairs."

That Dante had ample reason to feel that the political chaos of his day was a prime menace to man's pursuit of happiness should be quite apparent. It should also be understandable that he used the *Comedy* to protest this evil and to suggest a remedy. His analysis and conclusions took years of reading and meditation, during which he denounced all existing parties, Whites, Blacks, Guelphs, and Ghibellines, in order to "make a party by himself." As his compatriot Machiavelli was to do two hundred years late and from very similar motives, he sought his material in the literature of Ancient Rome, with the difference that the later scholar had the advantage of the humanistic revival and the

free inquiry of the Renaissance, whereas Dante was a pioneer circumscribed by scholasticism. He had already begun his study of ancient philosophy a few years after the *Vita Nuova* and before his political disaster. In his next work, the *Convivio* ("Banquet"), he tells how difficult he had found it: the Latin he had learned proved quite different from that of Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy*. Cicero's urbane and complex style was much harder and, more confusing still, his whole mode of thought, his concepts, viewpoints, allusions were as if from a different world. The young explorer from medieval Christendom went doggedly on from one work to another which he had seen mentioned, without adequate teachers, courses, reference works, or indeed, the works themselves, except as he could beg or borrow the manuscripts. Eventually he mastered and assimilated all the learning available in Latin or Latin translations, from the *Timaeus* of Plato, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Statius, and Lucan through Saint Augustine and other Fathers of the Church, to Averröes, St. Thomas, and the great mystics. But the wastefulness, the needless difficulties, the groping aroused his indignation, as injustice always did. He had been "educated," but how much it had helped him in the pursuit of real learning? He knew that there were others, too, who longed for such knowledge but lacked his extraordinary mental equipment (he allowed himself no false modesty) and thus failed to win through. What was lacking were real schools with competent teachers and high standard, available to all who had the talent and the desire to learn. But what agency would set them up and maintain them? Not the Church; for, though it was no longer ignorant of philosophy, the Church was suspicious of it and not inclined to grant it that primacy in the conduct of human affairs which Dante assigned to it. This was another problem, to be studied along with that of political instability and strife. In the meantime he, Dante Alighieri, could contribute the fruits of his own efforts in the form of an encyclopedia or compendium of knowledge which would at the same time earn for him badly needed prestige. Not only would it gather together the knowledge which he had found scattered piecemeal in many works and in different forms, it would make that knowledge accessible by use of the vernacular instead of Latin. Such a thing was revolutionary in the first decade of the fourteenth century and called for an explanation which Dante gave in the form of an impassioned defense of what we call Italian. He concluded with the following prophetic words, referring to the new language as

...a new light, a new sun, which shall rise whereas the accustomed one (Latin) shall set, and which shall give light to those who are in darkness because the accustomed sun does not give them light.

The *Convivio* was to consist of fifteen sections: an introduction and fourteen of Dante's longer philosophical lyrics, each followed by an expository prose passage. Only four sections were completed. Among the possible reasons for its abandonment, two in particular seem valid. First, the work is a failure in organization and style, typically medieval in its discursive rambling. Second, it was written to exalt philosophy, "most noble daughter of the Emperor of the Universe," and thus constituted a perilous deviation for a medieval Christian. It is at least possible that this frame of mind was included in the "Dark Wood" in which the *Comedy* begins, and it almost certainly inspired the repeated warnings against overdependence on philosophy and human wisdom which the poem contains.

Evidence that Dante had already begun to formulate his solution to the evils of his day may be found in the *Convivio*, but it is in the *De Monarchia*, last of his more important minor works, that we find the full statement of his theories. This is the best organized and most complete of his treatises.

He probably composed it in the last decade of his life and chose Latin as a medium rather deliberately, I suspect, for discretion's sake. It is certain, at any rate, that copies of it were sought out for burning by the Papacy some years after the author's death, and it was among the first books placed on the Index. The Church, struggling to wrest from the enfeebled Empire its supremacy as a temporal power, had made it a matter of dogma that the emperors were as dependent on the popes as was the moon on the sun. The *De Monarchia* denied and denounced this position, affirming that the two powers were rather like two equal suns, each dependent only on God and designed to guide man toward his two goals: peace and happiness in this world and spiritual salvation in the next.

To these states of blessedness, just as to diverse conclusions, man must come by diverse means. To the former we come by the teachings of philosophy...in conformity with the moral and intellectual virtues; to the latter through spiritual teachings which transcend human reason...in conformity with the theological virtues...Now the former end and means are made known to us by human reason...and the latter by the Holy Spirit...Nevertheless, human passion would cast all these behind, were not men, like wild horses in their brutishness, held to the road by bit and rein.

Wherefore a twofold directive agent was necessary to man in accordance with the twofold end: the Supreme Pontiff to lead the human race by means of revelation, and the Emperor to guide it to temporal felicity by means of philosophic education.

Failure of the two guides to cooperate prevented peace and bred injustice. Part of the blame rested on the Empire for neglecting its duties, but the larger share fell on the Papacy. In its greed for temporal power, which Dante believed rooted in the ill-conceived "Donation of Constantine," it not only deprived mankind of a strong civil government but neglected its proper task of spiritual guidance, so that most men were damned not only in this life but in the life to come. Dante's ideas have long been ridiculed as quixotic, yet history has seen a Declaration affirming man's right to "the pursuit of happiness," the separation of Church and State, education secularized and rendered accessible to the public, while to many today the idea of peace and justice through a world government seems not so much chimerical as indispensable.

Whatever fate might have befallen the *De Monarchia* would have mattered little, for its essential thesis was preserved in the enduring beauty of *The Divine Comedy*, interwoven with the other themes, expressed at times openly, at other times merely implicit in the structure. For the same reason it was unimportant that the *Convivio* lay unfinished, for all the erudition Dante had planned to present in that indigestible work found much nobler, more convincing expression in the poetry of the *Comedy*. Even the beautiful little youthful work, the *Vita Nuova*, found itself continued and sublimated on the slopes and summit of Purgatory, where Beatrice reappears in womanly glory first to confront and then to guide her lover. For one of the marvels of this great poem is the way in which all of Dante's learning, his speculations, observations, and experiences were blended together in its intricate fabric.

The poem's complex structure is itself a marvelous thing. Before we examine it briefly we should, however, remember that Dante lived in a Catholic world or, rather, universe, in which every slightest thing was encompassed in the will and knowledge of an omnipotent and omniscient Deity and that the supreme attribute of that Deity was the mystery of His Trinity and Unity. Evidences of

that mystery were sought and found everywhere and such numerical symbolism was not as today comical abracadabra but a serious and even sacred matter.

Now let us look at the *Comedy*. It is made up of three nearly equal parts which are distinct yet carefully interrelated to form a unified whole. Each part, moreover, is the expression of one Person of the Trinity: *Inferno*, the Power of the Father; *Purgatory*, the Wisdom of the Son; *Paradise*, the Love of the Holy Spirit. Each part, or *cántica*, contains 33 cantos for a total of 99. If we add the first, introductory canto we obtain a grand total of 100 which is the square of 10; 10 is the perfect number, for it is composed solely of the square of the Trinity plus 1, which represents the Unity of God. Even the rhyme scheme itself is the *terza rima* or “third rhyme” which Dante invented for his purpose. There are other symmetries and correspondences, but this should suffice to demonstrate that Dante planned his own creation in as close an imitation of a divinely created and controlled universe as was possible to the mind of man. Almost literally nothing was left to chance.

We today are more than inclined to despise such concern with what seem to us trifles, externals, Victorian gingerbread, because we are convinced that the mind preoccupied with them cannot have much of importance to say. In our utilitarian scorn we are in danger of forgetting that a certain preoccupation with form (and even today’s straight line betrays such a preoccupation) is essential to beauty. In *The Divine Comedy* we must remember that Dante had for his subject the whole world, the entire universe, all of man’s history, his learning, his beliefs, plus his own particular messages. To him preoccupation with form was not extrinsic, not a luxury; it was his salvation. As Mr. Gilbert Highet points out, it is this that sets Dante apart from his contemporaries; this was the great lesson he had learned from his master and author, Virgil. The medieval digressions which infest the *Convivio* have been eliminated by the “fren dell’arte.” I doubt whether there is another work of this size which is so economical in its use of words. The reader always has, as Mr. Ciardi aptly puts it, “...a sense of the right-choice-always-being-made”; and this applies to everything from the smallest word to the harmonious interrelation of the principal divisions.

This awareness of intelligence at work is clearly felt throughout *The Inferno*. This is the realm – or condition – of the “dead people,” those who have rejected spiritual values by yielding to bestial appetites or violence, or by perverting their human intellect to fraud or malice against their fellowmen. As subject matter it is the lowest, ugliest, most materialistic of the whole poem. Now in his unfinished treatise on the vernacular, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante had established a basic rule that the poet must make his style match his material. In accordance with this we should expect the style of *The Inferno* to be lower than that of the other divisions – and that is exactly what we find. The poet has used throughout it a low level of diction, common, everyday words and constructions, and relatively simple figures. Yet with this prosaic equipment he has obtained incomparable effects, from the poignant sensuality of Francesca (Canto V), the dignity of Farinata (X), the pathos of Ser Brunetto (XV), to demonic farce (XXI) and revolting ugliness (XXIX). He employed not only ordinary words but, where he thought it useful, those which in our language seem to require only four letters.

It is Mr. Ciardi’s great merit to be one of the first American translators to have perceived this special quality of *The Inferno* and the first to have reproduced it successfully in English. In order to achieve this he has abandoned any attempt to reproduce Dante’s complicated rhyme scheme and has even had to do some slight violence to conventional poetic usage. The resulting effect to the ear, which must be the supreme judge in these matters, is a good likeness of the original. It may also be

something of a shock to those who insist on a uniformly hieratic approach to all things Dantesque; let them come really to know the vigorous, uncompromising Florentine who, even in *The Paradiso*, wrote “E lascia pur grattar dov’è la rognal (i.e., ‘And let them go ahead and scratch where it itches.’).”

Introduction to *The Purgatorio* by Archibald T. MacAllister

One of the qualities which distinguish Dante’s *Divine Comedy* from most other long narrative poems is the individual character and, as it were, physiognomy peculiar to each of its three great divisions. Readers of *The Inferno* will recall its frequently harsh materialism, the great variety of intonation, the vivid realism, in which its ghostly figures rapidly seem to become people and the whole scene appears the “hell on Earth” Dante probably wished it to represent.

To understand *The Inferno*, some historical background was obviously essential. It was important to know that Dante, by being born an upper-middle-class Alighieri in the independent commune of Florence in 1265, had inherited the political loyalties of a Guelph and that he had also acquired hereditary enemies called Ghibellines. The history of the civil strife between these parties was of equal importance, for, even if it culminated in a Guelph victory just after Dante’s birth, talk of it, and of fears lest it flare up again, filled his mind during his formative years. Outstanding members of the preceding generation of both parties, such as the great Ghibelline Farinata degli Uberti and the Guelph statesman and scholar Brunetto Latini, were to supply a number of his infernal figures, and allusions to victories, exiles, and defeats fill its pages.

Since participation in public life would determine Dante’s fate, we had to be aware of new dissension among the Guelphs, now divided among themselves into “Blacks” and the “Whites” to which he belonged, and to follow the strange fatal parallel between his political progress and the growth of this new partisan strife. We saw the irony of his rise to the highest magistracy just as violence broke out in 1300, so his prominence made him a prime target for his foes.

What happened next, however, was of fundamental importance for all parts of the *Comedy* and, indeed, for all of Dante’s thinking thereafter. The Blacks schemed to interest the pope in intervening in the dispute. Boniface VIII, ever alert for an opportunity to strengthen his political influence, ignored the protests of the Whites and invited a supposedly neutral third part, Charles of Valois, to enter Florence in the role of impartial arbitrator and peacemaker. What the Pope’s secret orders had been became instantly apparent when Charles was admitted in November 1301. After seizing and disarming the Whites, he opened the gates to the banished Blacks, and stood by as they gave themselves over to murder and pillage. Dante was absent on a political mission and, fortunately for him and for posterity, he preferred exile to the sort of justice he would have faced had he returned.

This experience, crushing and embittering to most of its victims – and Dante’s share of bitterness can be tasted in the *Comedy’s* invectives and many ironic allusions – launched Dante’s mind on one of its greatest drives: to understand the problem of evil, and to try to solve it. What could lead the head of the church, of all Christendom, vicar of the Christ who scorned the hypocrites and drove the money-changers and shopkeepers from the Temple, to engage in the fraud and perfidy of the Florentine conspiracy? How could such a man rise to such a position? What hope was there that men in general might be persuaded to a just life in this world and salvation in the next

when they saw their spiritual leaders behave in such a way? Surely such a marvelously ordered physical universe, created for man's enjoyment, must contain somewhere a clue to a better political organization or government than that of Dante's day.

Exploration of these questions led Dante through the Scriptures with their commentators, the Church Fathers, notably Anselm, Bonaventure, and Augustine, to Boethius and beyond to Lucan, Statius, Ovid, Horace, and his beloved and revered Virgil. Cicero's treatises were a wonderful discovery ("like happening upon gold while looking for silver") but bristling with difficulties both stylistic and conceptual. This was the new and alien material – philosophy – that the church had repeatedly proscribed until the recent appearance of Aquinas's Christian explanation of Aristotle.

The fruits of his long and painstaking exploration of the problem of evil formed the substance of Dante's *Inferno*. In this remarkable amalgam of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero there is little that is particularly Christian except for a few borrowings from St. Thomas and the implicit application of St. Paul's "*Radix enim omnium malorum est cupiditas*" (roughly "Greed is the root of all evil") as the principle underlying the worst categories. It is not a theological arrangement but a philosophical one; not a theoretical exposition – save for the marvelously concise discourse of Virgil in Canto XI – but what might be called a case-system presentation of classic examples of evil in its outward social manifestations. The theoretical approach had already been tried in Dante's first work after his exile, the unfinished *Il Convivio*. Here he had set out along the scholiast's favorite way – a commentary on an established text – with the purpose of making available to the un-Latined the corpus of philosophy as he had found it. Yet when only about one-third complete, this ambitious task had been abandoned, with no word of explanation such as that which terminated his only preceding work, the *Vita Nuova*.

These two works together, the tender autobiographical effusion and the unfinished encyclopedia, or more precisely the experiences they represent, are of central importance to the *Comedy*. The *Vita Nuova* in particular is as essential to a deeper understanding of *The Purgatorio* as the Florentine events and Dante's part in them are to an understanding of *The Inferno*. Without a knowledge of at least the outline of his rapturous, remote love for Beatrice, the many allusions to her lose their meaning and the growing tension as the poet mounts to the top of Purgatory cannot be fully felt. Of even greater significance is the knowledge that Beatrice died in 1290, and that, in the ten years between then and the supposed date of the *Comedy*, Dante had been unfaithful to her memory; without it, we are puzzled by her severe reproof when she confronts him in the Earthly Paradise. An understanding of the allegorical meaning with which Dante invested both earlier works and their relationship explains another of her reproofs and illuminates the poet's spiritual biography. No one reading the *Vita Nuova* can doubt that its characters are real persons, especially the object of its idealized love. Likewise when Dante describes how deeply he was affected, in his grief after Beatrice's death, by the obvious compassion shown by the "Lady of the Window," he was clearly describing how his grief was being lessened by his interest in another woman; and the remorse with which this little book closes is obviously sincere. Twelve or more years later, when he begins the *Convivio*, Beatrice has gradually become a sacred abstraction relegated to Heaven, having no further role in this life, while the "Lady of the Window" has become "daughter of God, queen of everything, most fair and noble Philosophy."

Dante threw himself into his new love with such characteristic single-mindedness that, soon, as he himself tells us, “it drove out and destroyed every other thought” (*Convivio*, II.xii). At some point thereafter – and, since so little of this book dedicated to philosophy was written, it was probably not many years – there must have occurred another crisis like that at the end of the *Vita Nuova*, but much greater. Dante must have realized the peril in his overdependence on secular wisdom and on his own faculties, and he readjusted his scale of values in such a way as to re-establish the superiority of revealed truth. This crisis is probably represented in Canto I of the *Comedy*, for it is doubtless from this futile and dangerous self-reliance that Dante is there rescued by Virgil. In the *Comedy* it is evident that the lover, now definitely returned – both to Beatrice and to her sacred significance – wished to make public confession and amends for his error by weaving it very fittingly into the fabric of his Mount of Purifications. Indeed, to the reader thus prepared to understand it, this second *cántica* can be seen to contain a monumental act of atonement. To clarify his intent and achieve greater effect, Dante planned this episode to occur in a sequence similar to the original. Since all the deviations sprang from the *Vita Nuova*, some way had to be found to recall that work and its experiences to the reader without disrupting the poem’s artistic unity. This he achieved by a device so effective, so subtle, and at the same time so obvious that its secret has rarely been perceived. To see this we must examine *The Purgatorio* itself.

Among the distinguishing features of this division of the *Comedy* is what might be called its “middle” character. Whereas *The Inferno* is all darkness and *The Paradiso* is all light, *The Purgatorio* is a mixture of the two in its alternation of day and night. This comes about naturally, since it is imagined as a mountain rising in the middle of Earth’s southern hemisphere opposite Jerusalem. Arriving there at dawn on Easter Sunday, Dante and Virgil spend four days and three nights in its ascent. As Hell had its vestibule, so Purgatory begins with an “ante-Purgatorio,” the whole base of the mountain up to a certain height. Then comes a gate, and Purgatory itself begins. The poets reach this point in the first night, during Dante’s sleep; it is Canto IX. During the second night they are in the fourth or middle one of the seven vices, Sloth, and again Dante falls asleep; this is Canto XVIII. The end of Purgatory itself is reached, and Dante falls asleep for the final time, in Canto XXVII. The scheme thus revealed is a series of 9s. At this point, no one familiar with the *Vita Nuova* can fail to be alerted, remembering the pains its young author had taken to associate the number 9 with Beatrice, because she was herself “a nine, that is, a miracle.” When one sees further that there are precisely three of these 9s, and that each has a vision associated with it, he cannot help recalling how Dante first saw Beatrice at age 9, saw her again at 18, and concluded the *Vita Nuova* at 27; and that there was a vision associated with each of those three 9s. Dante has accomplished his purpose; the alert and knowledgeable reader is prepared for the confrontation with Beatrice. To make this doubly sure, he has the latter say, in her rebuke,

This man was such, in his *vita nova*,

where the last two words have the unaccustomed, though legitimate, meaning of “childhood” or “youth.” The only specific term Beatrice employs here to identify Dante’s transgressions is *pargoletta*, an endearment used by the poet in a love lyric not addressed to Beatrice. That they are meant to include Dante’s overemphasis on secular studies is made clear two cantos later, where she explains her use of lofty words and concepts:

“They fly so high,” she said, “that you may know

what school you followed, and how far behind
the truth I speak its feeble doctrines go;

And see that man's ways, even at his best,
are far from God's as earth is from the heaven
whose swiftest wheel turns above all the rest." (XXXIII.85-90)

It should be emphasized that Dante is not here denying the great value of secular wisdom, especially philosophy, for without it he could not have written the *Comedy*. His purpose is to put such wisdom in its proper place by making it subservient to God, by whom it was ordained to minister to man's practical intellectual needs, and by excluding it from all questions touching matters of faith. This message, aside from informing the *Comedy* as a whole, finds its most eloquent expression in the tragic story of Ulysses. It is in *The Purgatorio*, however, that Dante demonstrates systematically the interrelation of the two wisdoms he believes necessary for the education of mankind for the enjoyment of this life and the life to come.

In contrast with the turbulent complexity of Hell, Dante's Purgatory is simple, regular, and serene. On the lower reaches below the gate are kept in exile for varying lengths of time those souls who, for various reasons and in various conditions, sought salvation at the last moment. Above, within Purgatory, we find not the multifarious crimes by which vice or sin manifests itself in Hell (or on Earth,) but simply the seven Capital Vices that lead to sinful acts. Since the souls here are all saved, and eager to act in accordance with divine will, there is no place among them for violence, malice, fraud, rebelliousness, etc. Each vice is treated on a specific ledge (*cornice*) that circles the mountain. Souls remain on a given ledge until they feel purged of all slightest subconscious taint of that particular vice, at which point they move up spontaneously.

The educative system employs, first, examples of the virtue opposed to the vice, then examples of the vice punished; the method of presentation is different for each vice, and particularly suited to the posture and condition of the souls undergoing purgation. The Proud, bowed under loads that are proportionate to the gravity of their vice, have ample time, as they creak slowly around, to contemplate marvelously realistic carvings; the Envious, sitting together with their eyes, misused to their sorrow on earth, sewn shut, hear their lessons called out; the Slothful, rushing with the zeal they lacked in life, shout theirs aloud, and so on.

The ingenuity thus called for was admirable enough, but the truly significant figure is the steady pattern of duality, of the interaction of two sets of values. This is most clearly observable in the ordering of the lessons, or examples. First, in every instance, is an example from the life of the Virgin who, Bonaventure said, "...shone with every virtue...and was most free from the seven Capital Vices." Priority is thus given to sacred learning. Thereafter on ever ledge the lessons are drawn alternately from the Bible and classical history, mythology, or literature. Progress up the mountain is possible only while the sun shines, *i.e.*, under the inspiration of divine wisdom. At the same time we know that the stars representing the four Cardinal Virtues are overhead, though made invisible by the sun's brightness. In other words, divine wisdom is the *sine qua non* of education, but the virtues Dante identifies with ancient Rome form its subject matter. At night, when no progress is possible in the active way, the stars representing the Theological Visions are overhead, and men receive divine wisdom through mystical means, such as dreams and visions. At the end of Purgatory proper, Canto

XXVII, Dante is awarded his diploma by Virgil, who, telling him that because his will is now free, healthy, and straight he may follow it freely, adds “Lord of yourself I crown and mitre you.” In other words, Dante is henceforth his own philosopher-king and his own bishop-pope; completely educated in the cardinal and theological virtues, he needs no further formal guidance in this life.

The principle of interaction between the classical and the Christian worlds is repeated once again in the pageant at the end of the *cántica*. Here Dante recapitulates his theory of the history of man’s fall and redemption and the vicissitudes of the church, ending in its contemporary degradation, the “Babylonian Captivity” of the papacy in Avignon. To represent the church, Dante uses a triumphal two-wheeled chariot. Around the right wheel – indication of their superiority – dance the three Theological Virtues, as maidens each dressed in her appropriate color; around the left wheel dance four others identified as the Cardinal Virtues by their imperial purple. A few *terzine* later the union of Biblical and classical authority is underlined again by the verses which herald the approach of Beatrice. The first is a paraphrase of Matthew XXI, “Blessed art thou that comest”; the second are the words of Anchises in *The Aeneid*, VI, 833: “Oh scatter handfuls of lilies.”

To most modern readers, all this may seem of little importance, and certainly not dangerously controversial; things were quite different in the early 1300s. To form an idea of how different, we do not need to strain our imaginations; we have only to think of certain fundamentalist groups of our own day and in our own country, among whom to suggest that the Bible is not sufficient by itself for every need is to invite serious trouble. Yet Dante was not content with challenging the Church’s adequacy, though in a figurative and more or less covert form. His insistence that secular wisdom stand alongside sacred wisdom in the education of the individual implied a much more dangerous challenge: that secular government stand beside sacred government. In simple terms, the world needed a strong civil state independent of the church. Such a theory ran counter to the policy and pronouncements of the Holy See, supreme since its defeat of the last of the Hohenstaufen emperors. Now if an author should propound such an unpalatable theory openly, and add to it a proposal to remove and exclude from the Church all of its temporal power now and in the future, we have a book that’s fit for burning, with an author not far removed. Such indeed was to be the fate, so far as possible, of Dante’s last treatise, *De Monarchia*. Written in Latin, and hence worthy of official notice, in the last years before its author’s death in 1321, it contained the conclusions of Dante’s many years of study and meditation concerning God’s plan for the proper governing of the world. It not only argued the divine authorization of the Empire, the advantages of such a system, its duties in providing civil peace and education; it denied and denounced in strongest terms the official dogma published by Innocent III, which likened the emperor to the moon, deriving all authority from the pope as the sun. Instead, it maintained that emperor and pope represented two suns, each receiving light – and authority – directly from God. The world would thus have “the Supreme Pontiff to lead the human race by means of revelation, and the Emperor to guide it to temporal felicity by means of philosophic education.” Since the emperor would be the supreme civil authority and power, there would exist in the world no one for him to envy, no one with greater possessions for him to covet. With nothing to around *cupiditas*, “root of all evils,” he would himself be just, and would stamp out injustice in his subjects. Mankind would thus be able freely to develop its full potential for the enjoyment of this life in which Dante firmly believed. More important *sub specie aeternitatis* would be the inability of the clergy and the church to acquire wealth, property, and any but spiritual power.

In these circumstances its example would encourage men to follow its preachings of the unimportance of worldly goods, and would not have the opposite effect, as under actual conditions.

As Dante no doubt foresaw, the *De Monarchia* was not popular with ecclesiastical authorities. As a matter of fact, they destroyed every manuscript they could get their hands on, and later included it in the first Index *librorum prohibitorum*. As for the author, many persons believe there to be a connection between this attitude and the mystery which long surrounded the whereabouts of his remains.

It is a curious fact that in *The Purgatorio* the reasons for unhappy world conditions are much more outspoken in form than is the principle of interaction between the two sets of virtues. Here are some examples:

What does it matter that Justinian came
to trim the bit, if no one sits the saddle?
Without him you [Italy] would have less cause for shame!

You priests who, if you heed what God decreed,
should most seek after holiness and leave
to Caesar Caesar's saddle and his steed –

see how the beast grows wild now none restrains
its temper, nor corrects it with the spur
since you set meddling hands upon its reins! (VI, 9-91)

And again, speaking of the causes of injustice and discord:

Men, therefore, need restraint by law, and need
A monarch over them who sees at least
The towers of The True City. Laws, indeed,

There are, but who puts nations to their proof?
No one. The shepherd who now leads mankind
Can chew the cud, but lacks the cloven hoof.

The people, then, seeing their guide devour
Those worldly things to which their hunger turns
Graze where he grazes, and ask nothing more.

The bad state of the modern world is due –
As you may see, then – to bad leadership;
And not to natural corruption in you.

Rome used to thine in two suns when her rod
Made the world good, and each showed her its way:
One to the ordered world, and one to God.

Now one declining sun puts out the other.
The sword and crook are one, and only evil
Can follow from them when they are together;

For neither fears the other, being one. (XVI, 94-112)

The reason why such passages have not incurred official wrath lies probably in their being sporadic outbursts; they need not be interpreted as part of a systematic presentation, as in the case of the scheme for education.

In addition to such matters – and let it be said without wishing to lessen their very real importance – there was other material of much more crucial significance to be presented. In the *Comedy's* imitation of the Holy Trinity, this second *cántica* represents the Second Person, and one of His chief attributes is Wisdom; this is the logical division in which to offer intellectual wisdom. Furthermore, in a poem dedicated to the demonstration of how, by their merits or demerits, men make themselves subject to reward or punishment, there is one central, all-important question to be treated – that of Free Will and the individual's responsibility for his actions. In introducing *The Inferno*, I had occasion to point out the care with which it had been constructed so as to give maximum expression to the Trinity, the Perfect Number, and so on. Now I must ask the forbearance of those readers intolerant of all such antic devices while I call attention to the way in which Dante arranged the present discussions. He begins the explanation of responsibility in Canto XVI, continues it in Canto XVII, and concludes it in Canto XVIII. Since there are 33 cantos in *The Purgatorio*, these are, respectively, the last of the first 16, the 17th or middle and the first of the second 16. But added significance can be had by looking at the three *cántiche*, or the main body of the poem, less the introductory first canto. What has been said of *The Purgatorio* then becomes true for the whole; the discussion begins in Canto 49, continues in Canto 50, and concludes in Canto 51, the first of the remaining 49. The subject of the middle canto, either way, is Love as the moving force behind every action of mankind, whether good or evil.

For such instruction as was offered in *The Inferno*, Aristotle was much the preferred authority. In the presentation of metaphysics, psychology, and physiology, which comprise most of the instruction that Dante was making available in *The Purgatorio* to readers of the vernacular, Aquinas is absolute and unchallenged. This does not mean, naturally, that much of the material was not originally Aristotelian, but rather that in form it is the version, reading, or interpretation chosen or elaborated by St. Thomas.

The first lesson, having established man's freedom from predestination, shows the need of the free will for discipline administered by an independent civil authority which will curb and direct his inclination from childhood on. Since a child turns instinctively to anything pleasant, knowing no better, it will pursue valueless pleasures excessively and exclusively unless properly schooled. It is characteristic of Dante's method that the reader, now halfway through the book, suddenly realizes that he has already had an object lesson back in Canto II. There, among a boatload of souls arrived just after the two poets, Dante meets a dear friend, the musician Casella. All the souls are essentially childlike in their lack of sophistication and experience of the new environment; instead of pursuing their arduous upward path, they sit and indulge in the most innocent of pleasures by listening to the

singing of one of Dante's best lyrics. The necessary discipline is suddenly administered by the stern Cato, and the group hastens off in pursuit of more substantial goods, with Virgil very red of face.

The lesson on Love distinguishes natural, instinctive love from the intellectual love peculiar to man, and explains how the latter can err. The most ingenious feat, however, is the explanation of how the infliction of wrong on one's neighbor, as it was spoken of in *The Inferno*, is really the pursuit of what appears to the distorted vision as a good. The discussion thus ends in a definition of the Capital Sins or Vices.

The third great lesson (XVIII) was directed against Christianity's most dangerous domestic foes at the time, the Epicureans. Readers of *The Inferno* will remember how Epicurus is dealt a much harsher fate than the other Greek philosophers, and placed in the burning tombs of Canto X instead of in the pleasant, though hopeless, serenity of Limbo. An incredibly large proportion of Dante's townsmen shared this materialist heresy which denied the immortality of the soul and man's responsibility for his acts. The lesson is probably the most difficult in the whole *Comedy*. Having made the point that attraction toward a pleasurable stimulus is not necessarily a good, according to Epicurus, but merely a natural reaction, Dante must justify the concept of man's being held responsible for simply following a natural impulse. To accomplish this, the principle of the Substantial Form must be explained, together with the concept of Pure Act versus Potentiality. To have done all this concisely, clearly, and with poetry intact is one of Dante's greater achievements.

The last lesson of this general type is on human reproduction and the creation of the individual soul. It is introduced ingeniously by Dante's supposed curiosity as to how incorporeal souls could still reflect so vividly and painfully the effects of tantalized hunger and thirst, as are seen among the Gluttonous. From this starting point, and with the ostensible purpose of describing how, after death, memory, intellect, and will, stronger than before, impress on the surrounding air a fictive body with senses operative, Dante launches what is really a refutation of the other important heretical group of the day, the Averroists. Comparable to the Epicureans in numbers and influence, they shared with them a nonbelief in the immortality of the soul *as an individual entity*. They differed from them, however, in that the basis of their belief was what we might call today "scientific" rather than philosophical. The founder of the sect was a famed Arabian scholar who died about 1200, traditionally called Averröes, but known increasingly today as Ibn-Roschd. Physician as well as philosopher, he denied the existence of a conscious soul because he could find no organ or place for it in the body. His solution (simplified) to the obvious fact of man's intellectual ability posited a universal intellect, with part of which the soul was endowed, and to which each share returned at death. For decades, Christendom floundered in refuting him, till Aquinas accomplished it with the argument of self-consciousness or awareness used by Dante (XXV, 67-75), who himself has often been accused of Averroism. In this canto, then, Dante has given the best current explanation of human generation, and has established the unity of the soul, the survival of its individuality, and its capacity to suffer the sort of punishment calculated to impress at least his contemporary readers.

It should be noted, in this connect, that Virgil no longer enjoys the position he had in *The Inferno*, where he appeared as the quasi-omniscient, unique purveyor of wisdom. This was fitting in such a predominantly pre-Christian realm, people almost exclusively by souls who had lost *il bene dell' intelletto*, and where Virgil is the rescuer of one who had almost suffered that fate. As the poets emerge into the dawn light of *The Purgatorio*, the change is immediate and striking. The confident

guide becomes another pilgrim; wise and experienced, however, he serves Dante and his readers as an example of the disciplined mind at work deducing the rules of this Christian territory. So, although Dante has him deliver the great central lectures on Love, the earlier one on Free Will versus Predestination is given (with characteristic irascibility) by one Marco Lombardo, whom we never see because of the dense smoke on the ledge of Anger. The last, in Canto XXV, Virgil graciously entrusts to Statius, a Latin poet a generation and more later than Virgil. Presented by Dante as the older poet's ardent admirer, and a "crypto-Christian" through him, Statius represents a poet of the ancient, pagan world redeemed by the coming of Christ; the union of Empire with Christianity, of Cardinal Virtues with Theological virtues. He is, thus, the obverse of Dante and his goal: the union of Christianity with the revived Empire, and of the Theological Virtues with the Cardinal Virtues to be restored under it. Artistically, he contributes a great new dramatic interest at a point where it is most welcome.

Quite apart from inevitable limitations of space, I have deliberately refrained from commenting on the poetry, the style, and (so far as possible) the unfolding story. I feel that everyone is entitled to make his own private initial approach to the intimate author-reader relationship. Happily, in *The Purgatorio* as in the preceding *cántica*, Mr. Ciardi's perceptive and sensitive translation makes that relationship more accessible than has hitherto been possible without a good command of the original Italian.

Introduction to *The Paradiso* **by John Freccero**

Dante's claim for *The Paradiso*, the last *cántica* of his poem, is as daring as it is clear: "My course is set for an uncharted sea." History has in fact granted him the unique place that he claimed with that navigational metaphor, both as pilgrim and as poet. Just as, within the fiction of the poem, the pilgrim's course is privileged beyond the aspiration of ordinary men, so in its final course the poem accomplished what no other poet had ever dared. Throughout *The Divine Comedy*, the metaphor of the ship serves to describe both the pilgrim's journey and the progress of the poem: on both counts, Dante can refer to himself as a new Jason, who returns with the Golden Fleece that is at once the vision of God and the poem that we read.

For the twentieth-century reader, the fiction of the story requires a great effort of the imagination – few of us still believe in a paradise in any form, much less in the possibility of reaching it in this life. The claim of the pilgrim to have reached the absolute seems to us even more fantastic than the fiction of *The Inferno*, where at least the characters, if not the landscape, are quite familiar. For this reason, *The Paradiso* is often thought of as the most "medieval" part of the poem. This reputation should not, however, obscure for us the sense in which, as poetry, it remains daring and even contemporary. By attempting to represent poetically that which is by definition beyond representation, this *cántica* achieves what had scarcely seemed possible before (even for the poet of *The Inferno* and *The Purgatorio*) and has remained the ultimate aspiration of poets ever since. The quest of Romantic poets and their successors for "pure poetry" has for its prototype *The Paradiso*.

The poetry of *The Paradiso* represents a radical departure from that of *The Purgatorio*, as the latter represented a departure from the poetry of *The Inferno*. The changes may be thought of as a gradual attenuation of the bond between poetry and representation, from the immediacy of *The Inferno* to the dreamlike mediation of *The Purgatorio* to the attempt to create a non-representational poetic world in the last *cántica*. This refinement of poetic representation perfectly matches the

evolution of the pilgrim's understanding within the story: he learns first of all from his sense, from the sights and sounds of a hell that seems actually to exist, now and forever, thanks to the celebrated mimetic power of Dante's verses in *The Inferno*. As the pilgrim depends upon his senses in his travels, so the reader seems to be with him in a world which exists autonomously, almost as if it had not been created by an act of the imagination.

In *The Purgatorio*, on the other hand, the major revelations come to the pilgrim subjectively, as interior events in what Francis Fergusson has called a "drama of the mind." The dream-vision is the primary vehicle for this illumination; Dante refers to the power which receives it as the *imaginativa* (*Purgatorio* XV). According to medieval psychology, this is the same power that enables poets to create a totally new world from the fragments of sense experience and memory, so that in Dante's view, the poetic power that created the poem is the same power that is illuminated within the pilgrim during his ascent of the mountain. The poet's imagination, hidden by its own concreteness in the first part of his poem, becomes the focus of his attention and of ours in *The Purgatorio*. Thus, the landscape is suffused with mist, the tone is nostalgic, and the reader is called upon to respond with his imagination to both the sensory and the emotional suggestiveness, to imagine "visible speech" in the bas-reliefs, to hear the music of familiar hymns, to recall the lessons from the Sermon of the Mount. The substantiality of this part of the poem resides in the subjectivity of the pilgrim and in our reaction to it more than in an explicit architectonic creation of the poet.

In the last part of the poem, the pilgrim's vision is transformed until it no longer has need of any representational media whatever in its communication of the absolute. The technical problem involved in finding a stylistic correspondence to this transformation reaches insoluble proportions by the poem's ending, for it demands straining the representational value of poetry to the ultimate, approaching silence as a limit. Insofar as *The Paradiso* exists at all, therefore, it is an accommodation, a compromise short of silence, as Dante suggests in the first canto:

How speak trans-human change to human sense?
Let the example speak until God's grace
grants the pure spirit the experience.

This sense of compromise, of poetic inadequacy for the ultimate experience, is what accounts for the poignancy of much of the *cántica*, but particularly of the last cantos, where both memory and *fantasia* fail the poet, who can describe only the sweetness distilled within his heart.

The prodigious achievement of the poet is that he manages, within the limits of this compromise, to represent nonrepresentation without falling either into unintelligibility or into silent. Within the story, this accommodation takes the form of a "command performance" of all of the souls of the blessed for the exclusive benefit of the pilgrim. In the fourth canto, Beatrice tells him that all of what he sees in the heavenly spheres of the Moon, the Sun, and the planets is there only temporarily, until he is able to behold all of Paradise without any such "condescension":

So must one speak to mortal imperfection,
which only from the *sensible* apprehends
whatever it then makes fit for intellection.

One might incidentally extend the principle to include a justification of the effort to translation into English what at first appears to be this least translatable of all poems. As the pilgrim's experience is

out of the reach of the average reader of English, who requires the “accommodation” of a transition; in the case of a superb translation, such as this, the “accommodation” is also a work of art, dependent upon an original experience for its inspiration, but autonomous in terms of literary value for those to whom the original is out of reach.

To return to the fiction of the descent of the souls to the various spheres for the sake of the pilgrim, the extraordinary implication of Beatrice’s remark is that the whole of *The Paradiso*, at least until the crossing of the river of light toward the poem’s ending, has no existence, even fictional, beyond the metaphoric. When the souls return to their home in the Empyrean, the last heaven beyond time and space, they leave the spheres, presumably forever, and no subsequent voyager will ever see them again as the pilgrim saw them. If *The Inferno* may be said to have a fictionally autonomous existence and *The Purgatorio* a subjective substantiality, paradise and the poem are co-extensive, like the terms of a metaphor and, even within the fiction of the story, neither can exist without the other.

The metaphoric quality of the story has a stylistic counterpart in some of the distinctive features of the poetry, the most startling of which may have been referred to as anti-images. One of the most memorable occurs in the first heaven (III, 15), where spirits appear within the Moon and are described as “a pearl upon a milk white brow.” The comparison is obviously self-defeating as far as its function to convey information is concerned: we are told simply that the poet saw white upon white. The point is of course the *difference*, which we are unable to see, yet within which all of the reality of *The Paradiso* is contained. The juxtaposition of the pearl and the brow, in their concreteness, serve in a negative way to block the attempt to leave the confines of the text, defying us, as it were, to find more than a shadow of reference to the real world.

It cannot be coincidence that the comparison is found in a section of the poem where the moon spots are discussed at great length in what at first seems to be a superfluous digression. Its point becomes apparent when we realize that for Dante the spots on the Moon were visible only from the earth, while the heavenly body shone with a uniform radiance on the side closest to the Sun. The spots are therefore also shadows, in a sense an accommodation of God’s light to the eyes of mortal men below, gradations within a unity which might not otherwise be perceived. Finally, the literary significance of the complicated interplay becomes clear when one recalls the terms with which Dante had set forth his ambition in the prologue of Canto I:

O power divine, but lend to my high strain
so much as will make clear even the shadow
of that High Kingdom stamped upon my brain...

The experience of the pilgrim, like the experience of pure whiteness or, for that matter, the experience of the divine light, remain out of reach to mortal minds, which can proceed to unity only analogically. It is in difference that meaning is born, like the difference between two phonetic sounds, unintelligible in themselves, yet constituting meaning when linked together. So with the poem, which manages to approach its conclusion and silence by the gradual dissipation of all difference between light and light, and yet remains as the shadow of all that the experiences is not, as irreducibly literary as “a pearl upon a milk white brow.”

There was a whole corpus of writings in the Middle Ages which dealt with the subject of “light metaphysics,” an adaptation of light imagery, considered literally as the connecting link between God and the cosmos. These writings are obviously of doctrinal relevance to the study of *The Divine Comedy*; the point I wish to make here, however, is the poetic function of the interplay of light and shadow as a figure for the poem itself.

Dante’s ascent through all of the heavenly spheres provides him with excellent occasions for modulating his poetic effects to suit the cosmic context. We have already seen the correspondence between poetic imagery and the specific nature of the Moon. Mercury’s proximity to the Sun is an occasion for fugitive effects, Venus’s shift in the sky suggests the dramatization of a didactic passage in terms of a solar “illumination,” from behind and before the pilgrim, the heaven of the Sun calls forth zodiacal imagery and a dance of the hours, Mars colors even Beatrice with its ruddy glow, and so on; in each of the successive spheres, astronomical imagery contributes its color and its geometry to lend to the poem such concreteness as it possesses.

Perhaps the most daring of all sequences in the poem, again at the stylistic level, occurs in the heaven of Jupiter. I have already described what I have called an anti-image in the sphere of the Moon; Jupiter provides us with an anti-image which might almost be referred to as an anti-character: the figure of the eagle. In Canto XVIII, Dante sees the souls of the just and temperate rulers as so many lights that gradually arrange themselves in order to form the first sentence from the Book of Wisdom: *DILIGITE IUSTITIAM, QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM* – “Love righteousness, ye that are judges of the earth.” The last letter of the Latin sentence, as it is spelled out, is gradually transformed into the shape of an eagle, the symbol of Justice, which then speaks to Dante of its universal history. Mr. Ciardi remarks quite rightly in his notes that, as image, it must have seemed unprecedented in Dante’s time, while we, who are used to “spectaculars” and flashing billboards have no trouble imagining such a display. In terms that were set forth at the beginning of this essay, those of poetic representation, the figure is as astounding now as it ever was, for it seems to make a series of references beyond itself, yet the series is perfectly closed and self-contained, in effect leading nowhere beyond itself. In this dramatic sequence, there is no reality that is not a sign, pointing to another level of meaning: the words of the poem point to men of history, the men are lights that are the words of a text from the Bible, which in turn unfolds to its meaning, the eagle. But the eagle also points beyond itself to the words of the text we read, where the series began. Just as there is no concrete reality which may be distinguished in its own right as irreducible, not even the lives of men who serve as the signifiers of God’s Providence, so there is no ultimate reality signified beyond the text itself. The eagle, as unlike an eagle as can be imagined, stands as a figure for the poem itself, a nonrepresentation that is its own reality.

If the logical series of references in the episode turns back upon itself, giving the eagle a purely literary meaning, independent of the natural world or extant eagles, it is also true that at the farthest remove from the text in that logical series there is another text: *Diligite Iustitiam...*, a Biblical verse. The Bible was considered by the Middle Ages to be the exemplar of all books, possessed of a totality to which mortals could only aspire with their books, for God was taken to be its Author. Moreover, it is this sense of the universe as a symbolic book, of which the Bible was the concrete manifestation, that gives to everything its quality of sign, pointing beyond itself to its Maker. So it is in Dante’s poem, where the ultimate reality is seen precisely as a book:

I saw within Its depth how It conceives
all things in a single volume bound by Love,
of which the universe is the scattered leaves...

The aspiration of the pilgrim throughout the poem is to pick up the scattered leaves of God's book, but as he achieves that in the last canto of *The Paradiso* with his vision, the vision escapes him: "On the wild wind that bore the tumbling leaves / the Sybil's oracles were scattered so." His own book, the poem we read, is an attempt to reconstruct the archetypal book and it is in this sense that it may be said, in Charles Singleton's words, that Dante "imitates God's way of writing." For the [twenty-first]-century reader, whatever his beliefs, the inference to be made is that the ultimate reality and coherence is that represented by the written word.

The observation about the ways in which Dante's poem is an imitation of God's book brings us to the substance of his revelation in the final *cántica*. Heretofore we have been concerned with the poet's stylistic daring, but the daring of Dante the theorist is no less. The entire poem, from the Dark Wood to the Empyrean, traces the gradually transcendent view of Dante on his own culture, his own country, and even his own family, from the isolated and alienated bewilderment of the pilgrim in the first scene to the soaring view of the eagle in the upper reaches of the universe. It is characteristic of Dante and of his faith that any such transcendence must begin with the self; Dante's own history occupies the central cantos of *The Paradiso* in the form of his meeting with his ancestor, Cacciaguida. The encounter is based on Aeneas's meeting with Anchises, his father, in the sixth book of *The Aeneid* and has for its principal function the clarification of all of the dark prophecies the pilgrim has received throughout his journey concerning the future course of his life. As early as the sixth canto of *The Inferno*, he had been warned about future exile and misery in ambiguous terms; in the canto of Cacciaguida it is spelled out for him "not in dark oracles...but in clear words":

You will come to learn how bitter as salt and stone
is the bread of others, how hard the way that goes
up and down stairs that are never your own.

In spite of the formal resemblance to an ancient model, the mode of the revelation is distinctively biblical, as the phrase "dark oracles" and the context suggests. As the coming of Christ gave meaning retrospectively to all of history, so the revelation of Cacciaguida, a surrogate for the divine perspective in the poem, gives meaning to all of the prophecies in the poem.

The essential thing about an oracular utterance is that it contains the truth without revealing it; only in retrospect, after the fact, can its truth be appreciated. At the same time, when those ancient oracles dead with death, their truth can be tested only from beyond the grave, that is, when their truth is too late to be of value to humans. The coming of Christ changed all of this, for Christians, by providing a point of closure, an ending in time within time, an Archimedean place to stand from which the truth in life and in world history might be judged. It was therefore a death-and-resurrection perspective on the oracular utterance, at once an understanding and a survival. This mode of structuring history according to the Christ even forms the basis of Dantesque revelation in the poem: to tell the story of one's life in retrospect with confidence in the truth and the completeness of the story is somehow to be outside of, or beyond, one's own life. It is to undergo a kind of death and resurrection, the process of conversion, a recapitulation of the Christ event in the history of the individual soul. The retrospective illumination of Dante's own life by Cacciaguida is the

dramatization of the poet's self-transcendence, the achievement of a place to stand from which the course of time, its trajectory, may be viewed as though it were completed.

It was St. Augustine in his *Confessions* who first drew the analogy between the unfolding of syntax and the flow of human time. As words move toward their conclusion in a sentence in order to arrive at meaning and as the sentences flow toward the poem's ending in order to give it meaning, so the days of a man's life flow toward his death, the moment of closure that gives meaning to his life. Meaning in history is revealed in the same way, from the standpoint of the ending of history of Apocalypse, to use the biblical term. The same analogy is operative in Dante's poem, which is why *The Paradiso* is inseparable from the earlier *cántiche*. As we approach the poem's ending (and, incidentally, the literal ending of the poet's life), the closure that gives meaning to the verses and to the life that they represent, so all of history is reviewed under the aspect of eternity, beginning with Adam and ending with an indeterminate triumph of Justice on earth.

As the dark prophecies concerning the poet's life are given meaning by the revelation of Cacciaguida, so the dark political struggles which are a counterpoint to the pilgrim's story throughout his voyage are finally revealed, in a way that no historian today would consider historical. Indeed, the ultimate structure of history, from the perspective of paradise, would seem to be the very opposite of the history we learn from the chronicles. St. Peter's invective against the corruption of the Church, for example, insists three times on the sacredness of his chair in Rome, which from his perspective appears to be empty, when we know it to have been filled, during the fictional time of the poem, by Boniface VIII, perhaps the most secularly powerful Pope of the Middle Ages. Again, we know that Henry VII of Luxembourg, upon whose entry into Italy Dante had placed so much of his hope for the restoration of the Empire, died rather miserably in 1313, eight years before the poet's death and the conclusion of the poem. Yet, Dante awards him the very highest place among contemporaries in the heavenly spheres. This is the implication of Beatrice's remark in Canto XXX as she points out an empty throne:

That great throne with the crown already set
above it draws your eyes. To it shall come –
before your own call to this nuptial banquet –

the soul, already anointed, of Henry the Great,
who will come to Italy to bring law and order
before the time is ripe to set things straight.

In the last phrase, "before the time is ripe," Dante almost casually points up the difference between fallen time and the fullness of time that is the Christian eternity. Henry's death seems the merest accident of history, in no way affecting its meaning, as the presence and continued existence of a powerful Pope, Dante's bitter enemy on earth, is inconsequential under the aspect of eternity.

One of the last figures used by Dante in order to describe his transcendent view of universal history and of his own life seems particularly contemporary in an age when the view from the stars is no longer a poetic dream but a reality. In the heaven of the Fixed Stars, as the poet looks down from his constellation, Gemini, he describes the entire terrestrial surface:

And turning there with the eternal Twins,

I saw the dusty little threshing ground
that makes us ravenous for our mad sins,

saw it from mountain crest to lowest shore.
Then I turned my eyes to Beauty's eyes once more.

The convulsions of war and cataclysm are contained and almost domesticated by the figure of the threshing floor on which the winnowing is a contained violence with a purpose: the separation of the wheat from the chaff, the traditional biblical figure for judgment. At the same time, the pronoun "us" strains to have it both ways: the pilgrim is elevated far enough beyond human concerns to give him a perspective that seems supernatural, but the pronoun involves him in the fate of the whole human community so that even in the starry heaven he is not alone. This integration of the pilgrim into the human family, after the isolation of the Dark Wood, points to an essential feature of this poem and to the central paradox of the faith to which it bears witness: the Incarnation.

The last stages of the poem prepare the way for the final resolution of all paradoxes in terms of the paradox of the Incarnation. First of all, it should be observed that the final revelation that comes to the pilgrim is not simply Beatific Vision, but a vision of the principle that renders intelligible the union of humanity and divinity in the person of Christ. This mystery forms the basis, in Dante's view, for all of the "concrete universals" involved in the story as well as in the poem itself. It explains (to the pilgrim, if not to us) *how* an individual man, Dante Alighieri, can at the same time be all men, without any compromise of his identity. It also helps to explain, retrospectively, how an apparently chance encounter of a boy and a girl in medieval Florence on an exactly specified day could at the same time contain within it the pattern of universal salvation, without any surrender of historicity to a vague realm of ideas. Finally, perhaps most importantly for the modern reader, the vision of the Incarnation coincides with the coming together in the poem of the pilgrim and the author and narrator who has been with us from the beginning of the poem. It is as if the abstracted, confident voice of Dante-poet were an all-knowing principle of intelligibility and the figure of Dante-pilgrim were a flesh-and-blood reality, for that very reason struggling to understand his own meaning. When pilgrim and poet meet at the last stage of the journey, the circle is squared, to use Dante's figure: the poet's world joins the flesh of his experience and, in a sense that is at once paradoxical and exact, the poem is born.

At the beginning of this essay, I suggested that Dante could think of himself as a new Jason, returning with the Golden Fleece of his vision and of the poem that we read. In the last canto of the poem, this is in fact the figure that he uses:

Twenty-five centuries since Neptune saw
the *Argo's* keel have not moved all mankind,
recalling that adventure, to such awe

as I felt in an instant...

The perspective of Neptune, from the bottom of the ocean looking up to witness man's first navigation, is our perspective on the poet's journey, a celestial navigation, of which the "mad flight" of Ulysses's journey is the Promethean anti-type. The figure completes the navigational imagery with which *The Paradiso* began. At the same time, the perspective from the depths is the poet's as well,

who, like all prophets worth of the name, has returned to tell us all. This didactic intent is finally what separates Dante's vision from its more romantic successors or from its heroic predecessors. The final scene is not an apotheosis of the self in splendid isolation, but a return to the darkness of this world for its own good and a reintegration of poetry into society. There is a precise syntactic moment that marks his return in the final verses:

Here my powers rest from their high fantasy,
but already I could feel my being turned –
instinct and intellect balanced equally

as in a wheel whose motions nothing jars –
by the Love that moves the Sun and the other stars.

The restless drive of Dante's verse reaches its climax and its repose with the word "Love" in the last verse, just as the desire that is in human terms insatiable finds its satisfaction in the Love of God. What follows after the word represents a fall to earth, which is to say to us, after the ecstatic moment. Dante's personal fulfillment of his own most intimate desires is perfectly harmonized with the Love that is the motive force of the entire universe, of the Sun and the other stars. Spatially, to speak of the Sun and stars is to return to our perspective, looking up at the heavenly bodies which had long been surpassed by the pilgrim's journey to the Empyrean. The word "Love" is therefore the link that binds heaven to earth and the poet to his audience, containing within it the substance of the poem.