

Dante Our Contemporary: An Introduction to the *Divine Comedy*

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Exactly seven centuries ago, Dante completed the *Divine Comedy*. 1320! According to Wikipedia, that's in the Middle Ages! I have called my talk "Dante Our Contemporary," however, in order to rescue him from the taint of "medieval-ness." The taint of medieval-ness I would rescue him from is the gloomy de-valuation of the world: medieval-ness as the cultural assumption that sadness is the human condition. Dante called his epic a Comedy. How was this possible? Or did he mean it in a "medieval" way—pious and reverent, the opposite of how we usually think of comedy? Did he just mean that his epic had a happy ending called Paradise? Already Dante's ambiguity makes an appearance. Now, it is common to hear: "Dante is the great religious poet of the XIV century." The *Divine Comedy* has long been enshrined as a synthesis of theology, the poetic Summa of Christian doctrine. But what do we know of the XIV century? What do we know of the radical movements of the Middle Ages? Perhaps, it is Dante who has to rescue *us* from *our* medieval-ness? Perhaps he is more contemporary with us than we are with ourselves.

It is striking that we cannot find a follower or compatriot in the XIV or XV century, who would have adopted without qualification the view of Dante as a pious Christian. Instead, learned men like Boccaccio, Marsilio of Padua, Botticelli, even Machiavelli knew him to be a highly problematic figure, and dangerous. For decades following the Comedy's publication, numerous passages were condemned as heretical. Had the poem been less popular, had the

authorities known for sure what to make of it, the Comedy would have been placed on the Index of forbidden books, as was his revolutionary treatise *On Monarchy*. Of course, we think, that's just the medieval Church. Even Thomas Aquinas did not pass the Church's inspection at first, though he became the Angelic Doctor, whose work would become the pillar of Catholic teaching. Indeed, Dante seems to have gotten posthumously caught up in the revival of Aquinas, when Pope Leo XIII canonized Aquinas's works 140 years ago. Everyone simply forgot there had ever been suspicions about his compatriot Dante. Even Nietzsche took him at face value when, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, he imagined the *Inferno* to embody the revenge-motive he held to be typical of Christians. But it was the translators and commentators who made Dante into a typical Christian. They proceeded to curate him as a literary saint and covered him in a cloud of incense. Our erudite editions in English are steeped in this legend.

But how do we go about recovering the real poet of the Comedy? Every serious student of Dante knows how difficult it is. Dante's genius is too vast. To take the measure of his mind—to do justice to his monumental epic—one needs to have proficiency in all of Latin literature as well as Provençal and early Italian poetry, expertise in Scholastic philosophy, including the Judeo-Arabic and Islamic commentators; also, a solid grounding in the history of the Church since its founding, and a thorough knowledge of the Bible, of Christian theology, the dynastic feuds of the Middle Ages, and the political writings of antiquity. Now, individual scholars claim one or two of these specialties, or parts of several if they can. I, on the other hand, lay claim to none of them. I am an amateur. Maybe that is a perverse qualification. You will have to decide the value of a non-expert putting together several lines of inquiry, suggesting a pattern perhaps not apparent to the specialists. For I would like to bring to your

attention three interrelated themes, based on my reading both of recent scholarship and of Dante's works. These are three potentially subversive ideas making the rounds in the Middle Ages, or rather, making their way through the underground. My hypothesis is that Dante put these three radical insights together, understood their explosive consequences, and then prudently hid them away in his epic poem, concealing the gold under a lattice of silver. They might begin to show us who Dante is.

Here are the three radical ideas.

1. That *behind* the scriptures of the monotheistic religions there is a single universal Truth about human things, a Truth accessible to natural reason and independent of belief. This conviction took hold of Dante, just as it did Maimonides, in studying Aristotle and the Islamic philosophers of the X to XII centuries.

2. That the universal Truth behind these scriptures is preeminently the Truth about Love, a subject that the official Christian theology never adequately dealt with. According to Dante, the theologians misunderstood the relations of Eros and Agapē, and set the Bible at odds with philosophy. This he elaborated from the Provençal poets known as the Troubadours and, again, from the Islamic writers who inspired them.

3. That knowing the Truth about Love entails knowing why humans get Love wrong, why (in the Bible's terms) human beings sin. Dante, the self-reflective poet, could explain human failings in love psychologically, developmentally, and rework the Church's doctrine of Original Sin—the Fall—in naturalistic terms. His naturalistic analysis of Sin differed from the Myth of the Fall in a crucial respect: it did *not* enclose humanity in the gloomy fate taught by the theologians. By rethinking this Myth, Dante could rehabilitate not just erotic love but

politics and the ethics of nobility. The Comedy represents his breakout from the theological mindset and his rediscovery of the psyche's natural stages of growth. His epic poem is a complete reevaluation of earthly life, a Renaissance ready to happen.

1.

In a recent panel on Religion in the Program, Mr. LeCuyer said something that sums up the first point I want to make about Truth and the Bible. He said that some people – a *few* people—can attain the heights of human virtue by way of their own resources; but most people need the guidance of religion to support their spiritual development. This is the medieval Judeo-Islamic philosophy of religion in a nutshell. It is called the Doctrine of Two Truths, referring to the two audiences addressed by sacred texts—the philosophers and the multitude. It bears on the problem of interpreting religious works, since it proposes that the figurative language of Scripture, inspiring and up-building for most readers, will suggest more theoretical wisdom to the speculative mind (though the practical moral outcome may be similar). Mr. LeCuyer's distinction refers us to the most radical theme in medieval philosophy.

Now we know that Maimonides learned the Doctrine of the Two-Truths from the Islamic philosopher Al-Farabi (X century). Dante gathered a similar teaching from Avicenna and Averroës (XI and XII centuries), whom he often cites as authoritative. (Also, his closest friend, the poet Guido Cavalcanti, was an Averroist and probably an atheist.) In the Comedy, Dante has placed these Islamic sages in Limbo, his personal pantheon (as we shall see). Since we know that such philosophers stand for a type of higher rationality vis-à-vis religion, it is unlikely that the poet meant the Christian surface of his Comedy to set a limit on its interpretation.

Now the Islamic sages had adopted Aristotle's idea that Intellectual Intuition is the origin of all higher human insight. They embraced his brief account of the Potential vs. the Active Intellect in *De Anima*. (We read *De Anima* in the sophomore year, disrupting the seminar program's chronology, because it is the source for the theory of mind that became crucial for the thinkers of the Middle Ages.) Philosophers from the three monotheisms, beginning with those in the Islamic world, wrote extensive commentaries on the Active Intellect (III.5). With Aristotle, they regarded it as that which gives access to Reality—the light that suddenly irradiates the mind, after the sustained labor of discursive thinking. At this speculative height, thinking was said to come as close as possible to divinity. You may recall that fine metaphor in Maimonides's *Guide to the Perplexed* about the mental lightning-flashes that multiply to the point of providing an almost constant illumination. He is expressing the Aristotelian Active Intellect in a poetic image. In *Purgatorio*, Dante also will employ light imagery, accompanied by angelic visitations, to describe his epiphanies.

Such descriptive images for spiritual events should not be undervalued. But generally, imagination is the subordinate, if indispensable, element in the formation and expression of abstract ideas. That means that inspired flights of language, like those we find in the Scriptures, may signify the philosophic insights attained by those who strive to know, who reach the outer limits of what one can know. Now, we may wish to claim with Thomas Aquinas that, because our knowledge reaches limits, there are truths beyond those attainable by the highest intellect: these truths must be held by faith. But the actual content of such faith must, by its very nature, be open to doubt. If such "truths" are based on what is stated in Scripture—well, what is "stated" in Scripture is hardly straightforward. The articles of faith derive from an agreed-upon

interpretation of those texts, but can only count as one interpretation. At the end of the day, either reflective Reason or some external Authority determines what one believes.

Now it is easy to see the advantages of the Islamic-Aristotelian notion of a supervening truth, caught sight of in philosophic study. On the one hand, it avoids the fanaticism, the lethal struggle, that results when the three monotheisms all insist that only one of their books is *the* divinely revealed truth. On the other, it avoids the skeptic's inference that God must have forgotten what he had said at one moment or what he had inspired in some other place. To the Islamic philosophers, sacred scriptures employ the idioms of metaphor and story, and are the expressions of particular historical times, places, and peoples. The Torah, the Gospel, and the Koran are already translations, so to speak, of the Divine Mind and its purposes. We must admire, for example, the domestic defense-strategy of Maimonides: he protects Hebrew Scripture from the challenges of philosophy, even while philosophizing, by showing the general necessity of parables. Parables capture what can only be known imperfectly. Formally, Maimonides takes the believers' part, while maintaining a provocative ambiguity about whether the language of parable operates below or above the threshold of reason.

The American medievalist Gregory Stone has shown that Dante managed the rhetoric of Two Truths with similar skill. Consider the moment in *Paradiso* when St. John the Evangelist examines the pilgrim on the subject of the highest good. When John asks how Dante was directed to this end, he answers that he learned this lesson from both philosophy and scripture. Specifically, he cites Aristotle's arguments for the Prime Mover, then paraphrases God's words to Moses, and charmingly refers to the prologue of the Gospel written by his present examiner. Observe how John validates Dante's answer.

Through human intellect, and through authorities that agree with it,
Keep the love of God highest of all your loves." (*Para.* 26.46-49)
I myself have read this page a dozen times, over the years, without appreciating its subtlety.

First of all, Dante has named the most famous pagan thinker, the main Jewish prophet, and the beloved Christian apostle as his sources, without special preference. But John's confirmation suggests a subordination of them all. He keeps the authorities in the plural; but the ultimate arbiter, the intellect, is singular. He describes the various scriptural authorities as *agreeing with human intellect, not the other way around*. He implies that reason is the standard for the writings handed down to us. St. John gently improves on Dante's answer by taking his stand not with Thomas Aquinas but with the Islamic philosophers.

The more we look for such details in Dante's poem (assuming a faithful translation), the more we shall find our surmise confirmed. Here is an instance on the first page. Dante the lost pilgrim describes the rays of "that planet [the Sun] that *leads others rightly by every road*. (*Inf.* 1.18) Again, the text quietly asserts the higher cosmopolitan view of the three religious paths—a sort of XIV-century Multiculturalism, only set in the relief of a shared Truth. (That alone sounds like a Dante-message for our times.)

Now none of this should be understood to mean that Scripture is simply a translation of philosophy per se, nor that philosophy is superior to revelation in every respect. Judaism and Islam are not just religions of the Book, but religions of the Law. They remain closer to the practical function of religion than traditional Christianity; for this reason, they also focus on the moral leadership of the prophets. Again, we can take our bearings from Maimonides, who (as Sophomores know) takes a special interest in the psychology of prophecy. The essential difference between philosophers and prophets is *not their intellectual level*, but the fact that

prophets have a gift for addressing and inspiring the people. Philosophers address the intellect, through concepts. By contrast, the prophets speak in poetic images, and employ the language that motivates everyone. Scriptures of the Law thus give a foundation for right opinion, i.e. for harmonious communities. They appeal to the popular imagination and memory, without encouraging excessive curiosity about theory. Religion is good because it commands; philosophy is concerned with what and how we know. Yet the careful reader of Maimonides's *Guide* suspects that he is foremost an adept in philosophy. For, why else does his discussion of the prophets take the philosophical type of person as the *natural* candidate for prophecy?

Dante might well be read as a prophet in Maimonides's sense, essentially a philosopher but one with exceptional gifts of imagination and language. He applies the Judeo-Islamic idea of religion to the Christian dispensation, recasting its message and casting himself in the role of visionary. Readers have long felt this and have even regarded the *Divine Comedy* as a "Third Testament." But, following the Islamic idea, Dante consistently points to his philosophical subtext, with its self-selecting audience. Listen to his warning when he has left Purgatory and is about to enter Paradise.

Sail back till you see your shoreline reappear
For here the sea is deep, and if you lose
My leading light just once, then steering clear
Might bring bewilderment. So you must choose – (*Para.* 2.4-6)

We are at the boundary between the ethical and intellectual realms. Our training in practical virtue on the salutary mountain is complete, and we are about to venture into the trackless space of speculation, heavens unregulated by the laws of heavy bodies. The reader spontaneously decides if the poet's caution is discouraging or enticing.

2.

Now for my second point, that the Truth behind all Scriptures and philosophy is the Truth about Love. Dante makes the point with semiotic wit, again in the Paradise canto where John the Evangelist interviews him. To describe the Truth that transcends traditions, he turns the letters of the alphabet, usually signifiers, into the signified, the substance of his insight:

The Good is the Alpha and Omega of
All writing that is read to me,
With strong or gentle voice, by Love. (*Purg.* 26.16-18)

Again, we see that for Dante writing is mediation. It is Love itself that reads, and leads the soul to know the Good. Love's power is famously conveyed in the last lines of the epic, about Love moving the sun and the stars; and in Virgil's long speech about Love being the driving force of every soul. Dante may be the first person to say explicitly that people are happy or unhappy, depending on how they realize Love in their lives. Of course, Plato ventured something like that in his dialogues on Eros. And Aristotle hypostatized Eros in describing the Prime Mover as inciting the universe's motions by love. There is also the Islamic commentator and synthesizer, Avicenna. He combined the personal Eros of Plato and the cosmic Eros of Aristotle in his short but stunning "Treatise on Love." This text became a source for the courtly-love craze that swept through southern Europe like an Arabian sirocco. This mirroring of loves, inner and the outer, stirred Dante's imagination to a poetic extreme. Has any writer so mixed up his romantic passion for a girl with the intentions of Providence—his personal life with the world's destiny—as much as Dante? Was he a love-sick poet, or the avatar of modern subjectivity?

Modern Westerners are often surprised to learn that the ideology of romantic love actually evolved over millennia. The romantic myths we take for granted – elaborated in opera, cinema, and the novel – and our still-unfinished sexual revolutions—the entire liberation of the love-impulse only becomes self-conscious in Modern times. The most recent phase of this movement was inaugurated by the Troubadour poets of the XII century, close to Dante’s day. Nietzsche understood their immense significance. He wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Love as *passion* . . . must have a noble origin. Its invention belongs to the Provençal knightly poets, those splendidly inventive men of the “gay science” [gai saber] to whom Europe owes so much—almost its very self. (260)

What Nietzsche appreciated less is the role of Platonism and Christianity in this amorous creation of Europe. Here Dante’s contribution was spectacular.

This becomes evident when we recall the social and cultural context. The Church had always tried to keep a barrier between sacred and secular love. In Augustine’s view, writes Valentina Izmirlieva, a person was “either a saint or a slime-bag.” Put differently, the Church taught that Eros was wounded by his own arrows. Only Agapē, the gracious love expounded in the Gospels, was wholesome and healing. But the Troubadour poets came along with their radical lyric message: personal love was being stifled under traditional marriage contracts for producing legitimate heirs. Their songs made adultery fascinating. Dante’s entrance onto the Troubadour stage was world-historical. He recognized the metaphysical aspiration in the transgressive eroticism of the Troubadours, and declared the whole quarrel between secular and sacred love a mistake. The problem—in the soul as in society—was not to separate Eros and Agapē, but to see how they are connected and continuous. In his earliest published poetry, he merged the courtier’s devotion to his Lady-Love with the believer’s prayer to his patron

Saint. Without knowing Plato's dialogues, Dante created a Platonism for everyone, celebrating the personal passion that transformed all of a person's affects as from above. "My Beloved's image is so dignified," he wrote in his cycle *La Vita Nuova*, "that *its* power would not *allow* Love to guide me without the counsel of Reason." (1) Love spills out from the same higher source as Truth itself. To the noble soul, Love will always have ennobling effects.

It sounds so easily settled. But in celebrating his Beloved, Dante had invented a pious kind of blasphemy. If that never bothered him, it was thanks to his Two-Truths idea whereby philosophy runs in tandem with religious imagery. For the real and redeeming beloved had a name: Beatrice. And the religious image also had a name: Christ, the savior of souls. (Cf. *Par.* 31.80) From his earliest Troubadour days forward, Dante unapologetically glorified Beatrice as his personal experience of the Incarnation of Christ. Genuine love of a particular individual, if the affair was nobly-conducted, would have the same effect as a religious conversion: a gradual healing of the soul's wound. That is what it means for Love to be the Universal Truth. For presumably no one wants their deepest longings to remain disconnected and their fulfillment to be deferred until after death. In *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, Dante meets with countless shades who led their lives in frustration and deferral. They failed to let Love lead them. (Cf. *Inf.* 6.109f.)

What, then, is sin? Dante draws out the audacious consequences of his theological position. You may remember Aquinas's teaching about Original Sin in the *Summa Theologiae* (I-II). Following Augustine, Aquinas examines the symptom of this inherited sin, called the *fomes*, the desire for sexual possession. The idea is that the human inclination to lust is God's just punishment discharged on all flesh for the disobedience of Adam, his rebellion against his

rational end. (Q 91 a.6) Rather than raise fallen human beings directly from their debasement, God apparently thought it would be a good idea to make their rebellion worse, that is, to add lust as an impediment to their acquisition of reason. Whatever one may think of this divine pedagogy, it clearly supposes that erotic desire is the enemy of reason, and that we depend on the Church to set us on a course of resistance. By contrast, Dante repudiates any separation of Love and Knowledge: his beloved Beatrice comprises both the Christ-Logos and *Sapientia*, the Latin figure of Wisdom in the writings attributed to Solomon. For the philosophic intellect, the ancient punishment of the flesh, its constant incitement to sin, is simply the natural motive for coming to understand the eroticism of the soul.

I shall not go into all the details here of Dante's "solution" to the problem of Original Sin. But I would suggest a study of Purgatory cantos 17 to 19 under the hypothesis that such a solution is what he proffers in those pages. There, Virgil lectures explicitly on the "origin of human evils." Following tradition, he lays the blame on the hapless human will. Dante teases Virgil that he is playing the Scholastic doctor – a kind of proxy for Aquinas. Dante wants a dialogue, not a lecture. He wants to understand better the *causes* of sin. How is this possible if, like Virgil (or Aquinas), we ignore the power of *imagination* over desire? Then, as if to fill this gap, Dante irresistibly falls asleep and has his most blatantly sexual dream. In the dream, he confronts the archetypal Siren. The text makes explicit how Dante's Unconscious creates her. Sex channels the imagination into self-delusion. The Siren always promises the complete satisfaction of desire; she thus ties up our essential longing with the flesh. This is how the syndrome of Sin becomes established. Emancipation from this sensual cycle, however, is not achieved by impersonal Agapē, the will to charity, or sacramental grace. It is achieved by the

recognition that sensuality as such does not engage a person's desire for wisdom. By contrast, Dante teaches, authentic personal love *does* engage this desire, at least implicitly. It is always a response to a beauty uniquely felt, not to a type or archetype. Without such love, no one escapes the cycles of sensuality. Only a true and wise Beloved exposes the wiles of the Siren, as Beatrice does in Dante's dream: she descends to have Virgil uncover the Siren's putrefying pudenda. (19.28-33) Again, Beatrice's saving of Dante substitutes for the archetypal Christ redeeming Adam (34-36). Dante does not contradict the account of Sin based on the Church's mythic theology. Instead, he replaces the myth with the revealing sexual symbolism of dream, which the reader can apply to their own case.

Looking back at *Inferno*, we realize how Dante traces there the negative image of his philosophy of love, the tragic side of Eros. In the Circle of the Lustful we see the souls blown on a "hellish cyclone that can never rest." (5:31) Symbolically buffeted by an implacable wind, their desire was never anchored by the "counsels of Reason" as was Dante's love of Beatrice. But the poet describes these sinners with a striking phrase: they subjected their intellect to their *talento* (which, in Italian, can mean inclination or talent). (5:39) Indeed, a taste for poetry was the downfall of the sensitive woman, Francesca da Rimini, whom he meets in this circle. But Francesca's fate, though unchangeable, is about to be suspended. For she will momentarily find in Dante a compassionate friend, and a worthier one than the mute Paolo to whom she is literally bound. Dante spies the couple being whirled about, and calls them "in the name of Love." They should come to him, he says mysteriously, if "Another" should permit. Francesca declares their wish—actually *her* wish—to speak with Dante. If only the Creator were gracious (she says) and the wind remain silent! Her speech then reveals the kindred spirit of a poet: she

proceeds to sing a Troubadour lament of how “Love” led her and her lover to their demise. Always eager to exonerate Love, Dante presses her to disclose the true cause of her tragedy, that she had fallen victim to the new poetry of adultery. Reason gave way to her *talent* one day when she and Paolo were seduced by the romance of Guinevere and Lancelot. As Francesca recounts her submergence of Love in imagination, one realizes that something extraordinary has taken place. The relentless cyclone *has* died down. The two poets’ keenness to bring desire into language has been the occasion of a miracle—like Jesus calming the storm. The “Other”—the supreme Love that Dante invoked (5:87)—has turned the hurricane of lust into an intimate setting for dialogue.

3.

I have described Dante’s translation of the doctrine of Original Sin into an erotic depth-psychology, following the Islamic idea of the Two Truths. I proceed to my third point, namely, that Dante’s challenge to the myth of Original Sin constituted a modern revolution. This becomes apparent in the cantos that show us the world freed from that myth. His rethinking of sin will make three things possible: a) the secular diagnosis of the political ills of Europe; b) the recognition of the blessedness of the pagan intelligentsia in Limbo; and c) the challenge to the Church doctrine that Christ had to pay for Adam’s sin on our behalf.

a) Politics without Original Sin

Let me state the less than obvious connection here. If humanity is irredeemable by natural

means (owing to Original Sin), then it follows that the political order becomes merely a matter of controlling the damages. Civic virtues can have no integrity in their own right, for the health of the soul depends ultimately on the Church as a conduit of grace. This is roughly the perspective of Augustine's treatise *The City of God*, which had a fateful influence on medieval political thought. Augustine assigns *theoretical* supremacy to the Church over the secular power. He thus reinforced the *territorial* supremacy that the Donation of Constantine—a forged document of the IV century—had granted to the Bishop of Rome. Aquinas, for all his defense of the Natural Law, never challenges this theocratic design. He shows little interest in the differential goods and honors that make up political life as such, and no interest whatsoever in the major controversy of his day, the contest between Pope and Emperor.

What a different impression we get from Dante's Comedy! He never tires of decrying the crimes of the papacy and its usurpation of civil authority. Who can forget his Hymn of Hate to the Black Beast, Boniface VIII? And look at what he places at the center of the whole *Divine Comedy*, in canto 16 of Purgatory. He features a long diatribe by Marco of Lombardy about the political debacle in Europe. Curiously, the historical facticity of this Marco of Lombardy has never been traced. (In this respect, he may be like Thucydides' Diototus, the imaginary statesman who cuts to the heart of a political crisis.) Marco clearly represents Dante's ideals of intellectual vigor and courtly valor. We may appreciate his discourse better if we recall the dramatic run-up to his speech.

We have just left the Circle of Envy to enter the Circle of Wrath. Virgil's explanation of these evils, blaming the individual soul, has not satisfied his pupil. Dante is trying to grasp the *political* conditions of envy and anger, the unjust distribution of goods and honors in the city

that aggravates these deadly sins. Once again, anticipating the needed clarity, he has a sequence of visions, in this instance, visions that Machiavelli might have read as the story of the rise of Catholic theocracy and its destruction of the earthly good. To finally resolve his doubts, Dante asks Marco to explain why the world is “despoiled of every virtue.” We are in the Circle of Wrath; but Marco’s anger is the noble and righteous kind. Against the notion of Original Sin, he champions human autonomy. “You are free, subject only to a greater force and a better nature.” He deliberately contradicts Augustine on Original Sin. He replaces Augustine’s picture of the greedy child at the breast with his own image of the newborn soul: she is “like a little girl” that naïvely explores her surroundings and errs if not properly guided. Guidance is provided not by sacraments but by a wise political regime: “law as a curb, and a king who discerns from afar the towers of the True City.” (16:96) The cause of Europe’s decline, Marco continues, is “evil at the summit of power, not nature that, according to some, is corrupt in you.” (non natura che ‘n voi sia corrotta). He proceeds to attack the Church’s involvement in secular affairs, especially her destruction of the antagonism between the two supreme forces, pope and emperor, a balance of powers that is essential to civilization and to justice. The conspiratorial flavor of Marco’s discourse is confirmed by his sudden nervous exit. Here is Clive James’ accurate rendering of Marco’s closure.

Look over there, the smoke is turning white,
An angel – the source of that growing light.
I had better take off before he sees me.
So, he turned back, and cut short our colloquy. (*Purg.* 16, 142-145)

As I mentioned, this exchange occurs at the dead center of the whole *Divine Comedy*.

b) Pagans in Limbo, a Heaven Apart

Here the connection to Original Sin is more obvious, made explicit in the text of *Inferno*, canto 4. A soul is assigned to Limbo if, for whatever reason, it was not baptized in the true faith so as to remove the inherited stain. Technically, the rule condemns not just unbaptized infants but all non-Christians, regardless of the accidents of time and place. Virgil, himself a pagan, refers to this threshold-sacrament of baptism with a provocative aloofness: “it is the gate of the faith that *you believe*.” Yet later we learn that Virgil must be mistaken about his disciple.

In *Inferno* 19, Dante tells a story about an incident that happened to him during a baptismal ceremony in the baptistery of San Giovanni. There *an infant was in danger of drowning in the holy water*. The poet comes to the rescue, smashes the vessel, and saves the child. It sounds like a dream. But he calls it a real prophetic event; it reminds him of the Lord’s command to Jeremiah to break an amphóra at the Gate of the Potsherd and rail against the corruption of Jerusalem. Dante’s revelation in Florence’s baptistery thus directs him to preach salvation, but specifically without the presumption of Original Sin. He calls his assault on the baptismal font “a sign to *undeceive* all men” (*questo sia suggel ch’ogn’omo sganni*, 21).

So, what is going on in Limbo? Dante’s invention of Limbo both reveals and conceals the “bright line” between the Two Truths, defining the difference between the few who would save themselves by natural means, and the multitude who seek salvation by way of the sacraments. In Limbo, Dante the pilgrim beholds “vast throngs” of unbaptized souls; but his plain interest is in the “persons of great distinction.” The reader imagines him concerned about how the ancient sages are treated, why they are not permitted to join the blessed in Paradise. But that distinction depends on the readers’ perspective. The joke is on us. According to the Two-Truths principle, Limbo is a perfectly good Paradise. Only our assumption ranks the official

Paradise superior to the home of the virtuous pagans. When Virgil states that the residents of Limbo “live in desire without hope” (42), Dante allows the reader to imagine these non-Christians in an eternity of despair and futile longing. But “desire without hope” can just as well describe a soul’s activity in the light of the Primal Good, a trust in life studied with open eyes, and the continual satisfactions of a philosophic aspiration without end. In fact, *that* is the doctrine of blessedness that Dante set forth in his 1307 treatise, *The Banquet*. (III.15) In Limbo, he appears merely to be restating that doctrine, astutely disguised. (Cf. *Purg.* XXXI.128-9)

Indeed, the natural form of blessedness comes into view when the pagan sages in Limbo welcome the pilgrim Dante into their Academy. Virgil declares that the name “Poet” resounds above and wins the grace of heaven. This is confirmed by a mysterious Voice, like the Holy Spirit confirming Christ’s messianic election. Virgil observes that the Poets share their title collectively. The mysterious Voice makes them One with a single exalted Source—which sounds like the pure act of the Active Intellect. At this point, a process of initiation takes place. The five classical poets go into secret conclave. Virgil smiles, and Dante is admitted into their ranks. Notice that the group then “speaks of things better kept in silence as they progress toward the light.” As if to say, together they formulate the secret canonical learning that clears away the darkness of dogma. Next, they enter the Castle of Seven Walls and Seven Gates, crossing the encircling stream “as if on dry land:” they walk on water, like Jesus. The Hall of the ancient sages awaits them, a place “high and free and full of light”—miraculous for a subterranean enclosure, but symbolic of a true Paradise if we do not read literally.

c) Debunking the Theology of Vicarious Atonement

My last example of Dante's deconstruction of the ideology of Original Sin is his exposé of the medieval theology of Atonement. According to the Church, disobedient humanity needs to be saved; but none are worthy or capable of first making reparation to God to save His divine honor. The theory of substitute Atonement purports to resolve this juridical deadlock by saying that God's own Son suffered on the cross to appease his Father's wrath and reconcile humankind to Him. Christ's sacrifice both serves Justice and expresses divine Mercy. God pays himself back. Now this thesis of vicarious Atonement is sometimes extracted from obscure sayings of Christ and from Paul's letters. But it was only worked out in detail in an XI-century dialogue, *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God became a Man). This key text was authored by one of Dante's compatriots, Anselm of Aosta, *aka* "Anselm of Canterbury"—yes, Anselm of the famous ontological argument.

It is worth noting that Anselm's dialogue on the Atonement treats sin not just as offending but as *defrauding* God. As we descend to the eighth circle of Hell, the Circle of Fraud, we hear a story that sounds like a caricature of Anselm's doctrine. It hints at the salutary absurdity that God *had to punish some worthy subject* in order to avenge his offense by humankind. Again, Dante points to the line dividing the Two Truths, the difference between a humanity capable and a humanity incapable of achieving virtue by its own efforts.

The suspicious story is told by Ugolino of Pisa, in *Inferno* 33. Ugolino is imprisoned by the archbishop Ruggiero, along with Ugolino's sons, whose dead bodies will provide their father's final grisly meal. The sacramental allusions crop up continually in his tale, beginning with the reference to the *daily bread* delivered to their prison cell. When the bread-delivery is discontinued, the sons (one of whose name is Anselm—I am not making this up!)—the sons

offer their flesh to the father. They employ an argument that sounds like a parody of the Scholastic text. “O Father, it would be less pain for us if you ate us! You clothed us in this wretched flesh, it is for you to strip it off!” (61-63). (The Italian word for “strip off” here is *spogliare*, also a common word for defraud. “Father, it is for you to defraud us!”) Ugolino’s resolute silence is stressed—mirroring the impassivity of God the Father—and is contrasted to the innocent suffering of the sons, described as fixed on a cross (*porre a tal croce* 87). One of the dying boys cries out, “Daddy, why won’t you help me?”—without receiving any answer, thus echoing the words of the crucified Christ, “My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”

Now some commentators, perceiving the parallel to the Passion story, make Ugolino into a Christian lesson: they deplore his damnable incapacity to benefit from the sons’ self-sacrifice. But is that not exactly what Ugolino did, albeit perversely? Dante seems rather to be engaging in black comedy, hinting at his subtext by making children, unconvincingly, into heroic cannibals-in-reverse. The serious question in the parody would be: *How can we damn Ugolino’s acceptance of little Anselm’s offer and not reject the theologian Anselm’s theory of Atonement?* Its concept of God, translated to the human level, is transparently twisted. It could only appeal to a mind hell-bent on justifying the Father’s hunger for power. Anselm’s theology has, in effect, turned the Oedipal complex into an Edible complex. It is unthinkable that the poet who regularly invoked the feminine side of God—Sophia, St. Lucy, and Beatrice—should have embraced such a patriarchal thesis. No. Dante shows that Anselm’s doctrine, far from resolving a problem of evil, conceals a profounder one. It conceals an indifference to the crimes committed against children, for whom there is no compensation. There is no reward in Paradise for *these* victims! Only the poet’s naming of them redeems them in this hell of frozen

tears. We may even link Dante's parody of the patriarchal theology to the prophecies of Joachim da Fiore, the XII-century Jew-turned-wandering-monk, whom he glorifies in *Paradiso*. Joachim envisioned three ages of world history, that of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If, as scholars maintain, Dante's Comedy represents his attempt to compose a "Third Testament," then his intention was ultimately to depose the biblical authority figures.

4. (Conclusion)

Mention of the three historical ages of Joachim da Fiore brings me back to my theme of Dante as our contemporary. For, with the poet's dreams of a healed and whole secular order, we would enter Joachim's final age of the Spirit. Recall that Dante, in his fantasy of Limbo, had himself elected to the Academy of the Supreme Poets, all of whom are ancient. This self-celebration sharpens our awareness of how much the *Divine Comedy* is about him, about his coming into his world-historical destiny, answering a call to poetry and prophecy not heard for centuries. In Dante, the genre of epic poetry awakens from a thousand-year hibernation.

Now the old epics – of Odysseus and Aeneas—and even Plato's myth of Er depict heroes who journey into the Afterworld. The gods choose them to make their dangerous voyages, but not for the sake of coming to dwell with them and the shades. They seek direction for the courses of life they are called to, back on earth. Christianity intervened in this epic tradition. It gave *everyone* a preoccupation with the hereafter. It taught its official story about Eternity, but in no self-consciously poetic sense. Dante's daring was to revive the literary device of the ancient epic, now to treat the Christian Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory—and use them as the backdrop for the tale of his own divine calling. The pilgrim becomes the poet narrator. Hence,

the plot of the Hero discovering his Way in the world attains a new level of irony and self-dramatization. A simple revival of the classical perspective on the meaning of human existence was out of the question. After a millennium of heavenly aspiration, the ancient epic could not simply pick up where it left off. But how was Dante to lift the earth onto his shoulders in order to restore it to humanity? How could he break through the otherworldly bias of a millennium of theologizing? The answer sounds like an historian's joke: he has to do it *very cautiously*.

We observe Dante's caution in his famous letter to his benefactor Can Grande della Scala, where he describes his intentions in the Comedy. The subject of his poem, he says, is Man who by his own merits or demerits is *deserving*—note the agnostic word—deserving of rewards or punishments. The Comedy aims (he continues) “to remove those living *in this life* from a state of misery and bring them to a state of happiness.” Such perfect finesse! Here is a parallel statement from his philosophical treatise (*The Banquet*) on the goal of human longing:

Our desire is proportioned in this life to the knowledge which we can have here; it does not go past that point, except by an error, which is outside the intention of nature.
(*Convivio* III.15)

Dante's focus is ever on the present existence, existence that (with due respect to Aquinas) is *not* to be absorbed in anticipations of a future blessedness. His mission as the hero of his own epic is to open again the path to Paradise *through the natural realm*. His confrontation with demons and his climb up the mount of practical virtue are equally necessities of nature. With Dante, philosophy and visionary poetry, erotic love, and the ethics of nobility all recover their grounding in self-knowledge, as the classical authors understood. He rejects as specious, even fraudulent, the idea that our existence is a metaphysical wager, where we lay down the finite

goods that belong to us now for infinite compensations in Eternity. (*Inf.* 1.55) His logic is not the logic of the Either/Or. It is the logic of Both/And. Or better: the logic of *What is first for us*.

We might sum up his teaching with a deceptively simple saying from Luke's gospel. "Whoever can be trusted with little things, can also be trusted with great; and whoever is dishonest with little things will be dishonest in great things too." For Dante, the "little things" that we are being trusted with are the world and the life we know.

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