



“Sinners and Saints in Dante’s *Commedia*”

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Recapitulation of Week One

- Dante is the father of Italian, though not the inventor of Italian, nor is he the first Italian poet. He is part of a “fourth wave” of Italian poets ([1] the first Italian poets write in Old Occitan, [2] Sicilian poets at the court of Federico II, [3] *siculo-toscani* and Bolognesi in the Communes of northern Italy, [4] Dante & Company])
- Dante writes the *Comedy* while in exile and amidst a fractured and divisive political background
- both Liberal Italy and the Church claim Dante
- Italy’s literary unification precedes and perhaps supercedes its political unification (1861)
- The Church calls Dante “ours” (Pope Paul VI, Pope Benedict XV) despite Dante’s willingness to condemn popes and others to hell in the *Comedy*, and despite Dante’s argument, in the *De monarchia*, that the pope ought to concentrate on being Christ’s vicar on earth (“the two suns [Emperor and Pope]”)
- the *Comedy* presents a unified cosmos, consisting of “death, love, and God” that ends with God himself, who has “bound the universe in a single volume” (see also *Letter to Cangrande*)
- the *Inferno* is not enough - we must read on through *Purgatory* and *Paradise*
- “From the abyss of crimes punished, through the serene realms where human spirits purify themselves, toward the arduous summits of perfection, to which a multiplicity of ways lead to holiness and splendor, there are those who model the many different forms that holiness takes -- panegyrics woven for St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Peter Damian, St. Benedict of Norcia, St. Romuald, St. Bernard -- all rising toward a summit.” (*motu proprio* of Pope Paul VI, 1965, VII centenary of Dante’s birth)

Incipit prima cantica l'opere comedie dantes di
his q' s'it in seculis. Que incipit diuinitate
Incepit p'm' n'q' p'tem. i' ad totu opus

Dimeco tel chamun d'nostri uen
miratua p'una selua oscura
chella diruta ma em firarrita.
E quando adur quale cosa d'una
essa selua seluaggia. aspia forte
che nel pensier rinoua la paura.
Tanto camina che poche piu morte
mappetatar tel ten chio introua
d'oro tellalre cose chio uo scoue.
Cio non lo benedire ch'nono uirtua
tanto era piu d'isorno a quel punto
chella uenue ma alantona.
A poi chio sen apie dun colle guinto
laoue eminaua quella ualle
chemanea d'apaua ilcoz com punto
Guarda inuita emdi selue spalle
uelfuegia tel taggy del pianeto
chemena uenue altrui p'ogne calle
Illei fu lapaua un poco cheta
chenellago delcoz men durata
la nocte chio passai con tanta pietà
Come quei che cholera affinnata
uifito fuoz del pelago alla ruina
finoige allacqua perigiosa guata
Cosi l'antico mio tanto faggua
fuolle anietro arimmar lo passo
chene l'alto giamai p'fona uita
Poi che polio un poco ilcorpo l'alto
m'p'chi ma p'piaggia d'iserta
si bel pie fermo sempre eral piu basso
tacho quasi alcominciar tellerta
una lenca leggier. 2 presta molto
ched'era maculato era ceuto in
nomi parti d'ingangi aluoto
angi in perua tante l'antico sanua
chio fin p'ritenar piu uolte uolo

Tempo era telpanapio telmatino
il sol montaua su con quelle stelle
che in collu quanto lamoz diuino.
Cesse dapaua quelle cose belle
sichabene spar men ragione
d'iquella fiera la greta pelle.
Ora tel tempo ella tolce stagione
manosi chepaua nommi tesse
lausta che ma parue dun leone
uesti p'p'eta che cona me uenisse
colla restata con rabbiosa fame
si che parca che lair me temesse
Duna lupa che tu dice brame
sembrana chiara nella sua magrea
emote genti se gia uiuer giame
Questa impozie tanto d'ingame
colla paura ch'fata d'isua uita
chio p'ri lasp'ingia tellaltea
E quale quei che uoluneri aquista
eguenel tempo che p'ce lofice
ch'entati suoi pensier piange elatista
almitec la bestia l'anga p'ce
cheuenemto mincontro apoco apoco
Denar chi rumaua in basso loco
rimana agloch m'f'hi offerro
che plungo silene parca f'ico
quanto uidi colui nelgian d'iserto
miserere d'ime grida allui
qu'el che tulle ombra homo certo
risuosemi non homo homo gia fu
eti parenti mie siron lombardi
manouani p' patria ambidui
Acapui foguio anco che fosse tardi
emisi arroma socto buono aquillo
nel tempo telli dei falsi bugardi

italiana



The oldest known manuscript of the *Commedia*, [Ashburnham 828](#) (c. 1r). Now held at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence. Datable to 1335 to northern Tuscany, probably Pisa or Florence.

The Structure of the *Comedy*: Form as a Reflection of Content

- set in the Jubilee year of 1300 (March 25 or April 8) [likely composed between 1302-1321]
- The language is Dante's (Florentine) Italian, with many neologisms, provençalisms, frenchisms etc
- three canticles, each composed of 33 canti [*Inferno* has 34]
- contains 14,233 verses, almost all of which are in *terzine* (tercets)
- Dante uses *terza-rima* (a method of rhyming by which the second verse of every *terzina* provides the rhyme for the first and third verses of the successive tercet)
- the meter is *endecasillabo* (hendecasyllable), wherein there is a stress on the tenth syllable, which is (usually) the second-to-last syllable. There is another stress on the fourth (*a minore*) or on the sixth (*a maggiore*):
 - Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore (Guido Guinizzelli)
○ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
 - Nel mez-zo del cam-min di nos-tra vi-ta (Dante, *Inferno* 1.1)
○ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
 - Mi ri-tro-vai per u-na sel-va os-cu-ra (Dante, *Inferno* 1.2)
○ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

- Inferno:

- the *selva oscura* (canti 1, 2)
- Gate of Hell (canto 3)
- Circle One (canto 4, Limbo)
- Circle Two (canto 5, lust)
- Circle Three (canto 6, gluttony)
- Circle Four (canto 7, avarice, prodigality)
- Circle Five (canti 7-8, wrath; canti 8-9, Dis)
- Circle Six (canto 10, heresy)
- Circle Seven (canti 11-17; murder, suicide, blasphemy, sodomy, usury)
- Circle Eight (canti 18-30, fraud, simony, political corruption, theft, fraudulent rhetoric, schism, falsity)
- Circle Nine (canti 32-34, treachery)

**TO CRITICIZE
THE CRITIC
AND OTHER
WRITINGS
BY T.S. ELIOT**

“No verse seems to demand greater literalness in translation than Dante’s, because no poet convinces one more completely that the word he had used is the word he wanted, and that no other will do.”

(T.S. Eliot, “What Dante Means to Me,” 1950)

“May those ladies who aided Amphion
to build the walls of Thebes now aid my verse,
that **the telling be no different from the
fact.**” (*Inferno* 32.10-12)

Ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso
ch'aiutaro Anfione a chiuder Tebe,
sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso.
(*Inferno* 32.10-12)

Dante's metapoetic declaration: *Inferno* 32

S'io avessi le rime aspre e chiocce,
come si converrebbe al tristo buco
sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce,
io premerei di mio concetto il suco
più pienamente; ma perch' io non
l'abbo,

non senza tema a dicer mi conduco;
ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo
discriver fondo a tutto l'universo,
né da lingua che chiami mamma o
babbo.

Ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso
ch'aiutaro Anfione a chiuder Tebe,

Had I the crude and scrannel rhymes to suit
the melancholy hole upon which all
the other circling crags converge and rest,
the juice of my conception would be pressed
more fully; but because I feel their lack,
I bring myself to speak, yet speak in fear;
for it is not a task to take in jest,
to show the base of all the universe —
nor for a tongue that cries out, “mama,” “papa”.
But may those ladies now sustain my verse
who helped Amphion when he walled up Thebes,
so that my tale not differ from the fact.

(*Inf.* 32.1-12)

The appearance of common themes in vertical cantos

Rispuosemi: "Così com'io t'amai
nel *mortal corpo*, così t'amo sciolta:
però m'arresto; ma tu perché vai?"
(*Purgatorio* 2.88-90).

"Even as I loved you in my mortal flesh (**mortal corpo**), he said,
so do I love you freed from it - yes, I will stay.
And you, what takes you on this journey?"
(*Purgatorio* 2.88-90).

Io rispuosi: "Madonna, sì devoto
com'esser posso più, ringrazio lui
lo qual dal *mortal mondo* m' ha remoto.
Ma ditemi: che son li segni bui
di *questo corpo*, che là giuso in terra
fan di Cain favoleggiare altrui?"
(*Paradiso* 2.46-50).

"My Lady, with absolute devotion
I offer thanks to Him
who has removed me from the world of death (**mortal mondo**).
But tell me, what are the dark spots on this body (**questo corpo**)
that make those down on earth repeat their preposterous tales of
Cain?"
(*Paradiso* 2.46-50)

Io ch'era d'ubidir disideroso,
non gliel celai, ma tutto gliel' apersi;
ond' ei levò le ciglia un poco in suso;
poi disse: "Fieramente furo avversi
a me e a miei primi e a mia parte,
sì che per due fiata li dispersi."
"S'ei fur cacciati, ei tornar d'ogne parte,"
rispuos' io lui, "l'una e l'altra fiata;
ma i vostri non appreser ben quell' arte." (*Inferno* 10.43-51)

Noi salavam per una pietra fessa,
che si moveva e d'una e d'altra parte,
sì come l'onda che fugge e s'appressa.
"Qui si conviene usare un poco d'arte,"
cominciò 'l duca mio, "in accostarsi
or quinci, or quindi al lato che si parte." (*Purgatorio* 2.7-12)

Vero è che, come forma non s'accorda
molte fiata a l'intenzion de l'arte,
perch' a risponder la materia è sorda,
così da questo corso si diparte
talor la creatura, c'ha podere
di piegar, così pinta, in altra parte;
e si come veder si può cadere
foco di nube, sì l'impeto primo
l'atterra torto da falso piacere. (*Paradiso* 1.130-138)

Leva dunque, lettore, a l'alte rote
meco la vista, dritto a quella parte
dove l'un moto e l'altro si percuote;
e li comincia a vagheggiar ne l'arte
di quel maestro che dentro a sé l'ama,
tanto che mai da lei l'occhio non parte. (*Paradiso* 10.7-12)

I, who desirous of obeying was,
Concealed it not, but all revealed to him;
Whereat he raised his brows a little upward.
Then said he: "Fiercely adverse have they been
To me, and to my fathers, and my party;
So that two several times I scattered them."
"If they were banished, they returned on all sides,"
I answered him, "the first time and the second;
But yours have not acquired that art aright."

We mounted upward through a rifted rock,
which undulated to this side and that,
Even as a wave receding and advancing.
"Here it behoves us use a little art,"
Began my Leader, "to adapt ourselves
Now here, now there, to the receding side."

True is it, that as oftentimes the form
Accords not with the intention of the art,
Because in answering is matter deaf,
So likewise from this course doth deviate
Sometimes the creature, who the power possesses,
Though thus impelled, to swerve some other way,
(In the same wise as one may see the fire
Fall from a cloud,) if the first impetus
Earthward is wrested by some false delight.

Lift up then, Reader, to the lofty wheels
With me thy vision straight unto that part
Where the one motion on the other strikes,
And there begin to contemplate with joy
That Master's art, who in himself so loves it
That never doth his eye depart therefrom.

“The Abyss of Crimes Punished”: Sinners in the Inferno

Inferno 1: Dante has lost his way; he encounters the three beasts; meets Virgil

Inferno 2: Dante is uncertain and fearful; Dante “meets” Beatrice through Virgil; Dante’s hope is renewed

Inferno 3: the (in)famous Gate of Hell; first shades (the ‘neutrals’); the infernal boatman Charon

Inferno 5: Second Circle of Hell (lust); encounter with Minos; ancient shades (Semiramis, Dido, Cleopatra); ‘modern’ shades (Francesca and Paolo)

How does Dante describe sinners and Hell?

1. ...Loco eterno / ove udirai le disparate strida, / vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti, / ch'a la seconda morte ciascuna grida" (*Inferno* 1.114-117)

(“...Through an eternal place / where you shall hear despairing cries / and see those ancient souls in pain / as they bewail their second death”)

1. E io a lui: “Poeta, io ti richieggo..../che tu mi meni là dov’or dicesti, / sì ch’io veggia la porta di San Pietro / e coloro cui tu fai cotanti mesti.” (*Inf.* 1.130, 133-135)

(“And I answered: “Poet, I entreat you..../lead me to the realms you’ve just described / that I may see St. Peter’s gate / and those you tell me are so sorrowful.”)

1. “Ma dimmi la cagion che non ti guardi / de lo scender qua giuso in questo centro / de l’ampio loco ove tornar tu ardi.” (*Inferno* 2.82-84)

(“But tell me why you do not hesitate to descend into the center of the earth from the unbounded space you long for?”)

1. Intra per lo cammino alto e silvestro. (*Inf.* 2.142)
(I entered on the deep and savage way.)

How does Dante describe sinners and Hell?

- “Città dolente” (‘city of woe’) (*Inferno* 3.1)
- “Eterno dolore” (‘eternal pain’) (*Inferno* 3.2)
- “Perduta gente” (‘lost people’) (*Inferno* 3.3)
- “Le genti dolorose” (‘miserable sinners’) (*Inferno* 3.17)
- “L’anime triste” (‘wretched souls’) (*Inferno* 3.35)
- “Misericordia e giustizia li sdegna” (‘mercy and justice hold [sinners] in contempt’) (*Inferno* 3.50)
- “Sciagurati” (‘wretches’) (*Inferno* 3.64)
- “Anime prave” (‘wicked souls’) (*Inferno* 3.84)
- “Tenebre etterne” (‘eternal darkness’) (*Inferno* 3.87)

Inferno 1 and 2

1. “the realms [Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise] [he] has just described.” (*Inferno* 1)
2. “I am made such”, says she to Virgil, “by God’s grace / that *your affliction* does not touch, nor can these fires assail me” (*Inferno* 2. 91-93).
3. “not rebellious and not faithful to God, who held themselves apart” (*Inf.* 3.38-39).
4. “Io non Enea, io non Paolo sono”, he says (*Inferno* 2.32). ‘I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul.
5. “holy Rome and her dominion” (v. 21); the journey of Virgil’s protagonist “prepared the Papal mantle” (v. 27). (*Inf.* 2)
6. “‘If,’ says Virgil to Dante, ‘I have rightly understood your words, your spirit is assailed by cowardice’” (vv. 43-45). The Latin poet attempts to allay Dante’s fears; he recounts how he was called by Beatrice; she in turn relays that it was St. Lucy, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, who requested that Beatrice “help the one, Dante, who loved you so that for your sake he left the vulgar herd” (*Inferno* II, v. 105).
7. What are you waiting for?,” asks Virgil. “Why, why do you delay? Why do you let such cowardice rule your heart? Why are you not more spirited and sure, when three such blessed ladies care for you in Heaven’s court?” (vv. 121-125)

Inferno 2

“And as one who unwills what he has willed, / changing his intent on second thought / so that he quite gives over what he has begun, / such a man was I on that dark slope.” (*Inferno* 2.37-42)

From his initial doubts and cowardice, Dante is reinvigorated, buoyed, by Virgil’s account of Beatrice’s comforting words. His second thoughts are countered by the radiant sun that is Beatrice’s speech: “As little flowers, bent and closed / with chill of night, when the sun / lights them, stand all open on their stems, / such, in my failing strength, did I become” (vv. 127-131). Dante, newly resolute, concludes the second canto with an allusion to the very first verses of the *Comedy*: “Intraì per **lo cammino** alto e **silvestro**”: “I entered,” he writes in the final verse of *Inferno* II, “on the deep and savage way”. He uses the Italian adjective, *silvestro*, from the noun *selva*, “wood”, with which he had begun his epic: “Nel mezzo del **cammin** di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una **selva** oscura.”

Dante's distinction from the sinners of *Inferno* 3

1. “Woe unto you, you wicked souls, / give up all hope of ever seeing heaven. / I come to take you to the other shore, / into eternal darkness, into heat and chill” (*Inferno* 3.84-87).
1. “And you there, living soul, / move aside from these now dead. / .../ By another way, another port, not here, you’ll come to shore and cross. / A lighter ship must carry you.” (*Inf.* 3.88-93)
1. “removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis”),

Inferno 5

1. “[a]s doves, summoned by desire” and “borne by their will to the sweet nest” [vv. 82-84].

1. Poscia ch'io ebbi 'l mio dottore udito
nomar le donne antiche e ' cavalieri,
pietà mi giunse, e fui quasi smarrito. (*Inf.* 5.70-72)

(When I heard my teacher name the ladies / and the knights of old, pity overcame me / and I almost lost my senses.)

1. The pilgrim then hears from Francesca how Love (fantastic anaphora “Amor...Amor...Amor”) has caused them to end up here in Hell (*Inf.* 5.100-108):

Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,
prese costui de la bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende. 102

Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,
mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona. 105

Amor condusse noi ad una morte.
Caina attende chi a vita ci spense".
Queste parole da lor ci fuor porte. 108

Inferno 5

1. Quando rispuosi, cominciai: “Oh lasso,
quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio
menò costoro al doloroso passo!”
Poi mi rivolsi a loro e parla' io,
e cominciai: “Francesca, i tuoi martiri
a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio. (*Inf.* 5.112-117)

(In answer I replied: “Oh, / how many sweet thoughts, what great desire, / have brought
them to this woeful pass? / Then I turned to them again to speak / and I began:
“Francesca, your torments make me weep for grief and pity)

1. Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse,
l'altro piangëa; sì che di pietade
io venni men così com'io morisse.
E caddi come corpo morto cade. (*Inf.* 5.139-142)

(While the one spirit said this / the other wept, so that for pity / I swooned as if in death. / And down I fell as a dead body falls.)

22. Theology and philosophy also have a consistent relation with beauty: because beauty lends its garment and ornamentation to their doctrines; with sweetness of song and the visibility of the figurative and plastic arts, beauty opens the way, so that its precious teachings may be communicated to many. At times, high dissertation and subtle reasoning are inaccessible to the untrained and to the many who hunger for the bread of truth; they are otherwise informed through sensing and appreciating beauty's influence, it is more easily through this vehicle that the truth shines and nourishes them. This understood, justifies Dante as the "lord of sublime song", for whom beauty became the servant of goodness and truth, and goodness the subject of beauty.