



Dante

The Inferno

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence, Italy in 1265 to a family of the minor nobility but without the wealth and power that usually accompanies a title. Little is known of his education, but his work demonstrates a profound working grasp of both the rhetorical and philosophic traditions forming the heart of the great classical-Christian synthesis. He was married at the age of twenty to Gemma Donati, who bore him four children. Like most educated young men of his day, he was deeply involved in the politics of his city, and in Florence that meant being involved in the conflict between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. One of the great struggles and eventually one of the great accomplishments of the medieval Church was to separate itself from spheres of political power. But at the time that Dante lived, the battles between Church and State were intense and relentless. No one escaped them; they virtually defined the terms of existence for people living in every class of society. The battle lines were not always clearly drawn, but in Florence, they generally formed around two parties. The Ghibellines tended to be aristocrats who supported the Emperor and resisted the temporal influence of the Pope. The Guef party supported the Church and independence from the Roman Empire; it was comprised largely of minor nobility and the rising merchant class.

Florence was one of the new, rising commercial republics in Italy and the Florentines took their freedoms seriously. The Guef party had split in Florence, with the Black Guefs looking to the Pope as an ally against the Emperor and the White Guefs (Dante's party) advocating independence from both. Dante was a leading figure of the White Guefs, and in 1302 when the Black Guefs seized power in Florence, he was exiled under threat of death if he ever returned. He never did return to Florence, spending his exile first in Verona and finally in Ravenna, where he died in 1321. He was buried there and his remains are still there in spite of repeated efforts by the Florentines to have them returned to the city of his birth.

Although it may not show up in the conventional biographical details of his life, it is impossible to understand Dante's literary life without acknowledging the place of Beatrice. At the age of nine Dante met and was completely enchanted with Beatrice Portinari. His love for her lasted through both her marriage and his own and even well past her death in 1290. When she died, Beatrice was gradually transformed from the young woman he had fallen in love with to an

important inspirational figure that guided him through much of his literary work. Beginning with *La Vita Nuova*, where Dante describes his seeing Beatrice for the first time and his falling in love with her, and then culminating in the *Commedia*, in which she emerges as his guide, Beatrice became increasingly important for her power to show forth both the love and beauty of the Trinity and the providential care of the divine will.

The figures of Virgil and St. Thomas Aquinas were as important as the figure of Beatrice as inspirational forces. It is clear from the *Inferno* that Virgil serves as Dante's Muse and Mentor, particularly in the sphere of political philosophy. The influence of St. Thomas Aquinas is so crucial that his philosophy and theology can be said to be omnipresent throughout the *Commedia*, his giant figure striding like a scholastic colossus guarding Dante in the depths of hell and guiding him to the heights of paradise.

CONTEXT

Dante's epic poem *The Commedia* is one of the great works of Western literature, containing in its three *Canticas* much of the history, theology, politics, and learning from ancient times to the time of its writing in the 14th century. Drawing on an established literary tradition rich with dreams and visions of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, it is written in the vernacular rather than in Latin, signifying the author's intention that it be read by the common person, not just the well-educated few. Dante called his work the *Commedia* because it begins, as Dante himself says in his letter to Can Grande, "with some adversity but its subject ends prosperously," and because it was written in the "low" style of comedy—the vernacular Italian—rather than the "high" or noble language associated with tragedy. It was Boccaccio who appended the word "divine" to the work almost fifty years after Dante's death, a word that stuck and became formally incorporated into the title in the 16th century. Its influence is so great that there is simply no way to account for the degree to which it has been assimilated into Western culture, its pervasiveness making it practically invisible. Dante has been both a guide and an inspiration to writers for nearly 700 years, from Chaucer in the Middle Ages to the Nobel Prize winning poet T.S. Eliot in the twentieth century.

The story, partly in the tradition of Augustine's *Confessions*, is an allegory of Dante's personal return to God, and it must be read on a variety of levels. By the time Dante wrote, the exegetical principles that Augustine developed, and that Aquinas had honed, had become commonplace among Christian writers. Each event in life was to be seen in terms of multiple levels of meaning, the two primary being the *literal* and the *allegorical*. The *literal* is simply what takes place historically in the actual world of concrete particular events. Contained in the *literal*, however, is the allegorical, which consists of three distinct levels: 1) the allegorical itself, in which each image is a figure of something beyond itself, and more specifically within the context of Biblical exegesis that each image is a figure of a new future event (the movement from old to new, from the "old" man to the new, the Old Law to the New); 2) the typological or moral, in which each image is seen as a *type* of what man ought to do; and 3) the anagogical, where each image is seen in terms of its ultimate eternal meaning. Dante was capable of writing a poem on hell, purgatory, and heaven precisely because for him every event in each man's life contained the possibility of all of these levels of meaning.

On the *literal* level, the epic is the story of Dante's journey from the dark wood, through Hell and Purgatory, en route to Paradise, guided first by Virgil and then by Beatrice. On the most obvious allegorical level it shows Dante's personal return to God and the people and events that helped guide and illuminate his way. It is also, however, an allegory of Everyman and the responsibility

The Vestibule and Limbo: Canto III: They arrive at the gate of Hell and read the inscription over the lintel, "Abandon all hope, you who enter here," Virgil tells Dante that here, in Hell, they will meet the people "who have lost the good of the intellect." Passing through the gate, they enter the vestibule of Hell, an area outside of Hell proper that is reserved for those who refused to make choices in life. Ferried across the river Acheron, Dante follows Virgil into the First Circle of Hell—Limbo. Here are all the souls of the Unbaptized and the Virtuous Pagans who are not tormented but are excluded from the

Prologue: Cantos I-II: Dante awakes in a dark wood with no recollection of when or how he had strayed from the true or right path. He begins to climb a hill in hopes of reaching the sun at the top, but his way is blocked by three wild animals, first a Leopard, then a Lion, and finally a She-Wolf. Dante turns back to the woods in despair. The shade of Virgil ("whose voice had grown faint from long silence") approaches and tells Dante that he will never be able to get past the Wolf and so must take a different path. Virgil has been sent to guide Dante on a path that will lead him through Hell and Purgatory and eventually to Heaven where a "worthier spirit" will become his guide. Dante follows Virgil, but his courage fails him and he begins to voice doubts. Virgil accuses him of cowardice and then tells him that a whole heavenly order had been put in motion to help him—the Virgin Mary sent St. Lucia, who turned to Beatrice, who knowing Dante's love of Virgil summoned him to be Dante's personal guide. Inspired by these words, Dante's resolve returns and they go on.

The *Inferno* is rich with scenes that are dense and complex in meaning—T. S. Eliot once remarked that each Canto is in some ways equivalent to a Shakespearean play—but the structure is simple and so provides an aid to reading. The *Inferno* can be conveniently divided into two parts: the first is the beginning or prelude, Dante's coming out of a "dark wood" and wanting to climb to the "sun"—all that takes place prior to his descent; and the second is the descent itself which has four parts. The first deals with the souls outside Hell; the following three, corresponding to the three beasts Dante meets as he attempts to climb the mountain, are: 1) the sins of incontinence—the leopard; 2) the sins of violence—the lion; and 3) the sins of fraud—the cunning she-wolf.

SUMMARY

he has for the choices he makes in this life and the consequences of those choices in the next life. At this level, what happens can't be separated from the enveloping action of God's judgment. The reason Dante's allegory is so realistic, why it is more than an allegory of mere "ideas," is that for Dante all three levels of meaning are always present in the ordinary thing, the ordinary event. As Charles Williams has said, Dante starts with the common thing, with the man in the street, with Beatrice Portinari, but what he finds in the common thing is so much more. What Dante gives us is images in depth; his treatment of each scene is a perspective of distances; each event, each scene means so much more than it seems because all three levels of meaning are embedded in it. That the story is as historically grounded as it is, that he brings in actual people he knew isn't an accident; it's Dante's way of making clear the irreversible realism of the events that make up man's existence. By using actual people instead of the personifications of "ideas" that are typical of allegories (the personification of, say, Violence or Lust), Dante was much more faithful to the concrete depth of man's character. So, it is not abstract Reason or Philosophy that guides Dante through Hell and Purgatory; it is the actual, historical Virgil, the poet who had not known Christ or the saving action of grace but whose powers of reason and artistic merit had been responsible for so much of Dante's own growth and development as a man and poet.

presence of God. Virgil answers Dante's question about Christ's harrowing of hell and takes him to where they find the ancient heroes, poets, and philosophers, including Homer, Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates.

Incontinence—The Sins of the Leopard: Cantos IV-VIII:

They now descend to the Second Circle where Minos, the ancient judge of the dead, sits on the threshold assigning each soul to its place. He resists allowing Dante to pass, but Virgil speaks to him and the two enter the Circle of the Lustful. Here the souls of those who were mastered by desire are forever blown about by violent winds. The Circle is full of famous lovers, including Paris, Helen, Cleopatra, Dido, and Achilles. Francesca tells Dante her story, and Dante is so overcome with pity that he passes out. When he recovers, he finds himself in the Third Circle where the Gluttons are punished. They wallow in mud under a steady cold rain, mauled by the three-headed guardian dog, Cerberus. One of the shades, disfigured beyond recognition, recognizes and approaches Dante and prophesies disasters that are yet to fall on Florence. Plutus guards the entrance to the Fourth Circle, but he is silenced by a rebuke from Virgil. This circle is for the Hoarders and the Spendthrifts, sinners who roll heavy boulders in opposite directions around the circle until they meet, trade insults, and turn back again, repeating the same process endlessly. Virgil speaks of the workings of Fortune in the world, and they proceed to the Fifth Circle. There the souls of the Angry fight and tear at each other while mired in a swamp; the bubbles of the submerged souls of the Sullen can just be seen on the surface. A boat arrives to ferry them across the river Styx. While they are crossing, one of the Angry souls, Filippo Argenti, approaches them, but Dante angrily pushes him away. Disembarking at the entrance to the City of Dis, they are confronted by the Fallen Angels. When Virgil is not willing to pass through without Dante, the angels close the gates, denying them entrance. Virgil reassures Dante that even now Divine assistance is on the way.

Violence—The Sins of the Lion: Cantos IX-XVII:

Virgil hides his own anxiety, reassuring Dante that he knows the way and help will come. Dante looks up to the walls of the city and sees the three avenging Furies calling for Medusa. Virgil physically turns Dante around to make sure he does not look upon her. Just then, an angel approaches, scattering all before him. With a wave of his hand he throws open the gates to the city, rebukes the demons inside, and returns the way he came without a word to either Virgil or Dante. The poets enter the city and come to the sixth Circle, a great plain that is filled with the tombs of the Heretics, all on fire. As the Circle of Heresy, this one may be seen as the defining circle of the city. As they pass along the edge of the plain, one of the souls, Farinata, rises from his tomb and calls out to Dante. At Virgil's urging he goes to speak with him. They are interrupted by a second soul whom Dante recognizes and who asks about his son. Farinata picks up again, prophesying Dante's exile. In answer to Dante's question, he explains that the souls can remember the past and see the future dimly, but having denied the reality before them, they know nothing of the present, and when Judgment Day comes they will be blind eternally. As they proceed to the edge of the Sixth Circle, Virgil explains the layout of Hell to Dante and why some souls are punished outside of the city and some within its walls. They now come to the edge of the cliff leading down to the Seventh Circle, the realm of the violent, where Dante and Virgil will pass through three rings: the violent against neighbor, the violent against self, and the violent against God.

They climb down by way of tumbled rocks broken away during the earthquake that occurred at the time of the Crucifixion. At the bottom they are confronted with the Minotaur, guardian of the Circle of the Violent. Virgil taunts him, and while he crashes about in a blind rage, Virgil and Dante slip quietly by. At the base of the cliff, they come to the river Phlegethon, the river of

boiling blood. Guarded by the Centaurs, the souls who committed some harm against their neighbors are immersed in the boiling river, some to their eyebrows, some to their waists, some only to their feet. At Virgil's request, one of the centaurs is sent to guide them to the river's ford and carry Dante across on his back. As they go, the centaur points out tyrants and robbers who are being punished there. On the other side of the river, the poets enter into the second ring of the Seventh Circle, the Wood of the Suicides. Here the souls of those who did some violence to themselves either by destroying their lives or their property are punished. Those who committed suicide have been transformed into withered trees and are fed on by the Harpies. Dante speaks to one of the trees, who explains their fate and what will happen after the Last Judgment. Two Profligates crash through the woods, chased by black hounds that tear them apart. In the final ring are those who were violent against God, nature, or art. On a desert of burning sand, the blasphemous lie on their backs facing Heaven as a steady rain of fire falls on them. Dante is careful not to step on the burning sand, and Virgil tells him of the origins of the Rivers of Hell. Walking along the dike that banks the Phlegethon, Dante sees a group of souls who were Violent Against Nature (sodomy). One of them recognizes him, and when Dante looks closer, he discovers his old teacher, Brunetto Latin, whom he greets with affection. Dante would like to stop and talk but Brunetto's lot is perpetual restlessness and so they walk along together. Brunetto adds yet another prophecy to those Dante has already heard about forthcoming troubles and unable to stop moving, they run around Dante and Virgil so that they can hear the latest news that Dante can give them. When they run off, Dante and Virgil come to the edge of a cliff. Virgil takes the cord from around Dante's waist, and throwing it over, he draws up a strange creature, as if by a signal. The creature is Geryon, who oversees the Circles of Fraud. Appropriately, Geryon has a handsome face but underneath his outward good looks, he is a monster with the paws of a beast and a poisonous sting in his reptile tail. He speaks with Virgil while Dante observes a group of Usurers. They sit starting at the ground with empty purses around their necks, arguing with one another. Dante returns to Virgil without saying a word to the shades and finds him already seated on the back of the monster. He takes his courage in hand and climbs up in front of Virgil, and they take the long slow descent to the two circles of Fraud. The depths of hell become narrower and darker, and fraud takes two forms in these depths: Fraud Simple in Circle VIII, those forms of fraud which are impersonal and distant; and Fraud Complex, those kinds of fraud that involve personal or intimate relationships. Fraud Simple is divided into ten rings or malbowges; Fraud Complex is made up of four rings: traitors against kindred, traitors against country, traitors against guest, and the worst form of betrayal, traitors against lords.

Fraud—The Sins of the Wolf: Cantos XVIII-XXXIV:

They are now at the top of the Eighth Circle, which is made up of ten ditches, all connected by rocky bridges. In the first ditch, the Panders and Seducers run in opposite directions, scourged by devils. Passing over the second ditch, Virgil points out the Flatterers, who are sunk in the filth of human excrement. The third ditch contains the Simoniacs, who are upside down in holes in the ground with fire burning their protruding feet. In the fourth ditch are the Sorcerers (diviners, magicians, astrologers) with their heads twisted around backwards. In the fifth ditch, Dante sees the Barrators who as the civil equivalent of the Simoniacs made their money by selling justice and political offices. They are totally immersed in boiling black tar with devils watching to thrust down anyone who surfaces. The bridge over the sixth ditch collapsed when Christ harrowed Hell, and consequently a delegation of devils is sent to escort Dante and Virgil to a place where they can cross. The devils fork one of the souls out of the pitch so Dante can speak with him, and then quarrels break out among them. Two of them fall into the pitch, and in the commotion, Dante and Virgil slip off unharmed. The angry devils come after them,

and Virgil hastily scrambles down the bank into the sixth ditch, carrying Dante. Here they meet the Hypocrites, who wear cloaks that are gilded with gold on the outside but lined with heavy lead. Dante sees Caiaphas stretched out and nailed to the ground in the shape of the Crucifix. Caiaphas tells him that his father-in-law and all the Sanhedrim are in similar positions scattered round the ditch so that as the souls of the Hypocrites trudge past, weighed down by their leaden cloaks, they must step on them. Two Franciscan Friars tell Virgil that all the bridges over the sixth ditch were destroyed, and they will have to climb on the rubble of one of them to get out.

After struggling up the rocks, Dante and Virgil finally reach the top. They peer over the edge of the seventh ditch but are unable to see anything and move to the seventh bridge for a better view. Down below them they see the Thieves in a ditch filled with snakes that wrap around their bodies, restraining and stinging them. Each time a shade is stung, he is consumed by fire and reduced to ashes. The ashes then reform into his previous shape. One of them answers Dante's questions and then prophesies the fall of the Florentine Whites, the political party to which Dante belongs. The thief raises his hand in defiance of God and then runs off pursued by the monster Cacus. As the two travelers continue to watch, they see three thieves, one being absorbed into a serpent, a second exchanging forms with another, and the third running off.

Moving on to the arch of the next bridge, Dante and Virgil look down into the eighth ditch and see moving columns of flame. These are the souls of the Counselors of Fraud, those who did not practice deception themselves but counseled others to deceive. Dante asks about one flame that appears to be two and Virgil calls them over. The twin flames are revealed as Ulysses and Diomedes, the Greek heroes who masterminded the destruction of Troy with the deceit of the Trojan Horse. Virgil commands Ulysses to tell the story of his final voyage and then dismisses them. Another flame approaches and speaks to them—Guido da Montefeltro, who was betrayed by Pope Boniface VIII into helping him plan a deceitful strategy for defeating his enemies. Looking down into the ninth ditch, Virgil and Dante see a multitude of mutilated shades, the Sowers of Discord or Schism, who are continually slashed to pieces by a devil with a sword. They must walk the circular ditch wearing the gaping wounds they created in life, wounds that gradually heal as they approach the sword-wielding devil so that he can inflict them all over again. Here they see Bertrand de Born, a headless trunk swinging its head as if it were "its own lamp." Virgil rebukes Dante for staring so long at the mutilation, and they move on to the tenth ditch which holds the Falsifiers. These souls are divided into four groups, falsifiers of things, of persons, of money and of words, with a different punishment allotted to each: leprosy and paralysis, madness, drowsy, and fever. Virgil becomes angry with Dante for being riveted on an argument between two shades but is quickly appeased by the shame he sees on Dante's face.

Leaving the tenth ditch, Dante and Virgil now approach the depths of the netherworld. They encounter the Giants, Nimrod (who erected the Tower of Babel and whose speech is gibberish), Ephraïtes (chained for his part in the revolt against the gods), and Antaeus, who lowers the poets down to the Ninth Circle, where they will see and experience the consequences of complex fraud, that kind of fraud man works on himself when he betrays the most intimate ties within himself and with others. Here are the Traitors, those who betrayed their kin, their country, their guests, and their Lords. In Caina (named after Cain), on the outer edge of the circle, are the betrayers of their own kin, immersed in the frozen Lake of Cocytus with only their heads protruding above the ice. Dante speaks with two cousins who killed each other. Moving further in, he enters Antenor where traitors to their country are assigned, and he accidentally kicks a head belonging to a soul who had betrayed the Greeks and caused the Florentines to lose a battle. He comes across two heads protruding from the same hole with one higher and behind and bent on gnawing on the other. Dante questions the one feasting and learns that he is Count Ugolino, a

Ghibelline who had allied himself to the Guelfs in an effort to consolidate power. He was betrayed by the other shade, his meal, Archbishop Ruggieri, who locked him in a tower along with his sons and grandsons and starved them to death. When Ugolino finishes his story, he returns to his feast on Ruggieri's head. The poets move on into Tolomea, where those who betrayed their guests have their heads thrown back so that their tears freezing in their eyes punish them for their cold-hearted sin. Dante speaks with Friar Alberigo whose body is on earth inhabited by a demon but whose shade is here being punished for his heinous betrayal. They pass through Judecca where the traitors sworn to allegiance are totally encased in the ice.

At the center of the frozen lake is Dis, Satan, encased in ice up to his chest. He has three faces, a red one in front, and a yellow and a black looking out over each shoulder. His six bat-like wings appropriately fan icy winds over the lake. Virgil explains that the soul being eaten in the red mouth is Judas. The other two mouths tear at Brutus and Cassius. Virgil and Dante clamber down the enormous body of Satan, past the earth's center of gravity, and begin the long climb up the opposite side of the earth. Following the path of Satan's fall and the course of the river Lethe, they finally emerge to look once more upon the stars.



Reflection Questions

1. Be aware at the outset that the meaning of the prelude or opening can be lost because it isn't important. Dante has just come out of a dark wood. What does that mean? And he wants to go to the sun. What does *that* mean? Equally intriguing, he sets off with unabashed confidence he can make the climb on his own, and yet the fact that he is beaten back clearly means there's something about himself and something about the journey he doesn't really understand. What is that? Moreover, when Virgil arrives, he's described in terms of a voice that has grown faint from long silence. What does that mean? Has Dante neglected the classical education he had received, and the tradition of wisdom that it has bequeathed? Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* between the years, 29-19 BC. When is Dante writing? And has the world, especially a Christian world, taken adequate care to read Virgil or even epic poets in general and take them as seriously as it should?
2. Be aware of the epic tradition and the changes announced in Dante's opening. Epics traditionally begin with an invocation to a Muse, and they go on to describe a heroic action belonging to a past that is only available through memory. Dante doesn't invoke a Muse and he takes himself as pilgrim, as the subject of his epic *in the present*. To what extent does Virgil serve as his Muse, and to what extent is such a Muse different from the Muse invoked by the writers of the classical epics?
3. When Dante tries to climb the mountain and can't, and Virgil comes to help him, Virgil tells him that a whole divine community set itself in motion to help him. He is anything but an epic hero: he faints repeatedly, hangs his head in shame often, and is overcome by pity when he shouldn't be. In so many ways, Dante goes out of his way to show that he is simply an

- ordinary man. What is it about Christianity that accounts for all these differences? How is Dante changing the epic and possibly in some ways preparing for the modern novel?
4. Most of the people in Hell are believing Catholics. What does that fact tell us about Dante and his faith? Is that fact to his credit or discredit? Is he being vindictive or simply impartial? The second commandment forbids man to take God's name in vain. Some take that literally to mean man shouldn't swear. The deeper meaning is that man shouldn't presume to speak for God, to damn a man. The ultimate outcome of a man's life is in God's hands; seen in that light, Dante's putting people in Hell may seem wrong. Is it? Remember, this is a poem, a piece of fiction, and yet its effectiveness depends upon its stark honesty or realism, its uncompromising fidelity to truth. How are we to wrestle with this question?
5. Notice how the structure of the *Inferno* is the result of a spiritual fact. Man is a rational animal; his greatest good is his intellect. But the people in Hell have lost the *good* of their intellects. They do not see themselves very well; their use of language makes clear they rationalize their sins, they explain them away, or they hide themselves and their sins in excuses or in blaming others. The structure of Hell reflects the capacity of man to disfigure himself, to ruin the dignity given to him by God by engaging in sins that show degrees of culpability or seriousness.
6. Notice the juxtaposition of order and chaos in Hell. There is a structural symmetry in the physical geography of Hell and a logical organization to the assignment of the damned. But within each circle there is chaos—the moving banner in the Vestibule, the whirling winds of the Second Circle, the eternal movement of the Sodomites, the random exchange of forms between the Thieves and the serpents, the way the demons fight amongst themselves. Hell is a "house divided against itself." What is it we learn about the rejection of God from Hell? Recall, too, that if evil is a privation of being, all of these souls, even in revolt from God, still participate in being. They have being and so in some ways are in God, still have life from Him; otherwise how could there be anything in them to be punished? What does Hell show us about the economy of God's plan and man's part in it?
7. As you read, be aware of where Dante has placed men and women you have already read about, all the classical figures from ancient mythology, the Bible, the Trojan War, Greek and Roman history, Arthurian legend—what you know of these references will deepen your understanding of what Dante is doing.
8. The 4 Rivers of Hell: notice how these delineate or define certain aspects of sin:
- Acheron*: the mythic boundary between life and Hell.
Styx: translates "hateful," serves as the 5th Circle and the dividing line between Upper and Lower Hell.
Phlegethon: translates "fiery;" a river of boiling blood.
Cocytus: a river of tears that becomes a frozen lake in the narrowest, darkest reaches of Hell; divided into four unmarked parts:
Caina: (XXXII): icy outer ring; named after Cain.
Antenor (XXXII): from legend, Antenor of Troy who killed his brother and betrayed his city to the Greeks.
Tolema (XXXIII): named after Ptolemy, captain of Jericho who had his father-in-law and two of his sons killed.
Judecca (XXXIV): named after Judas Iscariot.
9. When Dante sets out to climb the mountain, he gets beaten back. Hell is really an inversion of the mountain. Be aware of this mountain; we will see what appears to be its duplicate in *Purgatory*. Why can't Dante climb it now? Before he begins to climb it he has to go down, apparently, to confront the three beasts in himself and in others. What are those three beasts? How will *Purgatory* reverse them?

1. In the opening lines of the *Inferno*, Dante describes his wakening. What is he wakening from? Where is he? How did he get there?
2. At an allegorical level, how are we to understand Dante's wanting to go to the sun?
3. When Dante climbs the mountain to reach the sun, he sets off alone, thinking he can make it by himself. What does he learn from being beaten back by the three beasts? Symbolically, allegorically, what are the beasts?
4. When Francesca tells Dante of her love affair with Paolo that sent the two of them to Hell, Dante is overcome with pity (V: 73ff). What is it about Francesca's perspective that explains why she is there and that we will see repeated in all the sinners whom Dante meets?
5. What do we learn about Heresy and how it affects one's sight from Farinata and Cavalcanti?
6. How will the punishment of the suicides be changed after the Resurrection of the Bodies (XIII: 103-108)?
7. What are the origins of the rivers of Hell (XIV: 94ff)?
8. In Canto XXIII, the two Franciscan Friars tell Virgil that there is no bridge that spans the sixth ditch. Dante records that when he heard this, Virgil walked off in anger. Go back and review Dante and Virgil's response to Belzeccue's offer to have some of his devils escort them to a "bridge that is still unbroken." Why do you think that Virgil is angry? What do we learn about "reason" from this episode, particularly with respect to "spiritual" facts?

Study Questions



10. *Gueffs and Ghibellines*: in the 13th and 14th centuries, Italian cities were torn apart because of the strife between these two parties. The fact that they were attached to the seats of authority and power, the Ghibellines to the Pope and the Gueffs to the Emperor, made their struggles virulent. The Gueffs were usually made up of minor nobility and the rising merchant class; they supported independence from the Empire. The party split in Florence with the Black Gueffs looking to the Pope and the White Gueffs (Dante's party) advocating independence from both. The Ghibillines were primarily aristocrats who supported the Emperor and resisted the temporal influence of the Pope. Be aware of the almost omnipresent violence the people of Dante's time were tempted to and at times engaged in because of their attachment to one or the other of these two forms of authority. Be aware also that resistance to the Pope's temporal power in no way suggests a resistance to his spiritual authority as supreme pontiff of the Church. Note, for instance, how Dante is politically opposed to the temporal designs of the Pope while remaining a devout and profoundly orthodox Catholic.
11. Remain aware that in reading the *Inferno* you are only reading the first third of a larger work. Resist the temptation to make judgments about Dante and his work on the strength of only having read the *Inferno* as distinct from the whole *Commedia*. Imagine that you had only read other parts, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*; would this allow you to make a judgment about the whole of *The Lord of the Rings*? Similarly we must not pass judgment on Dante until we have accompanied him on his journey through Purgatory and Paradise.
12. *Simoniacs*: the sin of simony (named after Simon Magus, Acts viii, 9-24) is the trafficking in holy things, e.g. the sale of sacraments or ecclesiastical offices.
13. *Barrator*: the civil equivalent of the Simoniac, someone who sells justice and political offices.

1. The *Divine Comedy* is an epic poem and like all epics, it has an invocation—it doesn't come at the beginning like most epics but it does have one. To whom does Dante address his invocation (II: 7-11)? What is the significance of his second invocation of the Muses ("those heavenly ladies...who helped Amphion...") in Canto XXXII?
2. *Mythic Images*: the greatness of Dante's *Commedia* rests partly on its "realism." And yet everywhere in the *Inferno* we keep running into mythological figures, figures that some would say are not "real." Recall the images of grotesque figures in both Odysseus' story of his adventures—the Cyclopes, the Laistrygonians, Scylla and Charibdis—and Aeneas' story of his—the Harpies, Cerberus, and Minos in the Underworld. Is there any basis for these grotesque mythological images in "reality"?
3. *Symbolic geography*: Dante doesn't "tell" or explain the meaning of his scenes; he "shows" them, rendering them as they are to our senses and forcing readers to learn to see "what's there" on their own, with the necessary assistance of the Thomistic philosophy and theology that informs Dante's vision. In one sense, we can say nobody is punishing anybody in Hell (despite the instrumental function demons have in this regard); sinners are being punished by their own actions. Consider, for instance, C.S. Lewis's insistence that the sinners in Hell are merely getting what they want; their will is being done. They suffer from the effects or

Questions on Language and Form



9. How does the story that Ulysses tells of his final voyage differ from the ones we know from Homer and Virgil (Canto XXVI)? Dante places Odysseus in Hell. What does that tell us about his differences with Homer and Virgil?
10. Locate Mahomet in the Eighth Circle and explain why he is placed where he is.
11. Shortly after seeing Mahomet, Dante sees Bertran de Born, holding his severed head like a lantern. Dante says of it, "Of itself it made a lamp for itself" (XXXVIII, 124). Why is that image of a severed head particularly appropriate as an image of discord or schism?
12. Draw a scheme that shows each of the circles (and any subdivisions) and identify the sin and the punishment of each one. How is the punishment a reflection of, and an effect of, the sin itself?
13. The first reading of the *Inferno* can be frightening. It is unsettling to think that we could end up in Hell or that those we love, with the sins we are aware they have, might end up there as well. How do we square this with our faith?
14. Satan is defeated in Hell; Christ has already harrowed Hell, and has overcome sin and death. If Satan is already defeated, how do we account for the sins in the rest of the *Inferno*?
15. Can the *Inferno* be completely understood without any reference to faith? Can it be completely understood without a deeper faith informed by reason, i.e. the synthesis of philosophy and theology that we find in Dante's great mentor, St. Thomas Aquinas?
16. We've already noted the frightening aspects of Hell. In the previous question, we raised the issue of faith. The *Inferno* is funny and comic, despite its frightening qualities. Do you think Dante's comic treatment of Hell could be possible with-out faith? How would an author seeing all that Dante saw treat the same materials if he didn't have faith?
17. How do you explain the ordered structure of Hell even though within its own sphere of action it has to be seen as a place divided against itself?



Dante

The Purgatorio

Like the *Inferno*, the second Cantic of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, has its own internal structure. Following a line of action inherent in purgation itself—that is, that man's taking responsibility for his faults is supported by an action of God's mercy—Purgatory is naturally composed of three sections: 1) Ante-Purgatory; 2) Purgatory proper; and 3) the Earthly Paradise. Ante-Purgatory contains two Terraces (this appears to be solely a construction of Dante); Purgatory proper is made up of seven Cornices organized around the seven capital sins that are at the root of all man's misdoings. Based on the principle that disordered love leads to sin as ordered love leads to virtue, the seven Cornices divide into three: Lower Purgatory where man does penance for loving an evil object, and repents of the harm he had wished his neighbor through *pride, envy, or wrath*; Middle Purgatory, where the object of his love is good but in which he repents of the harm done by his inadequate love of the natural goods of the earth through the sin of *sloth*; and Upper Purgatory where the object of man's loves is good again but this time in excess, leading to the harm caused by *greed or avarice, gluttony, and lust*. At the top of Purgatory is the Earthly Paradise, that Edenic world where man lived in harmony with himself, nature, and God before his fall. It is to this place that the penitents return, once they have completed their purgation, to reclaim the human dignity that was lost in sin and the freedom that comes with their newly acquired self-mastery.

CONTEXT

Ante-Purgatory (Cantos I-IX):

Tear-stained and darkened by the smoke of Hell (l. 127-129), Dante with Virgil emerges from Hell onto the shore of Purgatory where he notices the "four stars never seen except by the first people" (l. 23-24). Cato greets the two men and questions them on their escape from Hell. Virgil's answer satisfies him, and he instructs Virgil to wash Dante's face, to gird him with a reed, and then to take the sun as their guide as they climb the mountain. Dante sees a white light speeding across the sea towards them and recognizes an angel ferrying a boatload of saved souls. One of the souls, the musician Casella, who is an old friend of Dante's, approaches. The two greet each other affectionately, and to the delight of everyone, Casella begins to sing one of Dante's songs. Cato returns and rebukes everyone for lingering when they should be busy

working to return to God. The souls scatter; Virgil colors at the rebuke, and with a downcast face he and Dante quickly make their way to the lowest slope of the mountain. At the foot of a steep cliff, Dante suggests they ask directions from a group of souls slowly approaching them. They speak with Manfred who explains that these are the souls of the Excommunicated who returned to God at the moment of death and so were saved. They must remain on the First Terrace of Purgatory for thirty times the length of their contumacy. The poets accompany the Excommunicated until they reach a steep and narrow gap in the cliff that is the way to the Second Terrace. They pause to rest after the arduous climb and Virgil explains the location of the sun and tells Dante that as they climb the mountain the going will become gradually easier.

The Second Terrace is reserved for the Late Repentant, the Indolent, the Unshriven, and the Pre-occupied. The lazy Belacqua tells them that the souls on this terrace must endure a delay equal to the length of their mortal lives before they can begin their climb up Mt. Purgatory proper. Dante moves on and speaks with several of the Unshriven, who tell their stories and ask for his prayers. Moving on, the poets encounter Sordello who greets Virgil as a fellow Mantuan. When he asks Virgil for his name, he immediately falls to his knees. He asks Virgil his fate and then suggests that since nightfall is near, he will take them to a valley where the last group of the Late Repentant—the Preoccupied—will be found. These are the souls of rulers who were so preoccupied with ruling that they neglected their religious duties. Sordello takes advantage of the last of the sunlight to point out the various rulers and then leads them down into the valley. As night falls, two angels robed in green descend and take up protective vantage points. Sordello explains that they are there to protect the souls from the serpent who comes at night. Dante meets an old friend, Judge Nino, and speaks with several others. Sordello points out the serpent coming through the grass, and they watch as the two angels descend on it and the serpent flees. Dante falls asleep and has the first of the three dreams that will mark his progress up Purgatory. Here, he dreams of being carried away by an eagle. When he awakes he does so with a start and finds himself at the gate of Purgatory. Virgil tells him that while he slept, St. Lucia came and carried him to where he is. Standing now at the foot of three steps leading up to the gate, they are challenged by the angel who guards the gate. When Virgil tells him that a lady from Heaven has sent them, the angel bids them mount the stairs. At the top, Dante receives seven P's inscribed on his forehead (for *peccatum* or sin) and instructions that each P must be washed off in Purgatory. The angel opens the gate with the Keys of Saint Peter and offers a final warning not to look back. Dante and Virgil enter and hear the music of the *Te Deum*.

**Lower Purgatory (Cantos X-XVIII):
Love of Evil of One's Neighbor: Pride, Envy, and Wrath:**

Climbing the steep cleft in the rock that takes them to the First Cornice, Dante and Virgil emerge onto a level path some eighteen feet wide, the Ledge of the Proud. The path is unobstructed and empty in both directions, and they are taken with the artistic carvings on the sheer cliff that rises on its far side. Moving closer to inspect the carvings, Dante sees images of humility—the Annunciation, David dancing before the Ark of God, the Emperor Trajan granting the petition of a poor widow. These are the Goats for the Proud. Looking up from the carvings, they see a group of penitents slowly moving toward them, bowed down under the burdens of heavy boulders that are weighed in proportion to the pride they showed on earth. Falling in with them, Dante speaks to several of the souls, one doing penance for pride of birth, one for pride of artistic excellence, and one for pride of power. Finally Virgil calls him aside and directs his gaze to the ground. There Dante sees other carvings, the Checks depicting the sin of pride and its consequences—Satan falling from Heaven, Nimrod at the foot of the Tower of Babel, the destruction of Troy. The Angel of Humility who guards the way to the Second Cornice greets them and removes one of the P's from Dante's forehead, leaving him feeling immeasurably lighter. As they climb the

stair to the Second Cornice they hear the Benediction sung, "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—the first beatitude.

Arriving on the Ledge of the Envious, they find an empty path and a blank wall. As they walk along, they hear voices speaking the Goads—the first from the wedding feast at Cana, one from the classic story of Orestes and Pylades, one quoting the words of Christ. The penitent Envious come into view and Dante sees that their eyes have been stitched closed, denying them the sight that was the agency of their mortal sin: hating the good they saw, they now move about with their eyes shut. Dante walks along with them and hears several of their stories. He and Virgil move on alone when the souls tell him that they prefer their willing suffering to speaking about it. Moving on ahead, the poets hear the Checks in voices like crashes of thunder—the voice of Cain and the voice of Aglauros. Dante is blinded by the brilliance of the Angel of Generosity, who approaches and erases a second P from his forehead. They ascend the stairs to the Third Cornice to the strains of the Benediction, "Blessed are the merciful."

As they are climbing the stairs, Dante asks Virgil to explain how something divided by many can make each one richer than something divided by a few. Virgil answers that with respect to material goods, the more they are shared the less there is; but with respect to spiritual goods, the more who love each other the more love there is to be shared. This said, he refers Dante to Beatrice if he still does not understand. The third ledge is the Cornice of Anger. As they step onto the ledge, Dante is struck by visions of the Goads—Mary gently rebuking the child Jesus for causing her and Joseph to worry about his safety, the mild response of Pistoratus to his wife's rage, Stephen praying for the forgiveness of those who stoned him. As Dante returns to his senses, he and Virgil are overtaken by a cloud of smoke, the image of the consequence or effect of the anger being purged. From within the cloud they hear voices chanting the *Agnes Dei*, and Virgil explains that these are the voices of the Wrathful. One of the penitents addresses Dante from inside the cloud of smoke, and they talk about free will and the responsibility of man for the sins that wreak havoc on earth. As the smoke begins to clear, Dante is struck again by visions, this time of the Checks—Progne, Hamen, and Lavinia. Dante comes out of the vision and feels the presence of the Angel of Meekness who, unseen, removes the third P from Dante's forehead and offers the Benediction, "Blessed are the peacemakers who know not evil wrath."

Middle Purgatory (Cantos XVIII-XIX): Insufficient Love of Natural Goods: Sloth:

The sun sets before Dante and Virgil reach the Fourth Cornice and so they have to rest for the night. Dante asks about the sin of the next ledge, and Virgil tells him that it is sloth, the insufficient love of the good. In order to make clear what he means, Virgil explains that Purgatory is organized according to a principle of making loves *ordained*, of man taking responsibility for his sins and correcting them by doing penance. All evil, according to Virgil, is caused by disordered love, by men loving the wrong object or by loving the right object the wrong way: the object of love in Lower Purgatory is evil. Out of pride, envy, or anger, men want their neighbors to come to some harm as a way of putting them down. In Middle Purgatory, the object of men's love are the natural things of the earth, but not seeing the good in them and the love it warrants, they love them insufficiently; their sin is their lukewarmness or sloth. In Upper Purgatory the souls are still doing penance for loving natural goods but this time excessively. They see the good in things but love them to an inordinate degree, thereby harming themselves and others. The inordinate or disordered loves being purged there are Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust. Virgil's discourse raises questions for Dante about love as the motivation for both virtuous and evil acts of the soul, and Virgil responds with a second discourse on love and free will, telling Dante that any further questions will have to wait on Beatrice and will require faith. As Virgil concludes, they hear a throng of souls rushing towards them calling out the Goads and Checks

drawn from the life of the Virgin and Julius Caesar and the fainthearted Israelites and Trojans. Unwilling to pause in their zeal, they shout out directions to Dante and Virgil as they rush by. Dante falls asleep and dreams of a "stuttering," "cross-eyed," "sallow" colored woman (XIX, 7-9). This is Dante's second dream, and in it, the woman he sees is gradually transformed into a Siren. Her power, like that of the Sirens in the *Odyssey*, is so great that Dante can't wake himself on his own. A lady appears in the dream who is "holy and alert." She calls out angrily to Virgil, who seizes the other, tears off her clothes, and reveals her belly, the stench of which is so foul that it awakens Dante. It is broad daylight, and Virgil is calling him. They go only a short distance before hearing the Angel of Zeal, who draws them toward the pass to the Fifth Cornice. Dante hears the benediction, *qui lugent, "Blessed are they who mourn"* as the angel touches and fans him with his feathers, and they go on.

Upper Purgatory (Cantos XIX-XXVIII): Excessive Love of Natural Goods: Avarice or Greed, Gluttony, and Lust:

Dante and Virgil reach the Fifth Cornice where they see the penitent Covetous bound hand and foot and bent so that they can see only the earth beneath them. They come upon Pope Adrian V who explains that because they put too much store in the things of the world and refused to turn their gaze to Heaven, the Covetous are now required to see only the earth. Dante hears another penitent crying out the Goads for the Covetous, examples of worthy poverty, and stops to speak with him. He gives his name as Hugh Capet and laments the crimes of his house. He explains that the souls cry out the Goads by day and the Checks by night. As the two poets move on, an earthquake shakes them, and all the souls break out in the refrain of *Gloria in excelsis*. A shade overtakes them and explains that the earthquake and *Gloria* are because a soul has just been released from Purgatory. He explains how such a release takes place and acknowledges that he is the one who has just been freed from 500 years on the ledge. He identifies himself as Statius, a poet, and without knowing who his listeners are attributes his conversion to Virgil. Dante is unable to conceal a smile and is forced to reveal the identity of his guide. The Angel of Liberality erases the P from Dante's forehead and together the three poets climb the stairs to the Sixth Cornice to the sound of *situnt*, "thirst," the word standing for the Benediction, "*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness*." Statius explains that he was serving his penance for Prodigality rather than Avarice and that opposite sins from the same root are purged on the same ledge.

On the sixth Cornice, the Ledge of Gluttony, they come to a tall branching fruit tree. A voice in the branches warns that the fruit is not to be eaten and then proclaims the examples of Temperance that are the Goads of Gluttony. The emaciated shades of the Gluttonous overtake the three poets and Dante recognizes a dear companion, Forse Donat. They exchange news, and Donat points out fellow penitents among the Gluttons who are all enduring the self-denial they refused on earth. Donat hurries on and the three poets continue on their way alone. They come to a second tree where a voice warns them to pass by and then announces the Checks of the Gluttonous. The voice of the Angel starts them. Dante says of him, he'd never seen in a burning furnace, "glass or metal so red and glowing" as the Angel drawing them to the pass. He feels the Angel remove the P as a wind fanning his brow and hears him pronounce the Benediction, "*Blessed are those whom grace so enlightens that the love of taste does not kindle excessive desire in their breasts and who only hunger after righteousness*."

As the three poets climb the stairs to the Seventh and final Cornice, the Ledge of the Lustful, Dante asks a question about the "bodies" of the shades. Statius speaks on the nature of the soul and its relationship to the body both before and after death. The poets emerge onto the Ledge of the Lustful and are confronted with flames belching out from the bank. They must walk single

file paying close attention because the ledge between the fire and the edge is extremely narrow—as they approach ordinate loves, they are held to more exacting limits and conditions. Dante hears voices from the flames and looks up to see the souls of the Lustful passing through the fire. As they go they alternate between singing the Goads—hymns with images of chastity—and calling out the Checks—cries of “Sodom and Gomorrah.” As he watches, he sees the shades of Unnatural Lust running in the fire as well but moving from west to east, the opposite direction as those of Natural Lust, each shade pausing just long enough for a quick embrace and a chaste kiss when they meet each other. Dante speaks with two of the shades, both poets, Guido Guinicelli and Arnaut Daniel. Beyond the fire, the poets see the Angel of Chastity, but to reach the stairs they have to pass through the fire that lines the wall of the mountain. Dante is frightened but Virgil coaxes him as he would a child, saying, “Now see, my son, this wall is between you and Beatrice!” (XXVII, 36). The fire is hotter than burning glass, but Dante passes through unharmed to the sounds of the Benediction, “*Blessed are the pure in heart.*” The sun sets just as they begin their climb and Dante falls asleep gazing at the distant stars he can just see at the top of the stairs. In his third dream, he dreams of Leah and Rachael and wakes at first light to finish his climb and enter the Earthly Paradise. When they reach the top, Virgil crowns and miter Dante, saying that his will, now purged of sin, is sufficient master and that it “it would be wrong not to do as it pleases.” “Expect,” he says, “no further word or sign from me,” and Virgil resigns as guide.

Earthly Paradise (Cantos XXVIII-XXXIII): Eden Regained:

Followed by Virgil and Statius, Dante enters the Sacred Wood of the Earthly Paradise. He comes to a small stream and on the opposite bank sees a young woman gathering flowers and singing. He calls to her and she responds, answering all of his questions about the Earthly Paradise and suggesting that it is the source of all the images of a Golden Age that poets hark back to. As they walk along together on opposite sides of the stream, Dante looks up and sees a brilliant light and hears the music of a choir coming towards them on the Lady's side of the stream. He sees seven golden candlesticks, and then the Lady directs his attention to what they herald. Behind them are twenty-four elders dressed in white robes, followed by four figures who escort a chariot drawn by a Gryphon. Three ladies dance on the right of the chariot, four nymphs on the left; representations of St. Luke and St. Paul are followed by figures that represent the epistles. The whole wonderful pageant comes to a halt in front of Dante. Angels throng the air above the chariot showering flowers down and Beatrice is revealed. Dante says of the moment,

*I have often seen at the beginning of the day
the eastern sky all rosy, the rest
of the heavens beautifully clear,
and the sun's face appear veiled,
so that, through the tempering of the vapors,
the eyes could look steadily at it.
Thus, within a cloud of flowers,
thrown by angelic hands, which rose
and fell on and around the chariot,
underneath a white veil, crowned with olive,
a lady appeared to me, under a green mantle,
dressed in the color of living flame,
And my spirit which already had spent
so long a time without the trembling....
felt the great power of its old love (XXX, 22-39).*

Dante is overcome with the "old love." He turns to Virgil for support or reassurance, and Virgil is gone. The look back shatters the moment. Beatrice rebukes Dante, bringing him to tears. Crushed by her reproach, he confesses that after her death he turned to worldly things and is so remorseful for his inconstancy that he faints. He awakens to find that the Lady who had first greeted him on the far bank is now pulling him through the waters of the river Lethe. On the far side of the stream, she presents him to the four nymphs, who in turn point him toward the three ladies who had danced beside the chariot. They direct his gaze to Beatrice, whose eyes are fixed on the two-fold nature of the Gryphon, an image of Christ. When he looks at Beatrice, Dante is overcome:

*A thousand desires hotter than flames
bound my sight to the shining eyes
which still were fixed upon the griffon.
As the sun in a mirror, not otherwise
did the twofold creature shine in them,
now with one, now with the other nature,
Think, Reader, if I marveled
when I saw the object remain still
and yet change in its image.
While full of joy and wonder, my soul
tasted that food which,
satisfying, gives hunger for itself.... (XXXI, 115-29).*

The nymphs call on Beatrice to unveil herself to Dante, and unveiled, her light nearly blinds him. He is forced to look away. The pageant gathers again and moves off with Dante and Statius following.

The procession stops at a tall barren tree. The Gryphon ties the wooden pole of the chariot to the tree which bursts into bloom. The heavenly anthem lulls Dante to sleep. When he awakes, he finds Beatrice alone with the seven nymphs of the candlesticks. And now, with a warning from Beatrice to pay attention so he can faithfully report what he sees on his return to earth, he turns to another pageant played out before him. He sees an eagle descend through the tree and strike the chariot; a fox mounts the chariot but is chased off by Beatrice. The eagle returns and decks the chariot in its feathers; a dragon rises up and strikes the Chariot with its venomous tail; monstrous heads appear to grow from the chariot; and finally, a harlot mounts it guarded by a jealous giant who finally drags the chariot off into the woods. Beatrice with the nymphs moves off, and she calls Dante and Statius to join them. As they walk, Beatrice speaks with Dante about what he has seen and prophesies that before long a successor to Constantine will come and destroy the harlot and the giant. She admonishes him to report truthfully all that he has witnessed and that she has told him. The Lady Matilda takes him to the river Eunoe, which restores his memory of Good. Dante emerges, feeling as if he had been "born again, like young plants renewed by their new foliage, pure and prepared to mount to the stars."



Dante *Paradiso*

Like the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, the *Paradiso* can be structurally divided into three major sections plus one. These sections are 1) the Spheres Within the Shadow of the Earth; 2) the Spheres Beyond the Shadow of the Earth; 3) the Realm Beyond the Celestial Ladder; and the Beatific Vision which ends the work. In the first section, souls are shown who were deficient in the natural virtues—fortitude, temperance, and justice. The second depicts souls who were perfect in those same virtues. In the Realm Beyond the Celestial Ladder, souls appear to Dante who were perfected in both the supernatural virtues, faith, hope, and charity, and the life of contemplation that made that perfection possible. Finally, in the conclusion of the *Commedia*, Dante describes his experience of the Beatific Vision, his being given the grace to see into the mystery of the Trinity and how the human image is conformed to Christ in His dual nature as both God and man. In poetic treatment, the parallels between the spheres are similar to the parallels in the circles of the *Inferno* and the ledges of *Purgatory*. As in the two earlier Canticles, so here: the internal coherence is the result of principles being consistently applied. A reflection of the medieval cosmology, each sphere contains a planet with particular physical characteristics and light; each reveals a particular group of souls; each is ministered to by a specific order of angels; and each carries a particular denunciation of a person or condition on earth.

SUMMARY

Within the Shadow of the Earth (Cantos I-IX): Deficiencies in the Natural Virtues: Fortitude, Justice, Temperance:

The *Paradiso* opens with Dante the pilgrim still standing in the Earthly Paradise. Dante the poet, however, realizes that his greatest task as a poet still lies ahead of him. He offers a special invocation to both Apollo and the Muses for the increased help he will need. The pilgrim turns to Beatrice, and following her gaze, he looks directly at the sun. He turns back to Beatrice, who is still gazing at the sun, and suddenly finds himself engulfed in a sea of light and hears the music of the spheres. Beatrice tells him that they are rising above the earth, and in answer to the unexpressed question he has within him, she explains that all natures are obedient to their source when unhindered and that he is rising to meet his. They rise through the sphere of fire to the Heaven of the Moon. Dante puts a question to Beatrice about the markings on the moon that can be seen from the earth, and she responds with an academic answer, refusing commonly held ideas and explaining that the markings are evidence that the spiritual powers responsible for the

movement of the spheres distribute the powers they receive from God differently among the heavenly bodies, causing the various parts of the moon that differ from each other to reflect light unequally. Dante looks up and sees faces so pale he takes them for reflections. He speaks with one, Piccarda Donat, who is the sister of his good friend Forese Donat. Piccarda tells Dante that the saved souls here are the lowliest of the blessed because they neglected their vows—she herself had been a nun who was forced into marriage—but they are content with their status because in Paradise all wills are in accord with God's will. Dante turns to Beatrice and asks why if Piccarda had been forced to break her vow she shouldn't be considered more worthy and also why if Plato was correct in teaching that souls returned to the stars after death, she wasn't higher. Beatrice explains that all souls reside in the Empyrean, that Piccarda appeared to him here only to demonstrate her status, and that even giving consent when forced was breaking a vow. Dante asks whether anything can be done to compensate for breaking a vow, and Beatrice answers in a spirit of delight at Dante's progress in the truth. A vow, she says, being a promise to God in which the will is surrendered to Him, cannot be compensated. However, whatever is pledged can be substituted by something of greater value. Since the entire self is surrendered in a religious vow, there can be nothing greater to substitute.

They now rise to the Sphere of Mercury, where a large crowd of bright souls immediately surrounds them. One of them, the Emperor Justinian, speaks to Dante, offering to answer all of his questions. He tells Dante his story of misguided belief and conversion and goes on to explain that the souls in Mercury's Heaven did good and noble deeds in their earthly life, but their good works were tainted by too much desire for fame. Justinian relates the history of Rome from its founding to the time of Charlemagne. Like the souls Dante encountered on the Moon, these souls are now freed of their desire for anything other than that which God wills for them and rejoice in the beatitude they have been given. Justinian and the other souls go whirling off, leaving Dante with an unvoiced question raised by the exchange. Justinian spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem and Dante was left puzzling over his words, a "just vengeance justly avenged." Beatrice reads his mind and tells him there is no way to make sense of Rome's destruction of Jerusalem without understanding the dual nature of Christ: the vengeance of the Cross was just to Christ's human nature, she says, if we consider the nature He assumed was fallen and in debt. But if we consider the divine person who assumed that nature, then no vengeance was more undeserved than the Cross. "Thus from one act different results ensue; for the same death which shook the earth and opened Heaven pleased God and the Jews" (VII, 46-48). Beatrice goes on to make clear that the Crucifixion was the only adequate way of atonement for man's sin—man could not atone on his own since the sin was against God and so infinite—and so instead of canceling man's unredeemable debt, God gave Himself to redeem it. She touches on the immortality of angels and men, the mortality of nature, and the resurrection of the body.

Dante becomes aware of the increasing beauty of Beatrice and realizes that they have ascended to the Sphere of Venus, the last of those within the shadow of the Earth. Here they meet the souls of those who were too easily swayed by earthly love and affection. They are approached by a group of these souls, and one, Charles Martel, a young king whom Dante had known, speaks to him. Commenting on the good he might have done had he lived longer, Martel speaks about heredity, the Providential distribution of talents, and the folly of those who ignore the God-given talents of men and force them into roles they are unsuited for. Another soul steps forward, this time Cunizza, lover of the poet Sordeello and sister of the vicious tyrant Ezzelino da Romano, who tells Dante her story. After prophesying disasters that will strike the area around Padua, she returns to the dance of joy. Fouquet, a troubadour, who speaks of the corruption of the Church, follows her. His amorous nature caused him grief while on Earth, but he now sees that the love by which he sinned in his mortal life is also the power that governs the universe.

Beyond the Shadow of the Earth (Cantos X-XXII): The Natural Virtues Perfected: Prudence, Fortitude, Justice, Temperance:

Dante and Beatrice ascend to the Heaven of the Sun and so move beyond those spheres that lie in the shadow cast by the Earth. Bright lights from which pour sounds and harmonies beyond description encircle them. One light identifies himself as one of the flock of St. Dominic. It is Thomas Aquinas, who goes on to identify each of the other souls of wise and prudent men, hinting at problems in the Dominican order with his remark, "where they fatten well if they do not stray" (X, 94; XI, 139). Aquinas continues with a paean for St. Francis, recounting his life, his work, and his devotion to Lady Poverty. As St. Thomas finishes, a second circle of twelve lights surrounds the first. A voice from the second circle speaks, this time St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan. He responds to the praise of St. Francis with a like praise of St. Dominic; he also alludes to the problems within the Franciscan order that distort the Rule of St. Francis. The two circles take up again their circular dance—the exchange of perfect courtesies and graciousness in their words being mirrored in their motions—and sing of the Three Persons in the one nature of God and the Two natures in the One Person of Christ. Then Aquinas speaks again to answer Dante's perplexity over his words, "none ever rose..." He speaks of the wisdom of Solomon, unsurpassed as kingly wisdom, and closes with an admonition against rash judgments and the tendency of men to mistake their own evaluations of others as those of God. Once again seeing Dante's thoughts and anticipating his question before he asks it, Beatrice asks if the radiance of the souls will be unchanged after the Last Judgment and if it will, how their physical eyes will be able to tolerate the brightness. Solomon answers with a discourse on the relationship between Grace, vision, love, and radiance. A third circle of light appears, but Dante has no opportunity to speak with any of the souls that shine in it before he and Beatrice rise to the Heaven of Mars.

Dante sees before him two bands of light in the form of a cross against the redness of Mars. These are the souls of those who gave up their lives for their faith. On the cross he has a vision of Christ himself that he is unable to describe. A hymn of praise more beautiful than any he has yet heard rises from the souls of light, and Dante acknowledges that nothing had ever bound him "with such sweet ties." Anxious not to seem to slight the hold that Beatrice has always had on him, he hastens to remind the reader that her beauty grows ever greater as they ascend and he had not turned to her yet. A single soul separates itself from the others and speeds to the foot of the cross to speak with Dante. He reveals himself as Cacciaguida, one of Dante's ancestors (his great-great-grandfather), and speaks of the Florence he knew. After listening raptly to Cacciaguida's description, Dante asks about the ominous prophesies he heard in Hell and Purgatory. His grandfather answers him not in the obscure language of prophecy but unambiguously, telling him that he will be exiled and whom he should turn to for refuge. Dante suggests that it might be prudent for him to not reveal all that he has learned in his ascent so that he will not alienate others who might aid him. Cacciaguida charges him to speak out boldly and truthfully all that he has seen and assures him that in the end it will bring him great honor. Mulling over his grandfather's words, Dante turns to Beatrice who reminds him how close she is to Christ, and the love he sees in her eyes leaves him completely reassured and content. She tells him to look at the martyrs, and Cacciaguida identifies some of them individually.

Beatrice suddenly appears still more beautiful, and Dante realizes they have ascended to the Sphere of Jupiter, where they encounter the souls of the Just. The lights of the souls form, one at a time, the letters to the admonition, "*Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram*"; "Love justice, ye that judge the earth." The souls linger for a moment in the shape of the final letter M and then gradually resolve into the shape of an Eagle which Dante recognizes as the symbol of temporal justice in the emblem of the Roman Empire. Speaking with one voice, the souls who make up the

image of the Eagle answer Dante's question on why virtuous pagans are denied Heaven when they never had the opportunity of knowing Christ: the wisdom of God is beyond man's understanding and God's will is one with His justice. The Eagle says,

...the sight your world receives
penetrates into eternal justice
as the eye penetrates within the sea;
for although at the shore the bottom is seen,
on the main it is not, and nevertheless
the bottom is there, its depth hiding it (XIX, 58-63).

Man's perspective is too small to know who will be close to Christ at the Last Judgment and who will be sent away. The Eagle follows its answer with a condemnation of the unjust now ruling on Earth. The voices of the Eagle then identify the souls whose lights make up its eye and Dante is startled to hear that the Emperor Trajan and the Trojan warrior Ripheus are among them. He is told that St. Gregory interceded for Trajan that he might be allowed to return to Earth and be converted. There is no explanation given for Ripheus' presence. The impenetrable depth of God's justice clouds the question, but the suggestion is that he was so devoted to justice that he was baptized by proxy and so entitled to Heaven (see Question # 10 under Study Questions, pp. 9-10).

Rising to the Sphere of Saturn, Dante finds it hard to take his eyes off Beatrice, her beauty continues to grow. She deliberately does not smile because if she does, as she says, he would "become like Simele when she was changed into ashes" (XXI, 4-6). Dante sees a golden ladder thronged with the brilliant lights of the souls of contemplatives. One of them, who identifies himself as Peter Damien, detaches himself from the others and comes to speak with Dante. The poet asks him about predestination, but the soul is unable to answer his question and tells him that it is a mystery known only to God Himself and warns that men should not try to fathom it. He deplores the corrupt state of the clergy who are taken up with material wealth. The Heaven of Saturn has been silent, without the singing that Dante heard in the previous spheres but now the whole host of souls cries out and Dante is completely overwhelmed. He turns to Beatrice and she tells him to look again at the souls. He obeys and sees another soul approaching him. Identifying himself as St. Benedict, he too condemns the corruption of the orders but looks to God for help in correcting them.

Ascent of the Celestial Ladder (Cantos XXIII-XXXIII): The Supernatural Virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity or Divine Love:

Beatrice sends Dante up the ladder after the lights of the contemplatives have withdrawn to the Empyrean, and he emerges into the Heaven of the Fixed Stars in the sign of Gemini, under which he was born. Beatrice tells him that he is approaching the Supreme Good and directs him to look back over the path he has taken through the heavenly Spheres. He turns and looks down through the Spheres to the insignificant globe that is the Earth. Turning back to Beatrice, he finds her gaze fixed upward. The Heavens fill with the light of the Church Triumphant, and in the midst of all, brighter than all else, he sees the light of Christ. Having glimpsed, if even only for a moment, the brightness of Christ, Dante is now able to look directly at the brightness of Beatrice's smile. As she has so often before, she points him back to the souls around him, this time in the Garden of Christ. In particular, she points out the Rose, the Virgin Mother of God. Dante turns to look and sees the brightness of the souls in the Eighth Heaven. Then Beatrice speaks to them, asking that Dante be allowed to share in their overflowing joy. One light separates itself out and comes forward. This is St. Peter and at Beatrice's urging, he examines

As Dante is looking at the circles of angels, they begin to slowly fade, and he turns to look at Beatrice. Her beauty has so increased that the poet is forced to admit failure—he is speechless, unable to find words to convey it. They have entered the Empyrean. Dante is wrapped in a living light so bright that he is blinded but almost immediately finds his sight restored and so strengthened that nothing now can blind it. He sees a river of splendid light and Beatrice instructs him to wash his eyes in it (the metaphor used is “drinking”) so that he will be able to see clearly. He does as she has bidden and turns to see the Celestial Rose opening tier on tier to reveal the saints appearing as they will after the Last Judgment and seated on thrones. Beatrice points to the empty throne that is reserved for Henry VII and foretells the fate of Pope Clement. Dante contemplates the rose and the flights of angels ministering to the saints and falls speechless in joyful wonder. After taking in the beauty and grandeur of the whole, Dante turns to Beatrice for an explanation of all he is seeing. But Beatrice is gone, and in her place stands an old man. Dante immediately asks where she is, and the man directs his eyes to the Rose where Dante sees her in the third tier from the top. He offers a prayer that she will continue in her generosity to him so that his redeemed soul will please her when he dies. Beatrice smiles at him and then turns her gaze upward to God. The old man identifies himself as St. Bernard. He was sent to help Dante complete his journey. Dante stares in wonder at the face of the man who has seen God, and Bernard tells him to look instead at Mary, Queen of Heaven. Dante turns and sees her at the highest tier in a radiance that outshines all the others. Bernard points out the divisions of the Rose and some of the saints. When he points to the Baptized Infants, Dante is again troubled by the question of election and predestination. Bernard responds that nothing is

ways. angels, each angel being a species to itself and so reflecting God's light in varying and different own fancies rather than staying close to Scripture and closes on the multiplicity of forms of nature of angels. She speaks against the presumption of preachers who spin sermons from their said anything, Beatrice addresses the act of creation, the fall of the disobedient angels, and the according to its size and nature. Perceiving Dante's desire to understand when again he hasn't Primum Mobile, which in turn sets all of the planets in motion, each participating in goodness center of the universe; from another, since He is outside time, He imparts his goodness to the nine rings. Two perspectives are interrelated: from one perspective God is a still point at the encircled by nine rings of radiance. Beatrice explains the size of the point and the nature of the point of light reflected in her eyes. He turns to look at the source and sees the bright point begins. Dante turns his gaze on Beatrice and becomes aware of a tiny but immeasurably bright Dante and Beatrice rise to the Ninth Heaven, the starless Primum Mobile. This is where time

be sent to cure the corruption. and Peter assure Dante that God's Providential care will not allow him to continue. Someone will current occupant of his Seat, Boniface VIII. Beatrice blushes in shame at the Pope, and both she Peter steps forward again. The light of his soul now glows deep fiery red as he denounces the long he lived on the Earth. The host of saints rejoices in song over Dante's progress, and then St. had stayed in the Garden of Eden, the nature of his sin, the language he had invented, and how soul ever created, Adam. He answers Dante's questions on when God created him, how long he the three saints who had questioned him, but instead he sees four souls. The fourth is the first Dante successfully completes his catechism, and Dante's sight returns. He had expected to find then questions him on the nature of Love. The whole host of souls sings a song of praise when blinded, but he is reassured by the voice of St. John telling him that his sight will return. The saint Dante peers into the light of his soul but turns away, blinded. Dante is frightened to find himself and questions Dante on Hope. Satisfied with Dante's answer, St. James steps aside for St. John. Dante's understanding of Faith and hears his profession of faith. St. James now joins St. Peter

done outside of the wisdom and will of God, but the answer to his question is simply beyond the mind of men. He directs Dante back to contemplation of the Virgin as it is only through her that he will be able to see God.

St. Bernard offers a prayer to Mary, praising her and asking for a grace that Dante may be strengthened enough to behold God and that his heart may remain pure following the vision. The Virgin and St. Bernard turn to the Light of God, and Dante follows their gaze. Before attempting to describe the vision, Dante prays that his memory and his tongue will be adequate to convey even a spark of what he sees. He first perceives the universal form of all creation, but looking deeper into the Eternal Light, the single semblance deepening, he perceives three spheres of different colors that occupy the same space. The first two mirror each other and the third seems to be of fire emanating equally from the other two. As he gazes, the human image appears within the second circle. Dante wonders how the human image could be joined with the divine circle, but he is unable to conceive the answer. In an instant, however, a flash of grace is given which illuminates his mind and his wish is granted. But "for the great imagination"—his ability to describe what happens—"power failed," and he is left content with his will and desire moving in harmony with the Love "which turns the sun and the other stars."



Reflection Questions

1. The *Paradiso* is the most abstract and intellectual of all the Canticles because it deals explicitly, finally, with theological issues. But notice how Dante still manages to make everything concrete and present to our senses. Nothing is presented in terms of ideas that isn't realized in visual auditory images: the planets, their characteristics, the sense of space and freedom, the souls themselves, the light that radiates from and defines them and that grows in intensity with each stage of the ascent, their language, their movement. Notice that along these same lines, as we move into "outer space," everything is rooted in natural law. The first two stages are developed in terms of the four natural virtues; and even the supernatural virtues, which come afterwards, still perfect what is inherent in them. Dante makes it clear that everything about God's grace and His Kingdom is in accord with the universe He created. The senses, the mind, the supernatural virtues are all a part of a natural progression. Grace perfects nature because even while grace is higher, they both have the same source.

2. Place Dante's ascent in the *Paradiso* against his descent in the *Inferno*. What are the differences? In Canto I of the *Paradiso*, Dante repeatedly describes his experiences in terms of risings ("as a reflected ray is wont to rise upwards") or transformations ("day seemed joined to day"; and "I became like Glaucus"). His use of "transhumanizing" isn't adequate to describe what is happening. In the *Inferno*, under the guidance of Virgil and unaided reason, Dante does pretty much what he always does under the power of his own will. But how much of what he is doing here in the *Paradiso* is a result of his being lifted or drawn up under the combined power of his own changed will and the grace of God? How much of Dante's strange "transhumanized" motion is due to grace? And if any part of it is, has Dante lost any free will? Consider in this light the early discussions on free-will.