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## THE DIVINE COMEDY

By MARK VAN DOREN

THE full weight of Homer's wisdom was delivered in stories of particular persons who did what they did in particular times and places. For Virgil a story was not enough; there had to be an idea, too, and a view of human history. But all of that together did not add up to the one thing, or the two things, Homer sang. Neither was Milton content with the brief, tremendous myth he started with; he loaded it with inventions, and in these inventions it lost some of its original force. Lucretius, superior to story, addressed himself to things; he tried to say what they were made of, and to fix truth so that it would never move again. He was a noble poet, but the truth still moves, still seeks its natural pace, which is that of narrative.

The vast and delicate poem of Dante does not readily answer a question put to it by the context of its peers. Which comes first in its author's being, the philosopher or the poet? The answer in fact is never given, for Dante is that unique thing, a successful philosophical poet: his story, for he tells one, cannot be separated from the thing it means. In this respect he is the peer of Homer and of Hamlet's historian, though his procedure is different from either of theirs. The journey his narrative takes is through the entire universe, and that universe is stationary; its parts wait for him to pass, learning their nature as he goes.

But he does go; a journey is taken. Our belief in his story is simultaneous with our interest in what it signifies.

The *Divine Comedy* has to be sure absorbed a philosophy, and it is the most complex, not to say the most intimidating one, that poetry anywhere contains. Furthermore it is Dante's most serious conscious concern. The "sacred poem to which both heaven and earth so have set hand that it hath made me lean through many a year" is sacred to him because of the faith it explores. And the exploration is through regions where no other poet has been. "The water which I take was never coursed before." Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme—by now it is a familiar warning, and we shall be kept off if our curiosity is not great or pure. Its author is an intensely personal and passionate man who would rather be understood than admired. He believes the story he tells—of his own journey, with Virgil and Beatrice for guides, through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven—as genius believes things, with simplicity; and he tells it as genius tells things, without obscurity or reservation. Without obscurity, though with difficulties proper to the theme. For the journey is through knowledge, and knowing is often hard.

The initial canto, so famous and so spare, announces every quality of the poem to come.

In the middle of the journey of our life I  
came to myself in a dark wood where the  
straight way was lost.

The journey is more than a casual expedition; it is Dante's life, and in addition to that it is our life, midway in which a darkness may come down, and direction be lost. The darkness is real, and therefore terrible.

Ah! how hard a thing it is to tell what a  
wild, and rough, and stubborn wood this was,  
which in my thought renews the fear!  
So bitter is it, that scarcely more is death. . . .

Yet out of the terror will come knowledge—of what caused the darkness, and of better light beyond. So Dante will tell of both the darkness and the light.

A hill he comes to, with the sun shining on its summit, seems to offer escape from the obscure wood, and he thinks to ascend it. But three beasts prevent him, and he is in despair until there appears before him one who seems "hoarse from long silence"—a shade, not a man, though he was once a man.

A poet I was; and sang of that just son  
of Anchises who came from Troy after  
proud Ilium was burnt.

It is Virgil—"O glory," cries Dante, "and light of other poets! . . . Thou art my master and my author. . . . See the beast from which I turned back; help me from her, thou famous sage."

"Thou must take another road," Virgil answers, "if thou desirest to escape from this wild place. . . . Wherefore I think and discern this for thy best, that thou follow me; and I will be thy guide, and lead thee hence through an eternal place, where thou shalt hear the hopeless shrieks, shalt see the ancient spirits in pain, so that each calls for a second death; and then thou shalt see those who are contented in the fire; for they hope to come, whensoever it be, amongst the blessed; then to these, if thou desirest to ascend, there shall be a spirit worthier than I to guide thee; with her will I leave thee at my parting. For that Emperor who reigns above, because I was rebellious to his law, wills not that I come into his city."

Dante, in other words, is not to save himself, but has like any man to be saved; has to go the long way round—the longest way, through all three parts of existence; and Virgil, because he lived before Christ, can go with him only through Purgatory, the second part. After that Beatrice will be his guide; neither poetry nor philosophy, but grace, must be the final means to bliss. The three beasts, a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf, are the rea-

sons within himself, the natural reasons, why assistance will be necessary from without. They have been said to stand for worldly pleasure, ambition, and avarice, as Virgil has been said to stand for worldly wisdom. In any case they necessitate the journey, and the poem. Dante beseeches Virgil, "by that God whom thou knowest not," to lead the way.

Then he moved; and I kept on behind him.

As swiftly as that, and as certainly, Dante plunges us into the midst of his many meanings. His many meanings are one at last, but the truth that runs through his poem has countless tributaries, the voice it speaks with is echoed from numerous mountains. There are occasional entanglements and ingenuities; the three beasts, for instance, manifest their meaning less clearly than does the "way" that Dante takes. Their trouble, strangely enough, is that they seem to have only one meaning; whereas the "way" is at least a double thing: it is a road and it is the direction life follows. Dante is most at home when more than one meaning sleeps in his words. He is entirely at home when his meanings are mutual; and when, as in this initial canto, they meet in the quiet of understatement, the courtesy of recognition, to give his story the importance it must have if it is to be the story of how all truth, tried in fire, becomes known.

Dante comes as near perfection in allegory as any poet has come. Allegory for him is not a trick. It is the truest language of a world the whole of which is organized in terms of meaning. No part of existence is neutral to Dante's purpose. He can use every piece of his experience, every item of his knowledge, in the service of a vision which his poem will fit. All of his loves and hates, all of the life he has seen and the books he has read, all that he thinks and feels he can bring somehow into a focus which renders the *Divine Comedy* both as simple as a parable and as formidable as a treatise. This is because allegory for him

is more than pretending that one thing means another, more than concealing this behind that. Indeed it is more; it is the expression, the one direct and natural expression, of a multiple reality which he knows how to take for granted. The world is all about him all of the time: close about, exerting the pressure of its truth, each fragment of it waiting in its place to be noticed and to testify.

To say that Dante is good at allegory is to say that no one of his meanings, or kinds of meaning, tends to be more important than another. His details have in the end an equal depth. There is no philosophy "in" his poetry of which the poetry is the disguise or the container. His poetry is his philosophy, his philosophy is his poetry. It has been said that "a good allegory is clearer than any explanation of it would be." So with Dante's, which it is a greater pleasure to praise than to expound. It is a pleasure to praise it because it deals with the things men know. No fact is alien to it, for it writes itself in every part of the universe, and finds even the false gods edifying. The horrible giants who stand half-buried at the edge of Hell's deepest pit were hated in the old world too; Jove, says Dante, still threatens them from heaven when he thunders.

Dante does not prove his world; he reveals, he exposes it. He explores it systematically, transforming its matter as its inmost structure grows ever more intelligible. Nor does this operation seem to be a series of verbal acts. The poetry of the *Divine Comedy* is in its words, of course, but still more it is in the arrangement of its things. Each of them derives its chief beauty and force from the position it is given. The great work is done silently, and finished sometimes before we know it was begun. When Virgil bids farewell to Dante near the summit of Purgatory, saying that wit and art, so necessary in the narrow ways, can take him no farther now, since his own pleasure must guide him through Paradise, he concludes:

No more expect my word, nor my sign. Free, upright, and whole is thy will, and 'twere a fault not to act according to its prompting; wherefore I do crown and mitre thee over thyself.

Dante, recovered from Adam's fall, and therefore safely trusted with his freedom, is henceforth king and bishop of himself. The conception is daring, and we are tempted to call Dante vain, doubting that he or any man deserves the honor to be so addressed. But at once our long memory rebukes us. How has Dante earned this? Why, by writing the poem! He is placed here, and so can listen to these words, because his thought has taken him thus far; and incidentally it is he who has created this Virgil of whose good word we are so jealous.

Many another time the allegory collects itself in such fashion and strikes with all its force. Dante, learning in Paradise that to see truth in its own light is to love it and rejoice, does not master the lesson by memorizing phrases; he blinks with ever-increasing wonder as he moves among luminous spheres whose happy selves express their love not so much by singing as by whirling and glowing. But we also are there; we hear what he hears, see what he sees, and comprehend the four-fold simplicity of truth, light, love, and joy at the same minute that his poem does. It was different in Hell, when the angel came—from this same Paradise, but then it was remote and only imagined—to assure the entry of Dante and Virgil into the doleful City of Dis. He came over the stinking marsh that surrounded the city as a hurricane comes, stripping the trees and making the wild beasts flee; a thousand ruined spirits ran from him like frogs, and squatted on the bottom. Full of indignation, waving the gross air from his countenance with his left hand, he arrived and dispersed the uncivil shades who had denied the poets entrance. "Then he returned by the filthy way, and spake no word to us; but looked like one whom other care urges and incites than that of those who stand before him." Each of the three effects is

proper to its place, and is greater because it is proper. The angel, hating to be visible, will return and be again a wheel of light; and Dante, justified by his studies until he is free to think of the highest, the most abstract things, will see him there with the same eyes that see so easily now—so easily that we do not say: No man has ever been where such things are beheld.

An excellent measure of Dante's achievement in allegory might be taken by one who imagined the *Divine Comedy* not yet written, and who thus was free, as Dante must have been, to ask whether its contents were to be said or were to be told. The two forms of communication rarely coincide. In the *Divine Comedy* they do so with unique precision—but how, in what original moment, did its author come upon the means? There is no more searching question that criticism can ask, or that a poet can ask of himself, assuming in him a capacity for being completely serious.

Dante's answer, of course, was that his poem must both say and tell, and that the two languages must be somehow one language; allegory meant this much to him at least, quite naturally, by the custom of his age. But how? The answer, in so far as there can be any, is to be found in Dante's seriousness: in his power to believe that it is of life-and-death importance whether or not the soul understands the universe in which it has been placed. His subject is the soul's understanding. And his story is the progress of that understanding. For the soul to explore the riches of being, and to define its ultimate nature, time is required. Progress, in other words, implies time. It even implies space. So the *Divine Comedy* must be among other things a narrative, it must describe a journey taken by the soul through days and places as existence is explored. Dante does not forget that the primary tense of poetry is the past tense.

But Dante's concern is also with the understanding to be had. The end of the poem cannot be the same as its beginning—darkness and ignorance must yield to light—yet the poet must know the end at the beginning. Even if the action is to draw a per-



fect circle that circle must indeed be drawn—it cannot be printed all at once. Yet the poet must know the meaning of his story, which as meaning exists in eternity, before he has written a word. Dante, that is to say, is as much interested in the truth being sought as in the person—himself—who seeks it. His problem is therefore double: to tell his story well, and to make sure that it has the right meaning. He must know all before he starts, but he must conceal his knowledge, saving its essence till the end. His knowledge must order every step the journey takes at the same time that his imagination maintains the tensions of suspense, the excitements of learning. The relations which in his final vision he will possess as if they were one indivisible thing he must keep meanwhile so separate from one another that they can seem to tremble with unfinished life. On no page before the last may we be permitted to feel that we are There, yet on any page we must be both satisfied with what we know and studious to know more. Dante wants neither to deliver a sermon nor to tell a tale; he wants to be, if this is possible, at once didactic and diverting.

His success, for in his case the possibility was real, is perhaps not different from the success of any great poet. Any great poet is in a sense beyond criticism for the simple reason that he has written a successful story. Such a story is conceived out of time, but it is told in time. And the fact that it is easy to understand does not mean that it will be easy to discuss. Criticism is most at home with failure. In the presence of success it may be as dumb as the least instructed reader—more so, even, since many a reader understands by instinct how to receive what the poet by art knew how to prepare. Faced with the *Divine Comedy*, criticism can do little more than admire the patience with which its poet, who creates in time what he has conceived in eternity, holds himself back from saying all that he will ever mean. The poem must do that in its own time, through one detail after another. As for us who read, whether we are critics or not, we must do

with each detail in its place, noting if we can how it is anchored to every other detail, but content if no connecting line appears. For a great poem conceals its structure; it talks not about itself but about its subject. About itself it is silent, and criticism invades that silence at its peril. The dare must perhaps be taken. The parts of a whole which is so simple that it seems to have no parts must nevertheless be named. But no list of parts will be equivalent to what the poet left behind him to be read.

The *Divine Comedy*, then, is both narration and analysis; it moves, but toward a truth that stands still. Its stages are at once sequential and simultaneous. Man learns one thing after another, but all the things he learns are one from the beginning; they are true at the same time, however prior or posterior may be his process. This is the fact with which Dante wrestles as he seeks to express the uncreated in terms of the created—and never blundering, as Milton does, by falling into the idiom of history. He never forgets that the created and the uncreated we have always with us, here and everywhere. He does not strive to make his universe look either very big or very old. It is what it is when we find it. The difficulty of finding it is what he most remembers.

O Muses, O high Genius, now help me! O  
Memory, that hast inscribed what I saw,  
here will be shewn thy nobleness.

The difficulty of finding the truth is for Dante the same thing as the difficulty of writing his poem. "Who is that, who, without death, goes through the kingdom of the dead?" It was thus that the rebellious spirits challenged Dante at the entrance to the City of Dis. And in a sense they were right. For Dante's journey outrages nature. It is natural to desire this much knowledge, but it is unnatural to have it. The remotest objects are the most resentful of the mind's intrusion. Abstraction, the deepest secret, fights us off. Our only armor is a disinterested desire to

know, a spirit pure in heart and pure in study. It was because Virgil could certify such a spirit in Dante that the angel came and opened those inhospitable gates.

Dante's allegory at its best, which means most of the time, declares itself in silence: one thing is another, and that is all, except that it is itself too. The mutual meanings are as immediate, and as noiseless, as communication among mirrors. The result of this is that he does not have to call our attention to what he is doing; the poem is doing it as we read and understand. But his allegory is not always at its best. Upon occasion Dante must pause and point; his cunning has not been adequate to his plan.

Such an occasion mars, though it does not make uninteresting, the episode before the walls of Dis. Above those walls have suddenly appeared three hellish Furies, and they have threatened to summon Medusa, "that we may change him into stone." But Virgil will summon the angel, and with that aid the poets may go on. This is where Dante doubts that we shall understand—doubts, in other words, that he has contrived his poem with sufficient skill, as indeed he has not. For he must say:

O ye who have sane intellects, mark the doctrine which conceals itself beneath the veil of the strange verses!

"Doctrine" is the word of weakness here. We are to gather, perhaps with a scholar's help, that "a bad conscience (the Furies) and stern obduracy which turns the heart to stone (Medusa) are impediments that obstruct the path of every sinner intent on salvation. Reason (Virgil) may do much to obviate these evil influences; but divine aid (the angel) is necessary to dissipate them altogether." So once in Purgatory Dante must break off his narrative to remark:

Reader, here sharpen well thine eyes to the truth, for the veil now is indeed so thin, that of a surety to pass within is easy.

If "doctrine" is not a confession of failure, then "veil," twice used, must certainly be. In a perfect allegory, which doubtless will never exist, neither word would be needed. Doctrine would be implicit everywhere, no veil would have to be withdrawn.

Another form that failure takes is the lecture. Teaching is not done best in lectures, but there are times when Dante has no other resource. Virgil lectures in Hell upon the classification of sins, and in Purgatory upon gravitation, which as attraction is also love, the force which keeps the universe organized about its center. The position of this second lecture—at the exact center of the poem—is itself an allegorical stroke of the finest force. But the lecture, or the necessity for it, shows again that the system has for a moment broken down. How the breakdown could have been avoided no one knows, since Dante did not. If he could have avoided it he surely would have. Doubtless there was no way; doubtless the world is not that kind to man, that transparent at its center. At any rate Dante went on with his lectures. Virgil must explain the topography of Purgatory, and Beatrice must discourse concerning many things which no images can be summoned to convey.

A minor form of failure, though it is positive too, is the homily to the reader, the direct preachment, as when Dante, following Virgil's glance in Purgatory, sees the proud approaching, bent double under immense burdens of stone, and bursts forth thus:

O ye proud Christians, wretched and weary,  
 who, sick in mental vision, put trust in  
 backward steps,  
 perceive ye not that ye are worms, born to  
 form the angelic butterfly that flieth to  
 judgment without defence?  
 Why doth your mind soar so high, since ye  
 are as 'twere imperfect insects, even as  
 the grub in which full form is wanting?

The message may be true, but the form of it, given a surrounding allegory which for the most part makes any message superfluous, is shocking. So are the other devices to which Dante now and again descends in order to secure the emphasis he has not known how to maneuver into expressing itself.

None of these failures, however, is more than momentary. And all of them together are cancelled in Dante's final effect by the host of superb figures—little allegories inside the great one—with which his poem swarms. The whole world of the poem is one metaphor, but this does not prevent the existence of many within that one. The similes of Dante are as important to his purpose as Homer's were to his, though they are seldom so elaborate. They are his world making itself known, down to the finest detail, while overhead and over all the Word gathers its breath to speak the abstraction we are waiting for.

They are the signs we need that our poet has seen what we have seen, that he is interpreting the landscape of our life.

And as he, who with panting breath has escaped  
from the deep sea to the shore, turns to the  
dangerous water and gazes:  
So my mind, which still was fleeing, turned  
back to see the pass that no one ever left  
alive.

As sails, swelled by the wind, fall entangled  
when the mast breaks: so fell that cruel  
monster to the ground.

As a green brand, that is burning at one end,  
at the other drops, and hisses with the wind  
which is escaping:  
So from that broken splint, words and blood  
came forth together.

We met a troop of spirits who were coming  
    alongside the bank; and each looked at us,  
    as in the evening men are wont  
to look at one another under a new moon; and  
toward us sharpened their vision, as an  
aged tailor does at the eye of his needle.

Not otherwise the dogs in summer do, now with  
    snout, now with paw, when they are bitten  
by fleas, or flies, or breezes.

Then he writhed his mouth and thrust  
    his tongue out, like an ox that licks  
his nose.

As the falcon, that has been long upon his  
    wings—that, without seeing bird or lure—  
    makes the falconer cry, 'Ah, ah! thou stoopest'—  
descends weary; then swiftly moves himself  
    with many a circle, and far from his master  
    sets himself disdainful and sullen:  
so at the bottom Geryon set us, close to the  
    foot of the ragged rock; and, from our weight  
relieved, he bounded off like an arrow from  
the string.

And through the circular valley I saw a people  
    coming silent and weeping, at the pace which  
the Litanies make in this world.

As dolphins, when with the arch of the back  
    they make sign to mariners that they may pre-  
pare to save their ship:  
So now and then, to ease the punishment, some  
sinner showed his back and hid in less time  
than it lightens.

In that part of the youthful year, when the Sun  
    tempers his locks beneath Aquarius, and the  
nights already wane towards half the day,

when the hoar-frost copies his white sister's  
image on the ground, but short while lasts  
the temper of his pen,  
the peasant, whose fodder fails, rises, and looks,  
and sees the fields all white; whereat he  
smites his thigh,  
goes back into the house, and to and fro laments  
like a poor wight who knows not what to do;  
then comes out again, and recovers hope,  
observing how the world has changed its face in  
little time; and takes his staff, and chases  
forth his lambs to feed:  
thus the Master made me despond, when I saw  
his brow so troubled; and thus quickly to  
the sore the plaster came.

As up before the flame on paper, goes a brown  
color which is not yet black, and the  
white dies away.

There I see on either side each shade make  
haste, and one kiss the other without stay-  
ing, satisfied with short greeting:  
even so within their dark battalions one ant  
rubs muzzle with another, perchance to spy  
out their way and their fortune.

As a lady who is dancing turns her round with  
feet close to the ground and to each other,  
and hardly putteth foot before foot,  
she turned toward me upon the red and upon the  
yellow flowerets, not otherwise than a vir-  
gin that droppeth her modest eyes.

As a cross-bow breaks, when shot at too great  
tension, both its string and bow, and with  
less force the bolt hits its mark,  
so burst I under this heavy charge, pouring  
forth a torrent of tears and sighs, and my  
voice died away in its passage.

Gazing on her such I became within, as was  
Glaucus, tasting of the grass that made  
him the sea-fellow of the other gods.

For I have seen first, all the winter through,  
the thorn display itself hard and forbidding,  
and then upon its summer bear the rose.

And at the name of the lofty Maccabee I saw  
another move, wheeling, and gladness was as  
the lash unto the whipping-top.

As the bird amidst the loved foliage who hath  
brooded on the nest of her sweet offspring  
through the night which hideth things from us,  
who, to look upon their longed-for aspect and  
to find the food wherewith to feed them,  
wherein her heavy toils are pleasant to her,  
foreruns the time, upon the open spray, and  
with glowing love awaiteth the sun, fixedly  
gazing for the dawn to rise;  
so was my Lady standing, erect and eager,  
turned toward the region beneath which  
the sun showeth least speed.

As under the sun's ray, which issueth pure through  
a broken cloud, ere now mine eyes have seen a  
meadow full of flowers, when themselves covered  
by the shade;  
so beheld I many a throng of splendors, glowed on  
from above by ardent rays, beholding not the  
source whence came the glowings.

In form, then, of a white rose displayed itself  
to me that sacred soldiery which in his blood  
Christ made his spouse;  
but the other, which as it flieth seeth and doth  
sing his glory who enamoreth it, and the excel-  
lence which hath made it what it is,



like to a swarm of bees which doth one while plunge  
into the flowers and another while wend  
back to where its toil is turned to sweetness,  
ever descended into the great flower adorned with  
so many leaves, and reascended thence to where  
its love doth ever make sojourn.

So did I turn again unto his teaching who  
drew beauty from Mary, as from the sun  
the morning star.

They are also the sign we need that the visionary to whom we have entrusted ourselves can see more in the landscape than is commonplace—can see, in fact, the celestial landscape that lies within it as the fourth dimension sleeps among the other three, visible only to the deepest eyes. Midway through Paradise Dante begins to fear that the brightness he gazes upon will become such that “all similes fall short of it.” But it never does. His similes are ever more ethereal to match the increasing subtlety of what he sees, yet they never abandon the language of earth. Early in Paradise he learns that the spirits with whom he is henceforth to speak will to any gross sense be invisible. This is the way he learns it:

In such guise as, from glasses transparent and  
polished, or from waters clear and tranquil,  
not so deep that the bottom is darkened,  
come back the outlines of our faces, so faint  
that a pearl on a white brow cometh not  
slowlier upon our eyes;  
so did I behold many a countenance, eager to  
speak; wherefore I fell into the counter-  
error of that which kindled love between the  
man and the fountain.  
No sooner was I aware of them than, thinking  
them reflected images, I turned round my  
eyes to see of whom they were;

and I saw naught, and turned them forward  
again straight on the light of my sweet  
guide, whose sacred eyes glowed as she  
smiled.

Unlike Narcissus, who mistook a reflection for a face, Dante mistakes for reflections the faces of the last spirits he will see—and how faint these are three figures measure with an accuracy found only in such poetry as he writes.

The briefest metaphors flash in like manner, though more rarely, as we make our way from line to sober line.

Among evil cats the mouse had come.

And thus quickly to the sore the plaster  
came.

To course o'er better waters now hoists  
sail the little bark of my wit.

With the swift wings and with the plumes  
of great desire.

Thus, by asking, did he thread the very  
needle's eye of my desire.

The ice which had closed about my heart  
became breath and water.

Verily, I see how thou dost nestle in thine  
own light.

The mind which shineth here, on earth doth  
smoke.

Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by  
love in one volume, the scattered leaves of  
all the universe.

Work of this sort is done by Dante quickly—as nearly as possible in no time at all. These are the jewels on which the wheels of his allegory turn; they must be here, but he would rather that we watched the wheels. It is a secret that Milton discovered from him only to forget. Adam's few and powerful words concerning Raphael, whose coming is like another morn at noon, suggest the words of Dante in Paradise as he follows the eyes of Beatrice and looks straight into the sun: "Meseemed that day was added unto day, as though he that hath the power had adorned heaven with a second sun." But too little of *Paradise Lost* is like that, whereas the *Divine Comedy* is like that all the time.

Dante's figured speech might seem to reach its climax when in Paradise he telescopes the senses whose experience he reports. We hear about "the song of these lights," lights that ring out the name of Mary, and an eternal yellow rose which breathes praise. Yet there is in reality no climax; from the beginning of the work its author has been master of the hidden illumination, the buried phrase which will not stay buried. He even knows how to be brilliant with no light at all, as when in the dark plain before Hell proper he meets the unnumbered trimmers who deserve neither Hell nor Paradise, and cuts them with cold whips of phrases which no imagery makes merciful:

The dreary souls who lived without blame, and  
without praise. . . .

who were not rebellious, nor were faithful to  
God, but were for themselves.

These unfortunate who never were alive.

These have no hope of death.

Report of them the world permits not to exist;  
Mercy and Justice disdains them: let us not  
speak of them; but look, and pass.

I should never have believed death had undone  
so many.

Those who were neither good nor bad—the immense majority of mankind—Dante refuses to render visible. He regards them, lashes them with the driest thong of his wit, and goes on. The decision to do so is in itself a figure, but of a kind which only the intricate structure of this poem makes possible.

It is early in Hell that Dante meets Paolo and Francesca, perhaps the most famous of his persons. And they deserve their fame, for the passage in which they live is peculiarly powerful. But the reason for this power is not easily discovered. It lies deep in the images of wind and bird that alter so imperceptibly as we read. The alterations—italicized below—carry the meaning of the canto; they are the way in which Dante says what he has to say not only about these lovers but about all carnal sinners, in his view the least of sinners, and consequently so much to be pitied.

I came into a place void of all light,  
which bellows like the sea in tempest,  
when it is combated by *warring winds*.  
The hellish storm, *which never rests*, leads  
the spirits with its sweep; whirling and  
smiting, it vexes them. . . .  
I learned that to such torment are doomed  
the carnal sinners, who subject reason  
to lust.  
And as their wings bear along the *starlings*,  
at the cold season, in large and crowded  
troop: so that blast, the evil spirits;  
hither, thither, down, up, it leads them. No  
hope ever comforts them, not of rest but  
even of less pain.  
And as the *cranes* go chanting their lays, mak-  
ing a long streak of themselves in the air:  
so I saw the shadows come, uttering wails,

borne by that strife of winds; whereat I said:  
 'Master, who are those people, whom the  
 black air thus lashes?' . . .  
 After I had heard my teacher name the olden  
 dames and cavaliers, pity came over me, and  
 I was as if bewildered.  
 I began: 'Poet, willingly would I speak  
 with those two that go together, and seem  
*so light upon the wind.*'  
 And he to me: 'Thou shalt see when they are  
 nearer to us; and do thou entreat them by  
 that love which leads them; and they will come.'  
 Soon as *the wind bends* them to us, I raised  
 my voice: 'O wearied souls! come to speak  
 with us, if none denies it.'  
 As *doves* called by desire, with raised and  
 steady wings come through the air *to their*  
*loved nest*, borne by the will:  
 so those spirits issued from the band where  
 Dido is, coming to us through the malignant  
 air such was the force of my affectuous cry.  
 'O living creature, gracious and benign! that  
 goest through the black air, visiting us who  
 stained the earth with blood:  
 if the King of the Universe were our friend, we  
 would pray him for thy peace; seeing that thou  
 hast pity of our perverse misfortune.  
 Of that which it pleases thee to hear and to  
 speak, we will hear and speak with you,  
*whilst the wind, as now, is silent for us.*  
 The town, where I was born, sits on the shore,  
 where Po *descends to rest* with his attend-  
 and streams. . . .

Starlings, cranes, doves—the descent of the series is from restlessness to rest, as the movement of the wind is from war to peace, and as at the close the fall of the Po is from the mountains to the sea, attended by obedient tributaries. No passage in any poem does better work.

The difficulty of reading Dante is the difficulty of seeing all that is there. No poet has a greater horror of being obscure, but no poet has put so much into an equivalent space; to put in less than everything would have been for Dante to commit the obscurity that matters most, the obscurity of incompleteness. To put everything in, however, does not mean with him to be diffuse; it means the opposite, for every corner of this space is precious, every tick of this time suggests eternity. So Dante, who does not distinguish between poetry and truth, devotes himself entirely to his vision, strengthening its supports with any buttresses that will stand, and feeling no scruple when his concentration becomes crabbed, when his earnestness becomes prosaic. He is never, perhaps, prosaic, but he does not mind sounding so to those who have missed the poetry of his plan. His plan is as rigid as he can make it, to suit the rigor of his theme: the verse-scheme is handcuffs, and the system of the cantos—a hundred in all, as equally divided as possible among the three parts, and substantially of uniform length—is a set of leg-irons in which he walks from room to room. There is no other way in which he can feel his freedom. He does feel it, constantly, against the limits of so much form. It takes this much form to press out of his subject the “strong-bitter flavor” it rightly has. His ancestor who in Paradise counsels him to write the *Divine Comedy* predicts that his voice will be “grievous at first, yet vital nutriment shall it leave thereafter when digested.” The nutriment is the thing: “contracted words which shall note much in little space.” “The long theme so chases me,” Dante once explains, “that many times the word comes short of the reality.” This could be an apology, but it may be a boast; for nobody could know better than he does that he leaves nothing unsaid after all. He describes little—less, it would often seem, than enough—yet we see everything that we should see. “Who, even with words set free, could ever fully tell, by oft relating, the blood and the wounds that I now saw?” The answer must be another

question. Who thinks that Dante's Hell is empty of blood and wounds?

He regularly exclaims that the things he must tell cannot be told. The truth of his vision is ineffable—the more so as he approaches its beatific end. “I write it not, because all speech would fail to tell.” So he excuses himself for one of his silences in Hell. But the silences are much more numerous thereafter. In Purgatory he calls upon Helicon to stream forth, and Urania to aid him with her choir, so that he may speak of things which are hard even to conceive. The freest citizen of Parnassus, attempting to sing of Beatrice's eyes, would seem to have “a mind encumbered.” It is not merely that such things are by their nature unspeakable, but the confines of his form are tyrannous; the part of his poem reserved for Purgatory leaves him too little room. “Forasmuch as all the pages ordained for this second canticle are filled, the curb of art no further lets me go.” And in Paradise the complaint, if complaint it truly is, becomes chronic.

In that heaven which most receiveth of his light  
have I been; and have seen things which whoso  
descendeth from up there hath nor knowledge  
nor power to re-tell.

To pass beyond humanity may not be told in words.

If now there were to sound all of those tongues  
which Polyhymnia with her sisters made richest  
with their sweetest milk,  
it would not mount, in aiding me, unto the thou-  
sandth of the truth . . .  
And therefore, figuring Paradise, needs must the  
sacred poem make a leap . . .

It is no voyage for a little bark, that which my  
daring keel cleaveth as it goeth, nor for a  
helmsman who doth spare himself.

Thenceforward was my vision mightier than our  
discourse, which faileth at such sight, and  
faileth memory at so great outrage.

Oh but how scant the utterance, and how faint,  
to my conception! and it, to what I saw, is  
such that it sufficeth not to call it little.

To the high fantasy here power failed.

It is not truly a complaint. This is Dante's rhetoric for that which is less to be written than to be seen. The writing is there, but we do not see it for the brighter, taller thing that shows behind it.

No poet takes a more natural delight in abridgement which proves that all truth is possessed. For Dante condensation is a duty, but he loves the command that he be brief. The doomed souls "are prompt to pass the river, for Divine Justice spurs them so, that fear is changed into desire." And the Hell they go to is simply a part of the universe "where there is naught that shines." What other poet has put Demeter's daughter in three lines? Says Dante to Matilda in Purgatory: "Thou makest me to remember where and what Proserpine was, in the time her mother lost her, and she lost the spring flowers." But again it is in Paradise, where the heart of meaning beats, that compression reaches its limit.

And his will is our peace.

No more free than water that should not  
flow to the sea.

This glory which suffereth not itself to  
be surpassed by longing.

Bound by love in one volume.



If the limit is sometimes overreached, the reason is that Dante has fallen in love with brevity rather than with the cause it serves. He rests in silence, not the God of silence.

I did not die, and did not remain alive: now  
 think for thyself, if thou hast any grain  
 of ingenuity, what I became, deprived of  
 both death and life.

Ingenuity—Dante can seldom resist it. He is frequently more intricate than his subject is, more elaborate than the truth allows.

And that he might in very construing be what  
 he was, a spirit from up here moved them to  
 call him by the possessive adjective of  
 him whose he all was.  
 Dominic was he named.

“Dominicus,” in simpler terms, is the possessive form of “Dominus.” But that is too much to say—or not enough—concerning the subject at hand. The ingenuity of another tercet is more attractive:

Devoutly as I may do I implore thee that thou  
 speak to me; thou seest my will, and to hear  
 thee the sooner I utter it not.

This still, however, is ingenuity, and noticeable as such.

Dante is not above a predilection for puzzles, for incidental intricacies such as sometimes seem to justify the man who called the *Divine Comedy* a Swiss clock. The suggestion might have come from a simile for the singing of saints in Paradise:

And even as wheels in harmony of clock-work  
 so turn that the first, to whoso noteth it,  
 seemeth still, and the last to fly,

So did these carols with their differing  
whirl, or swift or slow, make me deem of  
their riches.

But it could have come equally well from any of a hundred other inlays of wit with which the poem is adorned. When the angels sparkle with joy at one of Beatrice's speeches about them, the spectacle is of a brilliance measured, Dante says, by the number of the angels, which runs to thousands "beyond the duplication of the chessboard." Chessboard would be as faithful an image as Swiss clock. It poses problems, and Dante is often pleased to give us little problems over which we must pause before we read any more in the book that day. The poem has scarcely opened before he tells us in which direction he bore as he started to ascend the holy hill whose top would be denied his. But see how he tells us:

I took the way again along the desert strand,  
so that the right foot always was the lower.

The astronomy by which he denotes the hour, the day, and the season when things happen is a noble science which Dante sometimes plays with, fascinated by the figures on its celestial face. The signs that Dante is alive in Hell and Purgatory are never the same; he breathes, he casts a shadow, he moves what he touches—the poet never wearies of inventing ways for the shades to learn that he is not like them. Indirection is a sacred game; logic is the law of this poetry's being. Count Guido da Montefeltro tells Dante that he is in Hell because one of the Black Cherubim remembered something Saint Francis had forgotten. Saint Francis came for Guido when he was dead, but these few dark words kept him forever out of heaven:

'For he who repents not, cannot be absolved;  
nor is it possible to repent and will a  
thing at the same time, the contradiction  
not permitting it.'

O wretched me! how I started when he seized  
me, saying to me: 'May be thou didst not  
think that I was a logician!'

Logic is Dante's law, but it can become in his poem a whip which he cracks. So with the understatement of which he is master. Understatement is proper to his style, as logic is, for both can underscore connections, forcing us to see them for ourselves; but it can torment the commentators with uncertainty as to what he intended they should understand. Ugolino, relating in Hell the starvation of his imprisoned sons and himself, comes at last to the famous moment when he knew himself to be their survivor:

Even as thou seest me, saw I the three fall  
one by one, between the fifth day and the  
sixth, whence I betook me,  
Already blind, to groping over each, and for  
three days called them, after they were dead;  
then fasting had more power than grief.

Do the last words mean that Ugolino ate his sons, or that hunger left him no strength for further grief? Certainly the second, but we ache to have it plainer.

Dante is nowhere more ingenious than in the circumlocutions he scatters like live sparks across the floor of his verse. They again are proper to his purpose, for in a world conceived as his is every object has a right to several names. The importance of anything is measured by the number of names it can have. The circumlocutions of Dante are not too numerous, nor could they be better than they are. God, who must not be named at all, is of course their most frequent occasion. God is called:

That Emperor who reigns above.

That Will whose object never can be frustrated.

Another.

Such.

Him who willingly doth pardon.

He who ne'er beheld a new thing.

He who hath the power.

Heaven is "where what is willed can be done." It is "that part where the world quickeneth most." Purgatory is "the mount where justice probes us," and "the mount which makes you straight whom the world made crooked." Virgil is "My Guide," "the Master," "the Poet," "the Sea of all intelligence," and "he who ever in front of me alert was going." Beatrice is "the sun which first warmed my bosom with love," and always "my sweet guide." Once the three archangels are named, yet the third one is not named either, except by indirection. Beatrice it is who talks with Dante of "Gabriel, Michael, and him too who made Tobit sound again"; for Raphael cured Tobias's father of his blindness. The poet could not permit his Lady to speak in series as many as three plain names.

The ironies of Dante are sunk deep into his texture. They are among his richest beauties, but they prefer not to call attention to themselves. We must dig them out. The poetry in the *Divine Comedy* is something we must work for; this least poetical of poets has a design upon us—it is to make us poets ourselves. We often have the pleasure of thinking that we see more than Dante did. We suppose it is our imagination that dresses the naked objects he leaves in our path; and forget the imagination that left them just there, in the position best calculated to suggest the costume they require. So in particular with his ironies, which he leaves for us to discover; as when Farinata, who burns in Hell because like Lucretius he insisted on earth—"yonder where men breathe"—that the soul dies with the body, rises out of his flaming tomb "upright with breast and countenance, as if he entertained

great scorn of Hell." Farinata's heresy has been disproved, his soul has survived his body, and still he refuses to believe it.

Such things bring it about that the *Divine Comedy* must be read slowly or not at all. It cannot be hurried, any more than the earth can be induced to rotate faster than its hours decide. Dante's progress is too difficult for his pace to be other than circumspect. "Ye Christians," says Beatrice in Paradise, "be more sedate in moving, not like a feather unto every wind." This might be a motto for the poem in which she is so fixed a star, smiling gravely as she precedes her worshipper among the spheres of understanding.

The poem is stiff with manners. Courtesy holds it down to the respectful gait which for its author it must have. Courtesy, indeed, is almost cumbrous here; dignity can never be sacrificed, nor the scruple ignored which urges against harsh and perhaps blasphemous directness. If the courtesy of the *Divine Comedy* is an exquisite thing, it is also exigent to the point of iron decorum. It suggests a code, the code that obtains between teacher and pupil when respect is mutual. For the story we are being told is the story of how Dante was taught, in turn by Virgil, by Beatrice, and by Bernard. And the complexion this story has is given to it by the hesitancy its persons never cease to feel as they ask and answer; the asker, Dante, is loath to interrupt the thoughts of his greater companion, and the companion is loath to lecture before lecturing is necessary. The teacher would rather that the pupil learned by himself, and imputes to him the power of doing so; while the pupil wonders whether he should hold back his question until the truth is manifest without words. It is as if they all wished words did not exist, so that things might speak for themselves. Not that the poem does not largely consist of the words they exchange, of the lectures they listen to and deliver. But Dante's fear lest he offend is never laid, and his teachers never commit the fault of condescension; though as often as need be they rebuke him, and sometimes they do this roundly. Virgil

is plain enough when he charges Dante with being too curious to overhear a certain quarrel between two false spirits in Hell:

I was standing all intent to hear them, when  
 the Master said to me: 'Now keep looking a  
 little longer and I quarrel with thee!'  
 When I heard him speak to me in anger, I turned  
 towards him with such shame, that it comes  
 over me again as I but think of it.  
 And as one who dreams of something hurtful to  
 him, and dreaming wishes it were a dream,  
 so that he longs for that which is, as if  
 it were not:  
 such grew I, who, without power to speak, wished  
 to excuse myself and all the while excused,  
 and did not think that I was doing it.  
 'Less shame washes off a greater fault than  
 thine has been,' said the Master: 'there-  
 fore unload thee of all sorrow;  
 and count that I am always at thy side, should  
 it again fall out that Fortune brings thee  
 where people are in similar contests: for  
 the wish to hear it is a vulgar wish.'  
 One and the same tongue first wounded me so  
 that it tinged with blushes both my cheeks,  
 and then held forth the medicine to me.

But, as the passage makes clear, he at the same time hurts and soothes his disciple. No such wound is ever left unhealed. Virgil and Beatrice both, and upon many occasions, grow impatient with Dante, calling him a child in reason, an infant in discourse. But kindness follows, and a grave smile smooths all away. Dante, nevertheless, does not forget to be modest with inquiry. Shall he put another question or walk on in silence? It is hard to decide, "and I remain in doubt; for yes and no contend within my head." His division of mind is not like that of Homer's or of Virgil's men. The problem is one of courtesy, and of courtesy alone.

The relation between Dante and Virgil is one of the most

beautiful things in poetry. It is Virgil, of course, who for the author of the *Divine Comedy* is "the sovereign poet," though it is upon Homer that he fastens the phrase. The remark of Statius in Purgatory, "to have lived yonder when Virgil was alive I would consent to one sun more than I owe to my coming forth from exile," would do for Dante too. The deportment of the pair is ever distinguished by its delicacy. "With eyes ashamed and downcast, fearing my words might have offended him, I kept myself from speaking till we reach the stream." But what were the words that might have offended Virgil? Merely: "Master, now grant that I may know who these are." And Virgil had declined to answer, saying that Dante would soon know by himself that they were Charon's passengers waiting to be ferried into Hell. Not that Virgil's silence can be cruel. It cannot, because he is the prince of courtesy; nothing could exceed the subtlety with which he apprehends his pupil's shames and fears. "That color," says Dante before the gates of Dis, "which cowardice painted on my face when I saw my Guide turn back, repressed in him more quickly his new color," which was the color of wrath. "Be not dismayed if I get angry," Virgil remembers to say. His help in time of trouble is a constant thing, and boundless in its power to comfort the shy learner in his charge.

The relation between Dante and Beatrice, once Virgil disappears from the poem, is still more beautiful, but it is not a relation of courtesy. Courtesy is the code of earth. It is mortality's best imitation of the divine life it will never share. Virgil is a great gentleman, but Beatrice is more than a great lady: she is a saint, and so can dispense with the elaboration of codes. Yet even she is the kind of teacher, the perfect kind, who can take pleasure in being forgotten when the time comes for that.

Never was heart of mortal so disposed unto  
devotion, and so keen to give itself to  
God with all its will,

as at those words was I; and so wholly was  
 my love committed unto him, it eclipsed  
 Beatrice in oblivion.  
 Her it displeased not; but she so smiled  
 thereat, the splendor of her laughing eyes  
 parted my erst united mind amongst things  
 multiform.

The fancy of this poet is unlimited but it is never unregulated. What regulates it is his unremitting seriousness as he searches for the truth. Philosophy for him, as for Aquinas, is not the study of what various men have believed, but of how "the truth of things standeth." Virgil assures Chiron, who resents Dante's presence in Hell, that "necessity brings him to it, and not sport." Dante is better than curious; he is studious. He would know more rather than see more. His admiration of the angels is because they know—even because their eyes are dazed, "like a faculty which by excess is confounded." So will he be dazed by what he sees in the last canto, but he does not hesitate to travel that far, by any conveyance that will take him there, metaphysical or mathematical. He is master of the dry term which in the end is not dry, for it measures the warmth of the world, and takes us along tangents to where we can delight our eyes with such sights as that of Matilda in the Earthly Paradise:

a lady solitary, who went along singing,  
 and culling flower after flower, where-  
 with all her path was painted.

If the picture is delicious, we have paid for it with the intellectual effort that brought us to where Matilda walks. Nor shall we measure the beatitude of Dante in his final state unless we can share with him his joy in the spectacle of a circle squared; for that was how God's face, with man's face painted upon it, seemed to him when he looked and lost consciousness at last.

Philosophy may be the serious concern of one who is not



a poet. Dante's intellect does not make him a poet, it simply makes him a better one. The systematic nature of the *Divine Comedy* is a nature that he knows how to elevate till it is art. All is system, yet nothing is mechanics; the serious poet in Dante is not dull. And for that matter we may easily over-emphasize the symmetries we find. There also are incidental surprises—stories told at length, figures that go beyond our expectation in the splendor of their light, and wonderful meetings like those with Casella and Statius, not to speak of those with Virgil and Beatrice. The poem is as rich as the *Odyssey* in its recognition scenes, though each of them is briefer than Homer chose to be, and less occupied with extending a single line of narrative suspense.

But the system is not without its own beauty, nor does Dante permit us to forget it. The three stages of the journey are constantly recapitulated. "Down in the world endlessly bitter, and along the mount from whose fair summit my Lady's eyes uplifted me, and after, through the heaven from light to light"—so runs one sentence out of many whose ends are tied together, making a strong thread through the fabric. If Dante is not speaking such a sentence then Virgil is, explaining the traveler's presence to Cato or some doubtful spirit; or Beatrice is, pleased as she steadily is to remind Dante of the stages in his own life which correspond to these. These stages, of Hell and Purgatory and Heaven, receive an ever richer weight of allegory. They organize the poem, but the poem is organized about love, and so the three regions partake of love's geography, shining or lost in shadow in proportion to the distance they lie from that "good wherein the mind may find rest." In Hell there is no love and hence no rest; in Purgatory there is love that voluntary punishment will purify, and those who undergo the punishment are content with their pain; in Heaven, where there is no pain, activity itself is rest, the music of pure being.

The grammar of Dante's system is the grammar of sin. He

is so skilled in it that no composition employing its terms is beyond his powers. And here as usual he is enamored of a scheme. The punishment suits the crime. In Hell the avaricious and the prodigal, because they were so undiscerning of the true good to be desired, are now "too obscure for any recognition." The sullen carry "lazy smoke" in their hearts. The carnal are driven in total darkness by unceasing winds. The evil counsellors are invisible to one another, each wrapped in the flame of his own consciousness. In Purgatory the proud go willingly under immense burdens of stone, and the envious, who once had looked without joy on the happiness of others, are pleased to suffer sutures through the lids of their eyes so that they may not see. But there comes a turn in the *Divine Comedy*, a pivotal point after which punishment is not only endured but sought for, not only suffered but enjoyed. This point, characteristically, is midway through Purgatory, the central point of all. Henceforth we encounter spirits who because they were gluttonous on earth are eager for famine in the midst of plenty, and spirits who because they once were lustful cannot be kept now from flames that burn them.

The turn is at the right time, and so it is always with the changes that steal over the poem as colors, obedient to season, succeed one another in the foliage of a forest. The *Divine Comedy* is never the same in two adjacent cantos. Its three grand parts are of course different, for they visit the extremes of the moral universe; but less perceptible changes are incessantly taking place. The movement of the poem is through many progressions—simultaneous, since each is a function of every other, but clearly distinguishable by the memory which recalls them, once the end is reached that draws them together.

The movement of the *Divine Comedy* is from low to high, and this is the same thing as from dark to light. It is from slow to swift, which is the same thing again, though there is also a fourth form: from difficult to easy. As Dante ascends into

light the rate of his progress is multiplied so many fold that he scarcely knows he is changing place, or that activity is involved as he does so. Harmonious with these movements is the movement from remote to near, which in one of its aspects is a movement from past to present, from the biographies of men to the states of the soul in bliss. Persons give way to figures of light—circles and wheels—and there is a parallel progression from sullenness or silence to unlimited burst of generous song. Correlative with this progression is one from the expressible to the inexpressible, from the sensible to the abstract; which means that the poem grows less narrative and more lyric. For lovelessness and pain are being replaced by charity and joy. When charity and joy are absolute, all else is absolute: light is blinding, swiftiness comes home to rest, the soul on high is perfect in its ease, *there* has become *here*, eternity has expanded all experience until it is contained in one present moment, and joy that cannot be expressed soars into a silence antipodal to the sick one with which we started.

If these advances are in a straight line, as manifestly they are, that line has the mysterious properties of one that is infinite, for it is also a circle. Movement at first is contrariwise: Hell is always darker and more terrible, and love less evident. But that is because we are visiting the nethermost extreme. The uppermost extreme is straight ahead; when we emerge at the foot of Purgatory's mountain we are still going in the original direction, though now the gravity of the sins decreases rather than increases. The carnal sinners are encountered last, not first, and Paradise is not too far beyond them.

Thus the movement of the *Divine Comedy* has many epicycles of meaning; and by the same token there is a host of minor progressions tucked into folds of the great one. The beauty of Beatrice, if indeed that is a minor thing, grows by degrees which are proportionate to the light reflected in her face. The song of Matilda is more articulate as Dante approaches the stream beyond which she stands among the flowers. The clairvoyance

of the teachers—for their courtesy is best expressed by their power to anticipate the questions Dante will ask—moves to its natural climax in Beatrice, whose radiant smile, signifying her willingness to instruct him, accompanies at last these words:

I tell, not ask, that which thou fain wouldest  
hear; for I have seen it where every *where*  
and every *when* is focussed.

As for the light which Dante by some miracle always can increase, for in many a canto it seems that he has reached the very death of words in his struggle with the brilliance about him, and yet he has not—light grows as hope grows, and charity, and faith; and as, in the intellect and the will, activity replaces effort. Nor is it neutral with respect to these things. Itself is a great person, warm and joyful, sparkling in the eyes of saints who nevertheless are hidden in it as in their own gladness. Light conceals light, sphere within sphere, as the petals of the divine rose have other petals over which they curl, protecting some innermost scent, some most ineffable song.

The *Divine Comedy* is crowded with persons, even in Paradise where they are not corporeal. Dante cannot do without individuals. His thought is subtle, but it is not content with figments. In the only life that men can understand, the characters and deeds of other men are what they understand; these are the language in which truth is written. The poem, therefore, is among other things a roll-call of emperors and popes, merchants and soldiers, friars, priests, thieves, murderers, liars, lovers, and ladies good or bad. In every canto Dante has his interlocutors who by their curses, by their confessions, or by the beatitude they breathe distil the meaning from whatever place they occupy. Cacciaguida, the ancestor of Dante who in Paradise directed him to write what we are reading, told him why persons would be necessary in his poem:

Therefore have been displayed to thee, in  
these wheels, upon the mount, and in the  
dolorous vale, only souls known to fame;  
for the soul of him who heareth resteth not,  
nor fixeth faith by an example which hath  
its root unknown and hidden, nor other  
inconspicuous argument.

Cacciaguida meant real persons, with real names. So Dante's people are not invented; he takes them where he finds them, in his own experience or in the history of Florence, Italy, and the world. Without such verifiable individuals the argument will be "inconspicuous," and the truth without example. The result is sometimes deplored by those who call the *Divine Comedy* not only a clock and a chessboard but a gazetteer, a pedantical dictionary of biographies best forgotten. But Dante's people could be dispensed with only at the peril of losing his poetry, which if it is in any one thing is in the procession of persons he meets. Nor is it necessary to know of them all that he knew. Francesca lives chiefly here, and so does many another celebrated shade. Vanni Fucci, making his indecent and blasphemous gesture at God, is self-confessed. Brunetto Latini, who as he turns away from Dante seems "like one of those who run for the green cloth at Verona through the open field," and of those seems "he who gains, not loses," is immortalized by that tender irony. The noble judge Nino, eager in Purgatory to send messages to earth, could not be better known than by the words he speaks:

By that especial grace which thou owest to  
him who so hideth his first purpose  
that there is no ford to it,  
when thou art beyond the wide waters, tell  
my Giovanna that she pray for me there  
where the innocent are heard.  
I do not think her mother loves me more,  
since she hath changed her white wimples,  
which hapless she must long for once again.

By her right easily may be known how long  
the fire of love doth last in woman, if  
eye and touch do not oft rekindle it.

Nor is anything added to the beauty of this passage by our learning that the widow who married again was Beatrice of Este.

Nino's concern is partly with himself but it is more with those he has left living behind him. The concern of the infernal spirits was with their own reputations. Dante could always use the promise of more fame—even a worse fame—than they already had as he sought to extract their stories from them; some grabbed at the bait, some growled that they did not care, some merely asked that their enemies on earth be got even with through tales carried back. In Paradise the thoughts of those with whom Dante speaks are entirely generous; they ask of others, not of themselves, and if they desire fame, it is fame of them they love. Here is another progression which the reader's memory adds to a list already long.

The most interesting person in the poem, if it is permissible to except the one who is its Person, is Dante himself. He is no Narcissus; the poem is not a mirror he constructs so that he may contemplate himself. But he is a passionate man whose every utterance expresses him, and his qualities are of the deepest interest. His sin is pride, he tells Sapia in Purgatory. Not envy, though for one instance of that sin in his life he expects to have his sight taken from him.

Greater far is the fear wherewith my soul is  
suspended, of the torment below, for even  
now the burden down there weighs upon me.

He still remembers the proud spirits bent double beneath their slabs of stone. And this seems proper, for he is indeed a person proud even to harshness and arrogance. Far from underestimating himself as a poet, he ranks himself at once with the greatest

who have lived. The "lords of highest song" in Limbo, Homer and the rest, salute him when they see him, and make him one of their number, "so that I was a sixth amid such intelligences." Nor will he condescend to tell us what they spoke of among themselves:

Thus we went onwards to the light, speaking  
things which it is well to pass in silence,  
as it was well to speak there where I was.

So in Purgatory it is a song of his own that Dante asks Casella to sing. And if Dante is humble in the presence of Virgil and Statius, walking behind them as they discourse of poesy, he permits Guido Guinicelli, whom he has praised, to praise him in return by speaking of those poems "so deep and clear that Lethe cannot take them away, nor make them dim."

The wrath of which Dante is certainly capable is nowhere represented as sinful wrath, nor within the limits of the poem is he angry in his own person. But he is a perfect scholar in the passion. The angers of Virgil and the angel before Dis are accurately done, and so are the ignoble furies manifested by the fiends. Dante's own loathing of these fiends is expressed in the iciest terms:

Master, I should be glad to see him dipped  
in this swill ere we quit the lake.

A little after this, I saw the muddy people  
make such rending of him that even now I  
praise and thank God for it.

To be rude to him was courtesy.

The ice betrays what waters lie beneath, but itself is never broken.

His pity—for Francesca, for Brunetto, for Pier delle Vigne—is of such a sort that Virgil must rebuke it, as he does when Dante

weeps for the diviners: "Art thou, too, like the other fools? Here pity lives when it is altogether dead. Who more impious than he that sorrows at God's judgment?" So his desire for knowledge, so intense that it is painful to him, is something of which he represents himself as the victim, not the beneficiary. Only one pain is greater, "an anguished dearth of knowing more."

Dante like Milton carries with him a sense of being fallen on evil days. Florence too is fallen from its sober and chaste height. All cities are—Lucca, Pistoia, Siena, Pisa, Genoa, and Florence again—all are corrupt in manners and confused in government. There is no government, and hence no peace, in Italy.

Ah Italy, thou slave, hostel of woe, vessel  
without pilot in a mighty storm, no mis-  
tress of provinces, but a brothel! . . .  
And now in these thy living abide not without  
war, and one doth rend the other of those  
that one wall and one foss shuts in.  
Search, wretched one, around thy sea-coasts  
by the shores, and then gaze in thy bosom,  
if any part of thee enjoy peace. . . .  
For the cities of Italy are all full of tyrants,  
and every clown that comes to play the par-  
tisan becomes a Marcellus.

In such a world Dante is an exile, doomed to "make trial of how salt doth taste another's bread, and how hard the path to descend and mount upon another's stair."

Peace is as precious to Dante as it was to Virgil, whom here the pilgrim through eternity reminds of his fourth *Eclogue*. But Dante can mean by the "new world" of that eclogue more than its author meant. He can mean the Christian peace for which Virgil was perhaps only groping. His golden age lies ahead, but it will be nothing like the age of Augustus upon which Virgil pinned his pathetic faith. Dante well understands that the golden age of old was like the Garden of Eden in that both were



nurtured by gods who walked there in the cool of the evening. He does not make Virgil's mistake of supposing that the better time to come will be of such a sort. No better time will come at all until men on earth have government. These evil days are blamed by some on heaven, but the fault is here.

Clearly canst thou see that evil leadership  
is the cause which hath made the world sin-  
ful, and not nature that may be corrupted  
within you.

There is none to govern the earth, wherefore  
the human household so strayeth from the  
past.

Not original sin is the cause of present chaos, but sin so recent that Dante can name the sinners; and he does, and certain popes are among the lowest. Boniface VIII has degenerated upon the seat which itself does not degenerate; when Saint Peter denounces him, all heaven blushes the color of clouds at sunset. The monastic orders have deserted their vows, and priests are fat with the filth of gain.

Now the modern pastors must need be but-  
tressed on this side and on that, and  
have one to lead them on, so heavy are  
they, and one to hoist behind.

With their mantles they o'erspread their  
palfreys, so that two beasts travel be-  
neath one hide; O patience, that so much  
endureth!

So it is to themselves that men must look for the good world that government makes possible. Virgil looked to the gods, but they were lying gods, and Augustus was among them. That is why Virgil must remain in Limbo, the insubstantial underworld where all pagans, no matter what their human greatness, live sadly in eternal gloom. They have been put there, not for

punishment but in logic, by the God whose light they never saw. He is a God whose peace burns like a rose in each heart that knows and loves him. The peace of earth he leaves to the laws of men.

Dante thinks and feels this with the intensity that makes him everywhere unique. "Even now the recollection"—it is a frequent phrase with him, for things that happen to him are too real not to last. They all survive into some vast moment, some present moment, which is ideally the time of the poem. Scholars work out time-schemes for the *Divine Comedy*, but their effort is largely wasted; the poem happens all at once, and if it seems long, that is because not even the best mortal imagination knows how eternity is spent. When Dante does know, for the ultimate canto takes him to this knowledge, his imagination is eclipsed, his tongue is tied.

Meanwhile he feels to the human limit every phenomenon he encounters. The beams of love are not for him the sunshine of an idle day; he must learn to bear them, for they are too much at first, as Blake's little black boy was told by his mother. The journey always threatens to become impossible, Dante is never sure he can go on. Each turn of his experience shakes him to the root. No wonder he thinks at the beginning, as he follows Virgil through the brown air, that he must prepare himself to bear the war both of the journey and the pity." Even then he knows that to possess all understanding, to travel everywhere through truth, must be in a sense to die. The Word, unless we are stronger than we think we are, is a crushing weight. The strength of Dante is sufficient only because it is given him by his guides. They do not minimize the difficulty, but they protect him against despair. When in Purgatory he is smitten by the brilliance of an angel so that against his will he must turn his eyes away, Virgil comforts him by saying:

Soon will it be that to behold these things  
shall not be grievous to thee, but shall  
be a joy to thee, as great as nature has  
fitted thee to feel.

But nothing becomes easy except the path his feet fly over. Physical progress is at last a thing of which he ceases to be aware, but the beams of truth and love are by degrees more difficult to sustain. The hymn he hears in the Earthly Paradise he cannot report, because he did not "endure its melody outright." He is filled by joy in Paradise because for once—when he is talking with Cacciaguida—his mind can fill with gladness "and yet not be rent." But the divine music that sounds as he beholds the golden ladder of Jacob does not sound for him; it would shatter his ears, as at this stage Beatrice would shatter his eyes if she turned her full smile upon him. Later, when he has withstood the blinding vision of Christ's triumph, she can say to him:

Open thine eyes and look on what I am;  
thou hast seen things by which thou  
art made mighty to sustain my smile.

The effort to do this, however, is nothing to the effort he must put forth when the Infinite Worth is to be seen. At that moment, in fact, it would have been death to look away.

I hold that by the keenness of the living  
ray which I endured I had been lost,  
had mine eyes turned aside from it.

Therefore he could be bold, and was; and the poem ends.

But there has been no moment, in Hell, in Purgatory, or in Paradise, when Dante's gaze at things has not been of that intense sort which Giotto painted on the faces, and indeed in the postures, of his men and saints. "I drew near my Guide with my whole body," says Dante once in Hell. And in Purgatory, as he walks

beside the proud spirits, he is "all bent"—as they are—from the sympathy he feels. All that he is—and wears, for the folds of his robe are eloquent—expresses the fullness of his response to what he sees. It is not surprising, then, that we too see things we shall never forget, things delivered to us by the testimony of two unresting eyes.

As the lizard, beneath the mighty scourge  
of the canicular days, going from hedge  
to hedge, appears a flash of lightning,  
if it cross the way:  
so, coming towards the bowels of the other  
two, appeared a little reptile burning  
with rage, livid and black as pepper-  
corn.

Nothing in any part of the poem, or in any other poem, is so startling as that midget in the seventeenth division of Hell.

The drama of Dante's recognition scenes derives its intensity from a similar source—the poet's peculiar power to drape human figures with the telltale garments of desire. Most of the recognitions are of course by Dante himself, but there is one of which he is spectator, and because he is thus the third party he can make a picture of it such as Giotto would have made. Statius, asked by Virgil in Purgatory who he is, identifies himself as a Roman poet to whom the *Aeneid* had been nurse and mother, for without it he would have been nothing. His praise of it is so wonderful that Virgil turns to Dante "with a look that silently said 'Be silent.'" But with the best will in the world Dante cannot restrain a smile; which Statius sees, and this leads to Virgil's permitting that Dante declare the truth:

He who guideth mine eyes on high is that  
Virgil from whom thou drewest power to  
sing of men and gods.

And he has more to say, but Statius needs no more.

Already was he stooping to embrace my Teacher's  
feet; but he said: 'Brother, do not do so, for  
thou art a shade, and a shade thou seest.'  
And he, rising: 'Now canst thou comprehend the  
measure of the love which warms me toward thee,  
when I forget our nothingness.'

The three grand parts of the *Divine Comedy* are ordered in a relation which the careful reader never tires of contemplating. The thought that ordered them is an even greater poem than the one we read. The details of the poem we read are supreme in power, but the whole is greater than their sum. The ugliness of Hell, for instance, does not prevent its relation to the rest of Dante's world from being beautiful. The function of Hell is to be the visible, the grotesquely visible, place which it is. No other kind of evidence than the kind here presented to the sinners who once would not believe that Hell exists—and so were already in it while they lived—could convince them now. In this Hell they are convinced, for there could be no clearer proof of Grace than that they know they do not have it; they cannot deny that they long for "the sweet light" and "the beautiful stars"—not of Heaven, for of Heaven they feel only the far authority, but of the earth on which they wasted their lives. Their incapacity to long for any more than "the sweet world" and "the memory of men" is something of which they know God makes them conscious. The fact is beautiful, nor is it anything that can be described. Dante does not even state it. It is for us to understand. And when later on we do, the immense distance that separates us from Hell's hideous objects clothes them for us in a livid light which we can love because it shows to us still, no matter at what height we ride, the under side of truth. Nor are all the objects in Hell hideous. Francesca is not, and Odysseus—Ulysses now—is not. Ulysses is there because

neither fondness for my son, nor reverence  
for my aged father, nor the due love that  
should have cheered Penelope,  
could conquer in me the ardor that I had to  
gain experience of the world, and of hu-  
man vice and worth;  
I put forth on the deep open sea . . .

He put forth, driven by his insatiable curiosity, to visit even  
"the unpeopled world behind the Sun," urging on his comrades  
with words like those of Milton's Satan when he tempted Eve:

Consider your origin: ye were not formed  
to live like brutes, but to follow vir-  
tue and knowledge.

But a mountain appeared, dim with distance, and a tempest rose,  
and the ship's prow went down, "as pleased Another, till the sea  
was closed above us."

All of Dante's dead except those who cannot leave Hell enjoy  
the stars. The subterranean gloom of Homer's and Virgil's  
Hades, where even the most glorious spirits walked in a dusk  
like that of Dante's Limbo, is transcended as soon as the poet  
and his teacher issue into the "sweet hue of orient sapphire which  
was gathering on the clear forehead of the sky" at the approach  
to Purgatory. Now are visible "four stars never yet seen save  
by the first people"—the four cardinal virtues, lost in their  
purity by Adam and Eve. And there is the look of life again in  
"the sweet grass" and "the trembling of the sea." All, indeed,  
henceforth is life as Dante knows life. It would be new to  
Homer and Virgil. It is the upper side of truth, the eternity that  
Christianity recovered.

The souls in Purgatory are relatively free, but only relatively.  
The infernal wailing of those who have in eternity what they  
wanted in time recede before the singing of these who want what  
can still be had if they hasten to get it. They are spirits "whose

sufferings both justice and hope make less hard.” They too are in a fire, but it is one that refines them. They are learning how to lose remorse, to look upward and not downward. Virgil cannot take Dante all of the way through this mid-region of the world. He must return to “the woeful realm” whence an angel had brought him thus far for Dante’s comfort.

There dwell I with those who clad them not with  
the three holy virtues, and without offence  
knew the others and followed them all.

Virgil may not possess even the relative joy that Purgatory makes possible. He must disappear as the intellect disappears when truth comes in sight. Beatrice, who replaces him as Dante’s guide, is what Virgil could never be: “a light between truth and intellect.” She of the shining eyes is a transformed and rapt Athene, a divine person whose wisdom is the love her gaze reflects. Virgil’s speech of farewell is the speech of a great gentleman and scholar, but Beatrice is something greater yet. And the greatest thing is yet to come.

It comes in Paradise, where Dante’s poetry demands of us the exercise of all the reason and imagination we possess. This heaven is not a work of fancy; for Dante it is what it must be, not what it may be. It is built out of the hardest mental stuff, although the bliss it pictures is impalpable. Its beatitude is graded, but there is harmony among the degrees, and no spirit but finds peace in God’s will. In the politics of eternity, which Virgil never knew, peace is not made by man. It is made *for* him—if faith, hope, and love in him are perfect. The three holy virtues are tested in Dante by Saints Peter, James and John; the stars disappear in pure light which puts them out:

light intellectual full-charged with love,  
love of true good full-charged with glad-  
ness, gladness which transcendeth sweet-  
ness,

a light "in river form, tawny betwixt banks painted with marvellous spring"; Beatrice ascends to her circle among the saints; and now only Bernard and Mary remain as intercessors between the poet and the vision he has come so far to see. The vision is granted him in the ending canto, each tercet of which is itself a folded rose, a periodic sentence of the fullest and deepest rapture. All of them together move him with grave and steady ecstasy to the moment for which everything hitherto has been but preparation, the center toward which every line of the poem has been plunging. He is looking straight into the eternal light. He knows all things at once. The facts of life for him are found.

Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound  
by love in one volume, the scattered  
leaves of all the universe;  
substance and accidents and their relations,  
as though together fused, after such fashion  
that what I tell of is one simple flame. . . .  
But already my desire and will were rolled—even  
as a wheel that moveth equally—by the love  
that moves the sun and the other stars.