

The Narrative Spirituality of *Dante's Divine Comedy*

a hundred-day guided journal



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INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot once wrote that Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them – there is no third. What a division if Shakespeare dealt with this life and Dante with the life to come! That life to come, of course, is very much concerned with this one, and what we do here affects what follows. What we do here on earth is that to which we have become habituated. We carry the dispositions formed by such habits throughout our lives unless we, for one reason or another, are impelled by some force to change direction.

It is for this reason that Aristotle, whom Dante will call “the master of those who know” (Inf. IV, 131), explains in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, “It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference” (Book 2, Ch. 1). So, what kind of habits are good habits? What kind are vicious? What is the best way to live? Aristotle had limited answers to questions like these – but what great answers, regardless! – because he lived in a fourth-century B.C. Greece, a Greece that had not yet been brought the light of divine revelation. Aristotle’s understanding of vice could not include an understanding of sin because he did not know a personal God whom he could personally offend.

Dante Alighieri, however, living at the tail end of the high scholasticism of the Middle Ages, enjoyed the fullness of truth, who is the Person he recognized as Jesus Christ. Dante’s knowledge of the philosophy of the ancient world provided him with the fullness of reason, and his knowledge of this light of divine revelation provided him with the fullness of faith. He knew what God was asking him to do, and he did it, like the son in the Gospel of Matthew who said no to the Father’s will and went ahead and fulfilled it anyway.

I say this because when we meet Dante the pilgrim in the first canticle, or part, of the epic poem known as the *Comedy* (which we know as the *Divine Comedy*), he is lost, midway through his life's journey, in a Dark Wood of Error. While we the reader will not learn the exact nature of that wood until we meet Beatrice, Dante's first and only true love, in Canto 30 of the *Purgatorio*, we can know something about his situation right from the beginning.

And so here it begins – our journey with Dante the Poet and Pilgrim down through Hell's dark night, up the steep climb to redemption and across the expanse of the heavens into the mind of God. Because this is a journey for everyman, we the readers accompany Dante on his way. And because Dante, like us, does not know the way, he, we, need a guide who can meet us at our level – the level of reason, which is accessible to everyone.

To begin our journey, then, let's lay the groundwork that Dante laid. First, we know that for a story to be understood, it has to be told in a way that listeners may follow. So, it has to have a sequence of events. This sequence of events is called a plot, and a plot is always formed by a theme, something that gives the series of events some internal cohesion. Dante the Poet begins the tale by explaining that he, as Dante the Pilgrim, was lost in a Dark Wood of Error. He doesn't explain why except to say that he had lost the true way and that when he thinks he sees it in the form of the Mount of Joy, he is barred by three beasts from reaching it.

So far, so good. These events are the initial plotline of the story. A man, lost in a dark wood, driven back from the object of his desire (which is none other than the way out promised by the glimpse of a safe area) by three common beasts. We call this the literal, or historical, level at which the story is told, the level at which the events of what Dante the Pilgrim is experiencing are explained to us by the narrator, Dante the Poet.

Were the story simply told at this level, we would have a fine bedtime story for youngsters who do not seek anything more than what is explained in the "and what happened next?" mode of storytelling. That is, we would still have a good story with no meaning higher than itself. But Dante has three other levels on which he tells the story. The first is the allegorical, also known as the symbolic, level. It helps us through

metaphor. The second is the tropological, also known as the moral. It helps us understand how we should act or not act. The third is the anagogical, also known as God's ultimate plan for our salvation. Some other fancy terms related to the anagogical are the eschatological, which deals with what's going to happen during the end times (for instance, the general resurrection) and the soteriological, which deal with salvation and our return to God.

These levels – the literal, the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical are called the four-fold level of allegory. On the symbolic level, those beasts stand for something. On the moral level, they teach us what we ought to avoid. On the anagogical level, they are part of that from which God is saving us. One medieval Latin poem breaks down the difference among these four levels with the following mnemonic device quoted by the Pontifical Biblical Commission: *Littera gesta docet; quid credas allegoria; moralia quid agas; quid speras anagogia*, which translates, "The letter teaches deeds, Allegory teaches faith, Moralia teaches behavior, and Anagogy teaches destiny." John Ciardi, one of the translators of the *Divine Comedy*, whose translation I've returned to again and again, offers us a fifth level, namely as "*a progress of the soul*" (xiii, emphasis his).

In their broad strokes, these levels cover the whole of the Comedy and are best engaged when we tie their exploration into the concept of metaphor, which is the transference in meaning from one thing to another. Readers of Dante cannot help but stumble over them time and again as they make their way through the text, stanza by stanza.

Just as there are four levels of allegory, there are four degrees of metaphor described by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*. They are formed in relationship between overarching categories, called by the name of genus, and the parts of which each genus is comprised, called by the name of species. A genus, for instance, might be "animal," and a species of the genus "animal" is "man," who has a *specific* difference – or a difference in *species* – from other animals in that man is a rational animal while all other animals are non-rational animals.

Now that we know what a genus is and what a species is, we can understand now how meaning gets transferred. Aristotle provides an example of transference from genus to

species in saying, “Here *stands* my ship.” Riding at anchor, which is how a ship “stands,” is a species, then, of “standing,” just as a car left running but parked in front of a building is “standing.” There are many ways, then, of standing, and that makes “standing” a genus and all those ways of doing so species.

Likewise, Aristotle provides an example of transference from species to genus in saying “Indeed *ten thousand* noble things Odysseus did,” in that the number ten thousand, he explains, is a species of “many,” so that ten-thousand is used instead of many. We’ve seen just, then, how the whole can stand for the part and the part can stand for the whole.

Another way metaphor is expressed is that meaning can be transferred from one part of a genus to another part of a genus, and Aristotle calls this a species-to-species metaphor. He gives two sentences, the first is “drawing off his life with the bronze,” and the second is “severing with the tireless bronze.” Both drawing off and severing are used interchangeably as species of “removing.”

Finally, the best of all metaphors is that of analogy, where B is to A as D is to C. An example Aristotle provides is that “a cup is to Dionysus what a shield is to Ares,” so one might speak of Dionysus’s shield or Ares’ cup. The reason why analogy is the best of all metaphors is plain – it enables us to slide from one concept to another and regard common things in new light.

Let’s now combine these levels of allegory and metaphor across the expanse of the *Comedy*. We deal with the literal level of allegory as straight narrative when we notice that the *Divine Comedy* carries us through a series of short stories in the tradition of Orpheus’s braving the underworld to return his beloved Eurydice to the world of the living.

Beatrice Portinari, Dante’s first love and the woman for whom he wrote a series of love poems he called *La Vita Nuova*, or the New Life, describing the transformative impact of her presence on him, has died quite untimely at the young age of 24. She left, in doing so, an indelible mark on Dante’s soul even though he was married all along to Gemma Donati, to whom he had been betrothed at age 12, and had four kids by her.

The story goes, then, that Mary looks down from heaven and sees that Dante is floundering in life and decides he needs a sentimental journey through the cosmos to put him back on track. She sends, with the help of St. Lucia, someone that Dante would follow, namely, Beatrice, who commissions Virgil. Dante is greeted by Virgil, the author of the *Aeneid*, and led through the darkness of Hell, stopping every time the scenery changes to learn about the pit of woes.

Virgil then takes Dante up the mountain of Purgatory but cannot himself enter Heaven as he had died a pagan. As Beatrice appears, Dante is so overcome with joy that when he turns to Virgil and finds him gone he is overwhelmed and cries for his loss. Beatrice begins her encounter with Dante by scolding him for his grief over Virgil's loss and then for his unfaithfulness to her. Once she has prepared Dante, Beatrice then escorts him almost the entire distance to God before taking her place in the Empyrean and allowing St. Bernard de Clairvaux to guide him to Mary, who raises him with her eyes into the mind of God.

As far as the linear plotline is concerned, that's the story. There is a lot of metaphor in there, but on the literal, or historical, level, we do not notice it. Were we to never get beyond the narrative, in any case, we would still have a great bedtime tale.

Metaphor starts to settle into the story the moment we begin to read on the symbolic, or allegorical, level. Because it is not enough for us to be readers of the plotline alone, we must climb into the story and walk the length of these roads with Dante. Only by doing that can we develop anything resembling an empathy for the transformative experience that this is.

Largely, that transformative experience is the fulfillment of a promise that Dante made at the end of *La Vita Nuova*. He wrote, "So that, if it pleases Him by whom all things live, that my life lasts a few years, I hope to write of her what has never been written of any woman" (trans. A. S. Kline). *The Divine Comedy* is that of which he speaks, planned not only to map the cosmos as the last greatest theological poem of the medieval period, but also to honor one woman in the troubadour tradition of courtly love.

That Dante keeps his eye on God throughout the entire poem to the point of leaving Beatrice (his reason for beginning the journey in the first place) in the Empyrean and

continuing on his path to God is what keeps this poem from trumpeting in the Italian Renaissance. That task will be fulfilled by Petrarch within six years of Dante's death when in 1327 he meets Laura in Avignon.

Climbing into this story, then, we would begin to see the significance of everything with which and everyone with whom the poet interacts as meaningful in the pursuit of his vision. Our focusing on the symbolism is what helps us understand that the meaning inherent within the she-wolf, lion, and leopard that Dante encounters at the beginning of his journey is as important in that concrete realm of the *Inferno* as the meaning inherent within the mystical rose is in the more abstract realm of the *Paradiso*.

While we will be impressed with the sheer volume of all four kinds of metaphor in these hundred cantos, we will find that they help us focus deeply on the moral (or tropological) level of Dante's cosmology. Now, Aristotle did not at all like the idea of an 'episode,' or side-stories, which he thought took away from the cohesiveness of the text. The tropological level of allegory, however, focuses on the value of tangential narratives. That is, Dante never tells a side-story that doesn't have a strong connection to the primary meaning of the text.

Given that the economy of Dante's cosmological structure is such that he need only identify the sin and move on, we might think that that's enough. Dante lingers here and there to tell a story, though. One that he tells is of Dame Fortune (*Inferno*, VII, 68), whom Ciardi explains is incorporated into Dante's scheme of the universe, ranked among the angels, and given a "special office in the service of the Catholic God" (65). Like all the other mythological characters Dante describes in the *Comedy*, none would have any meaning for the Catholic worldview separated from the text.

The attention paid to the moral level lends itself to an understanding of the anagogical in the sense that the anagogue is a mystical sort of spiritual awakening aimed at helping us understand God's divine plan for our salvation. It is teleological, which involves the study of the telos, or end, of things, and, as a result, is fundamentally eschatological in character.

That Dante chose Virgil as a guide through the first two legs of his journey, for instance, is not just symbolic of the light of reason's only being able to carry one so far before faith must take its place, but it is also significant in Virgil's having written the *Aeneid*, which is the foundation myth of Rome. The text is important for demonstrating how divinity works within the temporal reality of human existence.

The city of Troy had to fall to the Greeks in order for Aeneas to leave his homeland and make possible the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus. It was Rome's proliferation that created the stability of the Mediterranean world sufficient for Christ's message to spread so rapidly through the known world. Understanding this telos, we see why Ulysses is among the evil counselors in the eighth circle of Hell for fraudulently deceiving the Trojans with the Wooden Horse and why Cassius and Brutus for their betrayal of the empire are being flayed by the gnashing of Satan's teeth as he rips them apart in his mouths.

Anyone who attacked God's chosen, even if the consequences ultimately turned out for the benefit of God's plan (for we also find Caiaphas crucified and trampled in the eighth circle for his hypocrisy and Judas Iscariot shredded in Satan's third mouth for his betrayal of Jesus), ultimately ends up in Hell. They don't have to, of course, since they could have always repented, but their character dictates it. In this sense, then, we interpret our lives in terms of the divine, in terms, that is, of eternity, and come to identify with soteriological imperatives, where God's ultimate plan for the salvation of mankind is absolute.

That the soul moves through its corporeal existence with a natural inclination to the good (based on the idea that we are all created in the image and likeness of God) is what Ciardi means by the progress of the soul towards God. Somewhere along the way, we may stumble in our pursuit of the Good and see lesser goods or even outright evils as worthy of our attention, and we may become so habituated to our pursuit of them that we lose our ability to see the true light for what it is. It is for this reason that we pray that God 'lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil' so that we might more fully live our

lives in accordance with his plan for our salvation, for our lives will be more full when they reflect and shine with God's light.

Inferno

The third canto of the Inferno begins with these words inscribed on the Gates of Hell:

THROUGH ME IS THE WAY INTO THE WOEFUL CITY;
THROUGH ME IS THE WAY TO THE ETERNAL
WOE; THROUGH ME IS THE WAY AMONG THE LOST FOLK.
JUSTICE MOVED MY HIGH MAKER;
MY MAKER WAS THE POWER OF GOD, THE SUPREME WISDOM,
AND THE PRIMAL LOVE. BEFORE ME
WERE NO THINGS CREATED SAVE THINGS ETERNAL,
AND ETERNAL I ABIDE; LEAVE EVERY HOPE,
O YE THAT ENTER.

Dante reaches this signpost after two false starts coming out of the Dark Wood with Virgil, to whom Dante had looked as his master and primary inspiration, who materializes in the air in front of him in the first canto. We learn from Virgil, as he's trying to strengthen Dante's resolve to follow the plan that has been outlined for him, that Beatrice, Dante's beloved on earth for whom he wrote his *La Vita Nuova*, commissioned Virgil to serve as Dante's Guide on the behest of Mary, the Mother of God herself.

So, this admonition to abandon all hope surely cannot be for Dante, though it is the rule under which Virgil himself is necessarily sustained given his residence in the first circle of hell among the virtuous pagans. No greater demonstration of this is needed than we'll see in Canto XXX of the Purgatorio as Virgil disappears the moment Beatrice appears, and the reader can only assume that he either had to walk all the way back down

Mount Purgatory and up 8 levels of hell or has been divinely redeposited into the first circle of hell with quite a story to tell about what lies beyond it.

Between now and then, while we still have Virgil with us, we have some room to explore the implications of the signpost, in particular what is meant by the words, “justice moved my high maker.” We have already seen how the vices are engaged in hell as extremes, to one end or the other, of the virtues to which they correspond. These vices are also cavities, or deficits of the good. Globally speaking, in fact, all of hell is shaped like one big cavity within a creation that is otherwise good, as God explained in Genesis over the course of his creating it.

If hell has an architect, then it also has an architecture, and this is laid out for us by Virgil at various points along the way. From a distance, we can see that hell has three parts, an upper hell, a middle hell, and a lower hell. Each of the three parts corresponds to one of the beasts that Dante encountered in the Dark Wood – upper hell corresponds to the incontinent she-wolf, middle hell to the violent lion, and lower hell to the fraudulent and treacherous leopard.

Dante explains these correspondences in two places – one is at the edge of the 8th circle when he hands Virgil his lay Franciscan cord, or belt, to summon Geryon, the monster of fraud, for the purpose of taxi-ing the two of them down to the 8th circle’s floor. He mentions that he’d thought about using it to snare the leopard back in the Dark Wood. The other is when he’s emerging onto the fifth cornice in upper Purgatory, which is the first part of the triptych of avarice, gluttony and lust, and rails against the she-wolf for undoing so many.

As we zero in on the three divisions, we find that the first division, the sins of the she-wolf of incontinence, begins in circle 2 and ends for all practical purposes in circle 5 though we have seen how they carry over into the disbelief of circle 6. The second division, the sins of the lion, encompass circle 7, which is divided into three rounds, the third of which is divided into three bands. The sins of the leopard of fraud begin in circle 8, which is divided into ten bolgia, or ditches, and end at the bottom of circle 9, which is divided into four rounds.

Aside from these major divisions, our poets pass through a vestibule of neutrals on their way into the first circle. These neutrals include the angels who took no sides in the war in heaven – lukewarm, they are unfit for both heaven and hell since they didn’t choose heaven and so do not belong there with those who did, and were they to go to hell, the fallen angels there might glory over them because they themselves had at least made a choice.

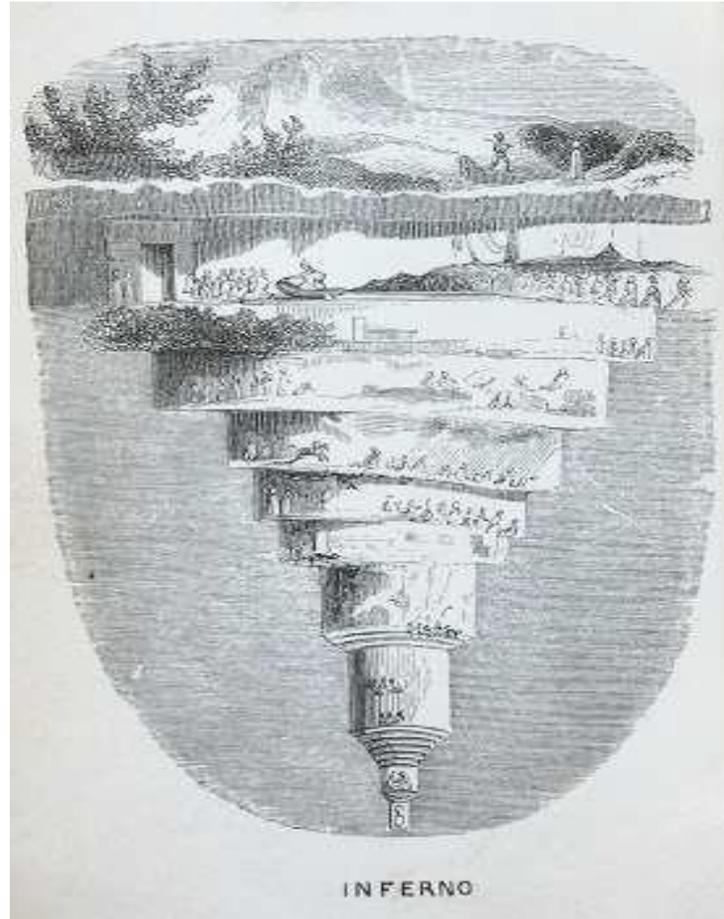
Included among these neutrals are human souls, too, who refused to take a stand, one of whom is Pope Celestine V, whose abdication from the papacy opened the door for Pope Boniface VIII, whose politics caused a great deal of grief within the Church and were directly responsible for Dante the Poet’s exile from his hometown of Florence. Our poets also pass through Limbo, the first circle of hell, within which we find the philosophers and poets of antiquity, including Aristotle. If circle 6 deals with disbelief, then circle 1 deals with lack of belief due to lack of access to written or oral forms of divine revelation.

So, this is our container – a silvan top resting on a funnel-shape crater inside of which are open fields that lead to a gated city with densely populated urban areas closer to the center and a frozen lake of ice at the very bottom. Robert Frost’s poem “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening,” had a line reminiscent of the setting I’ve just sketched out for you “between the wood and frozen lake, the darkest evening of the year.” An interesting thing can be seen, further, in the layout of these divisions. As the poets descend from the first circle to the ninth, they begin to experience around them the utter and complete breakdown of community.

Here is how it works:

The first circle of hell, which contains the virtuous pagans, is an Elysian fields with its own light – the light of human reason – illuminating it. The souls in Limbo have only one pain – the lack of hope in living in joyful communion with their Creator. They are doomed, it would appear, to remain forever outside the sweetness and light of his presence, and they can grow spiritually no more than they currently are. They are both hopeless, then, and stunted in their spiritual growth, but they exist in the kind of community that Plato has Socrates describe as he is talking about the afterlife in the *Phaedo*—an eternal

conversation among people who desire to know and express what they have come to know.



G. Borghi's "La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri," 1844.

The second circle of hell, which contains the lustful, is characterized by a tornado that whips the souls around whichever way it likes. The lovers are together with their beloved, but they take no joy in one another's presence. In fact, the presence of the other person is

a burden and part of the torment these souls experience. While all the souls here seem to be contained within a tornado of souls, further, there is no indication that their proximity to one another provides them with the same kind of community dialogue as we see in the relatively peaceful realm of the virtuous pagans. They are together but silent to one another and unable to provide one another with comfort.

The third circle of hell, which contains the gluttons, is a cold, slushy and muddy kind of farmland on the ground of which wallow fat souls over which the three-headed guard dog, Cerberus, slavers. The slush on which these souls feed seems to be their own excrement, and the souls themselves seem not to notice one another. The one to whom Dante speaks, a soul who in life was named Ciaccio, collapses after their conversation not to rise again until the general resurrection where the resumption of his physical body will only increase the pain he now experiences spiritually.

In these first three circles of hell, then, we've seen significant leaps in the way community is able to organize from full human engagement, to human disengagement, to human lack of engagement. No rubric was better designed by way of expressing distinct categories.

The fourth circle of hell, which contains the avaricious—both of the hoarding and wasting kind—regroups community in a manner that is disposition—rather than person-centered. That is, the souls work in two teams in an activity-oriented form of engagement, to roll boulders against one another and shout epithets of “Why do you hoard?” and “Why do you waste?” but their focus is so intent on screaming at the other group that they do not have any energy left over to engage even the members of their own team. Their features are so non-descript, further, that none can be recognized, and Dante doesn't even talk to them.

The fifth circle, which contains the wrathful and sullen, is a more intentional expression of what we noticed in the fourth circle—namely, a deliberate unwillingness to understand the motivations of the other. This is a stinking marsh called Styx over which the poets must cross on a boat piloted by Phlegyas, the guardian of the irascible souls who cling to the edge of the boat as it crosses over to Dis, hell's capital city. When one soul

raises himself up on the boat to speak with Dante, Dante recognizes him as Filippo Argenti, the person who took all of Dante's property in Florence after his exile. Dante, in an act of righteous indignation, rails against the soul and wishes him further torment, a desire that is fulfilled by the other souls who race in upon Argenti and rip him apart.

The sixth circle, which contains the heretics by the thousand within large graves dug into the ground, provides Dante with the occasion to notice that though they share a common pit, the souls are really too preoccupied with their own state of affairs to notice the affairs of one another. When Farinata is speaking to Dante about Florentine politics, for instance, another soul named Cavalcanti pops up and inquires of Dante about his son, Guido, who was one of Dante's best friends. Dante hesitates in responding just long enough for Guido to think his son is no longer alive – and without reason to stay further, Guido disappears. At this point, Farinata picks back up on his monologue as though there had been no interruption, completely unconcerned as he is for Cavalcanti's concerns. Dante leaves Farinata with a message letting him know that Guido is still alive, but the reader is left to wonder whether Farinata ever delivered it.

In these second three circles, we see both anger and indifference. Souls appearing to be physically engaged in the same activity are not engaged in one another. Souls gathered together because of their common anger and sullenness issues are attacking one another. Souls clustered together because of their stubborn refusal to let go of an idea they've closed their minds around refuse to acknowledge one another, except perhaps only tacitly as demonstrated by Farinata's stopping his monologue long enough for Cavalcanti to make his query.

The seventh circle, which contains the violent, follows this pattern, but here it moves from angry expression against others to cold narcissism that notices no others. In the first round are those who committed violence against neighbor, lashing out in their anger against other human persons. They are joined in the second round of this circle with those who committed violence against themselves, engaging in an act of injustice against those within their own society as they ripped the social fabric that makes community possible. Among the souls in this second round are those who wasted their substance before

committing suicide, destroying the wealth of their families in pursuit of their own gratification. In neither round are the souls shown engaging one another though each group is clustered together.

The third round of the seventh circle, which contains the violent against God, nature, and art, is worth exploring separately because of how the violent against nature are characterized. The souls there are divided into small groups that race around a desert plain apparently able to enjoy communion with one another in their small groups but unable to engage in dialogue with people outside their groups. No great matter if all the dialogue is sterile, but at least they get to engage in the human activity of conversation. Those who were violent against God, on the other hand, simply continue their blasphemies, and those who were violent against art simply sit and reflect on their own money chests.

The eighth circle, which contains those guilty of simple fraud, is divided into ten separate bolgia, or ditches, each of which demonstrates from the first bolgia to the last the same kind of community disintegration we saw above.

In the first bolgia, which contains those guilty of pandering and seduction, we find them marching in a double garland flogged by demons who represent their pangs of conscience. They are not talking to one another as they march around the bolgia.

In the second bolgia, which contains those guilty of flattery, we find the souls smeared in excrement, wallowing but not talking.

In the third bolgia, which contains those guilty of simony, Dante has his first conversation with the soul of Pope Nicholas III, who is stuck upside down into a baptismal font with his legs aflame and demonstrates that he is aware of those who will follow him into the font by asking, “Is that you, Boniface?” So, he’s talking to a passerby but for the purpose of receiving new information that seems to him to contradict the future he’s been able, like Farinata, to read.

In the fourth bolgia, which contains those guilty of sorcery, the souls are closed in together but not engaging one another in conversation. Dante, staring at them, actually feels pity for them, for which Virgil reproves him.

In the fifth bolgia, which contains those guilty of graft who are tossed by demons into a boiling pitch, we actually see some personality as one who is caught and pulled from the pitch devises a clever scheme by which to engage the demons. He speaks in terms of community – a whistle used beneath the pitch to alert the others that a demon is near – but his message is intended to trick the demons into letting him go. The best model of community shown to us here is by the demons themselves, who march in a troop and fall easily into in-fighting.

In the sixth bolgia, which contains those guilty of hypocrisy, we find two friars heavily laden in leaden robes who are able to speak to the poets, so it's possible they also get to talk to one another. As they walk, they trample upon the members of the Sanhedrin, crucified to the floor of hell.

In the seventh bolgia, which contains the thieves, we see community for the sake of theft in the form of the complete objectification of the human body as an object that may be stolen and used until it is stolen again.

In the eighth bolgia, which contains the evil counselors, we find that the closest form of community the souls, whose presence is manifest in flames, is the dual flame of Ulysses and Diomedes, so they presumably engage one another on some level.

In the ninth bolgia, which contains the schismatics, we see a garland of souls marching, cleft by the blade of a demon according to the degree by which they ripped the Church apart.

In the tenth bolgia, which contains the counterfeiters, we find that far from being communal, they attack one another both verbally and corporally.

The ninth circle is worse in terms of visible disintegration of community than the eighth not only because of how quickly it happens but because the sins are those of treachery where a person or persons had a reasonable assurance of safety in the hands of another and found themselves destroyed because of their trust.

In the first round, called Caina, named after Cain, for instance, we find those who committed treachery against kin. They are submerged in a lake of ice but can bend their

heads to shield their eyes from the icy wind being blown at them by Satan. They can talk to one another and know one another, but no one can trust anyone else down there.

In the second round, called Anenora, named after a Trojan prince who purportedly plotted with the Greeks to overthrow Troy, the souls are submerged to their necks, and two of them, co-conspirators, are locked so tightly together that the one behind, Count Ugolino, can gnaw on the brains of Archbishop Ruggieri in front of him as payback for a double-crossing.

In the third round, called Ptolomea, named after either Ptolemy of Jericho, who murdered his his father-in-law and two of his sons at a great feast he threw in their honor, or Ptolemy XII, Cleopatra's brother who murdered Pompey as a peace offering to Octavian Caesar after granting him refuge. These souls, their encased in ice up to their chins and noses, have no chance to lower their heads to prevent their tears from freezing closed their eyelids, and Dante describes that the bodies remain living on earth inhabited by demons while the souls descend here at the moment of their treachery.

In the fourth round, called Judecca, named after Judas Iscariot who betrayed Christ, the souls are trapped completely under the ice, in proximity to one another but completely unable to engage with anyone. Here, at the center of hell, we also find Satan, who betrayed his master, and who is chewing in his three mouths not only on the soul of Judas but also on the souls of Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Caesar.

The point of this disintegration of community that we see occur over the course of the canticle is that vice and sin corrode our ability to love others, and as that ability to authentically engage one another as persons created in the image and likeness of God is corroded, so, too, is our relationship with that very God who brought them and us into being.

Vice, in short, stunts our spiritual growth and by degrees whittles our capacity for relationship down to nothing. If we were truly designed for joyful communion with God, then we are working against our design whenever we act contrary to the virtues that enable it.

Purgatorio



G. Borghi's "La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri," 1844

When Dante and Virgil ascend from the pit of hell, they are met by Cato of Utica, the guardian of the shore of Purgatory and a suicide. Cato's suicide has not apparently affected his virtue, a point Dante makes clear from the onset. All four of stars in the sky above him, each of which represents one of the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude, shine brightly on his face. The reason has to do with Aristotle's argument that suicide is an act of injustice against society, not against the self since it's voluntary. Cato's society had already been destroyed by Caesar, so there was no society against which Cato could have acted unjustly.

The nature of the Purgatorio is one of growth in virtue for the purpose of the soul's readying itself for heaven. All the soul has to do is climb a mountain that is structured to provide such growth while the soul is in transit. This mountain, Mount Purgatory, is divided into three major parts, namely ante-Purgatory, Purgatory proper, and the Garden of Eden.

In ante-Purgatory, the souls must wait in a series of holding chambers for their time to ascend, and the amount of time they have to wait depends upon how long they made God wait for them. As Dante is staring his way to the top of the mountain from the bottom, Virgil points out that way is hard at first but gets easier the higher one climbs. The virtue Dante will build as he ascends Purgatory proper will facilitate his climb, and because all virtues harmonize, each newly acquired virtue will assist in collecting the others.

While Dante will make this climb in only a few days, it takes some as many as a thousand years or more because of the purification that is required and the size of the cavity of vice within itself that the soul is endeavoring to fill. Purgatory proper is itself encouraging, though, having a built-in structure of whips and reins to spur one on to virtue and rein one in from vice.

For the purposes of addressing these whips and reins in this lecture, we'll move directly to the Gates of Purgatory, through which Dante will have to pass with Virgil if he is to be granted admittance. Once at the gate, Dante is met by an angel confessor standing there and humbly asks permission to enter.

In response, the angel takes a sword and carves seven Ps, for Peccatas, or sin, into Dante's forehead, each P representing one of the seven deadly sins that Dante will purge on his way up the seven cornices of Purgatory. Each time Dante advances a ledge, he will lose one of the Ps—an angel's wings will wipe it clear from his forehead.

During our time in hell, Dante showed us how to recognize the vices, which we came to understand as extremes of their corresponding virtues. The seven ledges above us are divided into three parts based on these virtues. The first part includes the first three ledges of humility, caritas, and meekness, and the corresponding vices of pride, envy and wrath that are purified by them demonstrate a defect of love. The second part includes only one

ledge of zeal, and the corresponding vice of sloth demonstrates not enough love. The third part includes the last three ledges of liberality, abstinence, and chastity, and the corresponding vices of avarice, gluttony, and lust demonstrate an excess of love for the created thing.

Dante learns rather quickly how the ledges work. Each of the cornices up which he and Virgil climbs will be preceded with the whip (or a spur) concerning the associated virtue and followed by the rein (or brake) concerning the consequences of the vice.

Both the whip and the rein are presented to the souls on the mountain in a mode they can receive. On the first ledge, for instance, the whips represent themselves in the form of carved images, but on the second ledge, where everyone's eyes are sewn shut, they represent themselves in the form of radio waves. An explanation for why it is done this way is evident – it has to do with what St. Thomas said about the receiver only receiving in the mode of reception of the receiver. God, in short, knows how to communicate.

Whenever a soul steps on a ledge for the first time and begins to move on it, it triggers one of the whips. As the soul enters into the specific mode of purgation, it triggers the reins. Concerning the whips, each one begins with a scene from the life of Mary in the form of a beatitude that exemplifies the virtue and is followed by a scene from either the Old or New Testaments and from the secular world – in keeping with Dante's pattern of using both sacred and secular examples of virtue and vice.

So, how do they play out on each of the ledges? Let's follow Dante up the Mountain:

Pride/Humility:

In the first whip on the first ledge of humility, Dante sees a panel carving of the Annunciation and actually hears the proclamation, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." This is the two-part statement from St. Gabriel and from Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, that forms out of scripture the beginning of the Hail Mary prayer. The angel both greets Mary

and announces the presence of Christ; it is to this angel that she gives her fiat – the ultimate act of humility.

Two panels follow. The first is of King David's nude and uninhibited dancing before the Ark of the Covenant following its arrival in Jerusalem. The second is a story from the life of the Good Roman Emperor Trajan who stopped a war train in order to secure justice for a widow.

Given these scenes, we can work out, like St. Thomas did in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the nature of humility as “consisting in the keeping of oneself within one's own bounds, not reaching out to things above one, but submitting to one's superior” (Book IV, Ch. 55). The whip of pride shows us the ideal of humility when it demonstrates this form of submission. Our response to this is clear. We must submit to the authority that is higher than we are, and that calls for an active response to divine revelation, which is the definition of faith.

After meeting the souls undergoing their penance by being weighted down with huge boulders they have to drag around the cornice, or ledge, Dante notices that carved into the pavement are images, like photographs, of the dangers of excessive pride. This is the rein of pride, and it is telling that the scenes would be etched upon the ground since the souls here, laboring under the weight of the boulders, can no longer look up.

Virgil points out thirteen scenes of the consequences of hubris, or excessive pride, the first being Lucifer's fall from heaven, the next Briareus' lightning-struck body. Another is Nimrod after God confounds him and Arachne, turned half-way into a spider for losing a challenge to Minerva. Yes, the Greek mythology remains with us because all of it is a morality tale. The slaughtered remnants of Holofernes and the ashes of Troy bring up the final panels, and it is over these that the proud creep, bearing their weight so they might study the scenes as they clamber over them.

Since they can no longer see the whip of Pride, we have the sense that the whip merely induces the souls to accept their penance while it is the futility of resistance demonstrated in the rein that completes it.

Envy/Caritas:

On the second ledge of caritas, the poets come upon the whip designed to spur souls on their way to purification; this whip isn't visual but acoustic. The reason for this is that the penitents themselves are all blind. John Ciardi's translation describes the scene: "each soul [with] its eyelids pierced and sewn with iron wires, as men sew new-caught falcons, sealing their eyes to make them settle down." The radio voices, then, are necessary as the eyes would be unable to scan the scenes the sounds depict.

Our first whip, as will become the pattern, is a scene from the life of Mary, who says at the wedding at Cana, "We have no wine!" thinking only of the happiness of the guests rather than envying them anything that is theirs. This is the first lesson in love, and Christ's response to this act of love turns out to be his first recorded miracle.

Orestes is next, and Ciardi tells the story that Pylades, having heard of Orestes' sentence to death, went and stood in his place so that Orestes would live though Pylades himself would die. Orestes shows up and, seeing what his friend is about to do for him, announces his own identity, whereupon both friends argue "I am Orestes," each trying to save the other. The final whip is the cry, "Love your enemies." "Love," Virgil explains, "is the lash that scourges."

When Dante and Virgil come upon the rein of envy, they hear two voices cry out, "All men are my destroyers" and "I am Aglauros who was turned to stone." The first is from Cain, who slaughtered Abel out of envy that Abel's gift was the more acceptable to God. The second is from Aglauros who envied her sister Herce's luck in being able to sleep with the god Mercury. In spite of the bribe Mercury gave her to arrange the tryst, Aglauros turned him away when he arrived for his appointment. Mercury's response was to turn Aglauros into stone.

Upon the dissipation of the second voice, Virgil explains to Dante what it was and pronounces a judgment on all mankind—that we can see heaven all around us but we still "gulp the Hellbait hook and all and the Old Adversary reels [us] in." Why do we engage in mortal sin? Well, it's easy, we're our own worst enemies.

Cain's killing Abel and Aglauros' betraying her sister, if we reflect on the circumstances of how the tryst was arranged, are acts that were both done out of envy. That's how envy operates, pitting brother against brother and sister against sister and all the various permutations of relationships up and down the generational charts.

Wrath/Meekness:

Reaching the third ledge of meekness, the poets are instantly assailed by a vision of the whip of wrath. Dante's entered a cinema with a huge movie screen playing out three scenes in front of him. The first is from the life of Mary, who asks her son when she finds him in the temple why he would treat his parents so in running away from them.

This vision gives way to another, that of Pisistratus's wife telling him to avenge his daughter on the man who embraced her out of love, and his response is a sweet forbearance: "What shall we do to those that wish us harm if we take vengeance upon those that love us?"

This gives way to a third and final scene, the stoning of St. Stephen, who appeals to God to forgive his murderers.

At the end of these visions, Virgil notes that Dante has been lagging along the path and encourages him to step up his stride, whereupon both look again straight ahead and find themselves swallowed up in black smoke.

Upon leaving the cloud, the poets are instantly assailed by the next rein, three scenes which play within Dante in holographic projection. "A vision grew within me," Dante writes, "and my imagination was so shut into itself that what I saw revealed could never have come to me from without."

The first vision is of Procne, who killed her own son in wrath. The second is of Haman, who convinced King Ahasuerus to kill all the Jews in Persia beginning with Mordecai. Queen Esther, Ahasuerus's wife, saved them, and Ahasuerus crucifies Haman instead. The final scene is of Amata, who kills herself out of wrath when she believes that Turnus is dead and that her daughter Lavinia is going to marry Aeneas instead.

Sloth/Zeal:

On ascending to the ledge of zeal, which is the central ledge on the mountain, Dante hears the first whip shouted from a band of running souls who don't have time to stop and talk. The exclamation is from the life of Mary, who ran to the hills to visit Elizabeth after the Annunciation. The second exclamation is from the life of Caesar, who quickly consolidated his hold on Spain following his conquest of southern Gaul.

The band of runners is moving fast, and we find a cause for their speed in that the rein of sloth, in the form of two final runners, seems to be chasing them. A runner, bringing up the tail, cries out, "They died before the Jordan saw its heirs, those people for whom the Red Sea's waters stood aside." The second cries out, "Those who found it too laborious to go the whole way with Anchises' son cut from their own lives all that was most glorious." One is a biblical reference to the Exodus from Egypt, and the other a pagan reference to Aeneas, from whose progeny sprang the Roman Empire.

Avarice/Liberality:

On ascending to the ledge of liberality, Dante understands that he has only the sins of the she-wolf yet to purge, and it is on this he is reflecting when he hears the cry, "Blessed Mary! How poor you were is testified to all men by the stable in which you laid your sacred burden down." The first whip complete, the second comes immediately after, a pagan example about the Consul Fabricius who chose poverty over dishonorable wealth and died so poor that the state had to bury him. The third concerns St. Nicholas's providing a dowry for three young girls who would otherwise have gone into the brothel.

Here, Dante finds the source of the whip in the person of Hugh Capet who responds to Dante's question about his seeming to be the whip-bearer by stating that everyone is speaking these whips but that he was simply the loudest at the time Dante was within earshot.

If we contrast this group effort with the ledge below where the majority of the penitents merely received the whip from some and the rein from others, we find another layer of community cohesion in progress—something that’s been building since the first ledge.

Capet then explains the relationship between the whip and the rein of avarice. During the light of day, the penitents cry the whip, but when the sun sets and through the night, they cry the rein. He then relates the seven reins, which are all of the hoarding rather than of the prodigal type: Pygmalion’s self-destruction in pursuit of gold, Midas’s despair at having his wish gratified, Achan’s theft from Joshua, of Sapphira’s and her husband’s blame in stealing from the early Church, Heliodorus’ and Polymnestor’s crimes, and Crassus’ reputation as a money-grabber, causing the Parthian king to defile his disembodied head by pouring molten gold into its mouth.

Gluttony/Abstinence:

On ascending to the ledge of abstinence, the poets come upon a great tree bearing delectable fruit. It’s an offshoot of the Tree of Good and Evil that will be found in the Garden. Its branches are so high that no one can climb it. From its center, it cries the whips.

The first whip, of course, comes from Mary, and it’s the second whip we’ve seen that is drawn from the wedding at Cana, the first being on the ledge of envy where she cries out, “They have no wine!” Here, the tree says, “Mary thought more of what was due the joy and honor of the wedding feast than of her mouth, which still speaks prayers for you.” This image from the life of Mary follows a commandment, “You shall not eat of the fruit!” which is appropriate here considering the nature of the tree.

The tree continues with four more whips: the matrons of ancient Rome who did not drink wine; Daniel’s determination not to defile himself with the king’s wine and meat; the natural state of man in which he ate as hunger directed him and not in the excess that

came with refinement of the palate, gourmet meals, and fermented drinks; and, finally, John the Baptist's diet of honey and locusts.

Three of these whips deal with the drinking of wine, and the corollary to Mary's whip from the second ledge is that the guests at the marriage feast had no wine and needed some. The meaning here, though, is plain. It's not eating and drinking that get us into trouble, but doing so out of all moderation, which leads not only to gluttony but also to drunkenness, which is part of this vice.

Shouting the rein of gluttony is a second tree, an offshoot of the tree of knowledge, which cries out its denunciation of Eve's act, for her gluttony "lost God to all mankind until the coming of Christ." Next is the image of the slaughter of the centaurs by Theseus, for they had become so drunk at a wedding feast that they tried to make off with the bride. The final rein is the verbal image of Gideon's selection of the men who could defeat the Midianites by watching how they slaked their thirst on the banks of a river.

Lust/Chastity:

Ascending to the final ledge of chastity, the poets hear the whip of lust from souls within a wall of flame so hot that Dante would feel safer swallowing molten glass. The first whip recalls the holy chastity in Mary's response to the angel, "I know not man." Then, the natural chastity in Diana's refusal to allow one of her handmaidens smitten by lust and involved in an inappropriate relationship with Jove to remain in her presence. Praise then flows from these penitents to "husbands and wives who were chaste as virtue and marriage vows require," so that even husband and wife, as is explained in the Book of Tobit, should not look upon one another as objects when enjoying one another in the sanctified, connubial act.

This wall of flame within which the lustful burn out their final passions contains two groups, one heterosexual and the other homosexual. It is the homosexuals who cry out the rein. Sodom and Gomorrah is the first cry, and the second is "Pasiphae enters the cow to call the young bull to her lechery," recounting the Greek myth of the conception of the

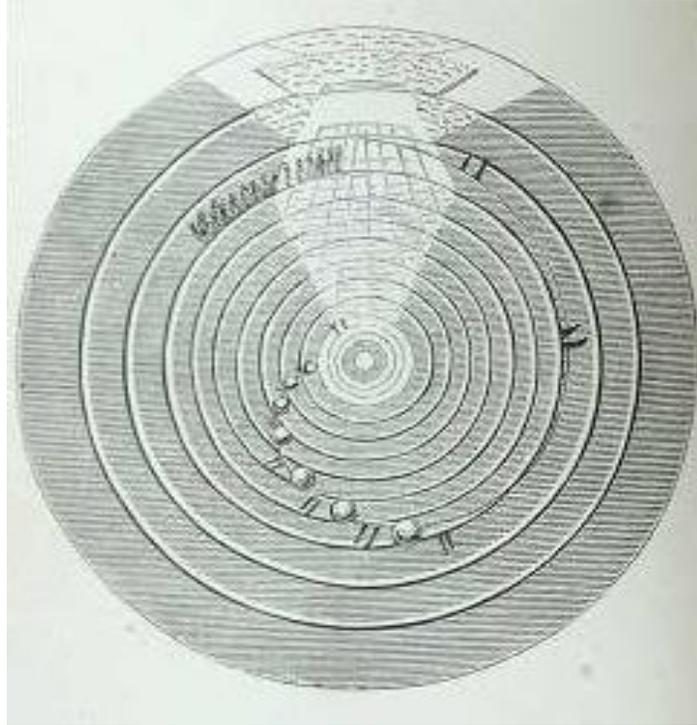
Minotaur whom we met guarding the violent in hell. Note that both reins identify disordered passions, but the same disordered passions could be attributed to heterosexuals who engage in acts intended to use others as objects rather than to join appropriately with them in the fullness of love.

This journey through these whips and reins has provided us with a sense of the structure of Mount Purgatory, that it is designed as a purification experience, something that undoubtedly provides some measure of pain related to letting go of our vices. If we recall what Aristotle wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that all appetite is pain, we might consider that it's more painful to hold onto those vices than it is to let them go. In that light, Purgatory involves the release of pain more than the imposition of it, but since letting go of our vices is hard to do, we necessarily experience it as pain, albeit an ultimately sweet and satisfying kind.

Paradiso

The Paradiso, the final canticle, or part, of the *Divine Comedy*, is divided into ten spheres, that appear to expand concentrically from the earth. The first sphere is the moon, and above it in orbit is Mercury, and so on up the orbital space of Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the Fixed Stars. Beyond the Fixed Stars is the Primum Mobile, the First Moved sphere, and beyond that is the Empyrean.

The placement of the spheres provides a framework for the cosmos, the purpose of which, like in hell and Purgatory, is to represent states of being in spatial terms. The ten spheres of heaven, then, are presented to us as levels of grace, which is a degree of measurement concerning God's participation in the activity of man based on each individual's capacity to receive it.



G. Borghi's "La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri," 1844

The way grace works is that everyone in heaven has a full cup of it, but not everyone's cups are the same size. Each person's relative capacity for grace is what makes his or her cup larger or smaller. As Dante and Beatrice move through the spheres, various souls manifest themselves within those spheres to speak with them.

The sphere in which a soul manifests him- or herself reveals the capacity each has, with the smallest amount of grace manifesting itself in the first sphere of the moon, and the greatest amount in the eighth sphere of the Fixed Stars.

Even so, everyone is equally in the presence of God, but some experience a greater sense of that presence than others because of the size of their cups. As we'd expect, we find that she who is fullest of grace in all of heaven is its queen, Mary.

So, how does it play out across the ten spheres? Let's take a short tour.

Sphere 1: The Moon

On the sixth cornice of Purgatory, Dante asked his friend, Forese Donati, a kinsman to his wife, Gemma, "But where now is Piccarda? Do you know?" and Forese said of his sister that she "sits crowned on High Olympus, rejoicing in eternal triumph there."

We meet her, among others, here in the lowest sphere of heaven, staring at Dante through the smooth surface of the moon.

Beatrice explains the contrapasso.

Souls who manifest themselves within this sphere do so because they have the least amount of grace working through them. The reason for that has to do with their inconstancy to holy vows. Their inability to keep their vows, that is, truncated their capacity for grace.

Dante will wonder at this sense of justice when he learns from Piccarda at the end of the canto that she and the Empress Constance, who appears next to her, were ripped against their wills from the veils they assumed. That is, they did not choose to break their vows; rather, they acquiesced to an act of violence against them.

Curious about how heaven works structurally, Dante asks Piccarda about her relative state of bliss and whether she can be happy in so lowly a place. Piccarda answers that the power of love, which is their bliss, calms all their will.

"What we desire, we have," she says. "There is no other thirst than this." The explanation is that were these souls to wish for more, then their wish would be in discord with the high will of God.

Dante gets it immediately. It doesn't matter where one is placed in heaven: all are equally in the presence of God. Even if all vary in their capacity to enjoy their state of bliss to the same degree, they all enjoy it perfectly.

So, how can Piccarda's and the Empress Constance's vows work against them if they were forced by violence to marry? The vow, Beatrice explains, has two parts, the first concerning *the matter* and the second concerning the *manner*.

The manner of the vow cannot be set aside: one must fulfill it. But the *matter* that is fulfilled can be negotiable in the sense that a man who pledges a certain amount to charity each year and loses all his money may fulfill the vow through labor, and if too infirm to work, through prayer.

Such changes in matter are circumstantial, but they cannot be arbitrary, for the nature of the vow is that man freely gives his free will back to God, so it's no longer his own will but God's will that is now working within him. That's what is meant by a supernatural covenant.

Sphere 2: Mercury

Beatrice is transfigured by the arrival in Mercury, the second sphere of heaven, and Dante hasn't yet realized it but he's also undergoing change.

In this sphere, he meets Justinian, who became the emperor of Rome in 527 and wrote the great law code that bears his name.

Having identified himself, Justinian is free to explain his work in developing good government, ending the canto with an identification of others within his sphere and the nature of the sphere, embellished as it is "with the light of those good spirits who were zealous in order to win honor and renown."

The pursuit of the good for the sake of personal glory is a good reason, but it is the least of all good reasons. This is because one can just as easily pursue the good for the more noble purpose of increasing the glory of others or augmenting the glory of God.

All souls who manifest themselves in this sphere pursued the good as they understood it for the best of their community in the hopes of setting an example and being remembered by history.

Sphere 3: Venus

Venus is the last planet within reach of the earth's shadow, so it is also the last of the spheres where Dante will see human lineaments or anything at all resembling a human body.

For this reason, the first three spheres of the moon, Mercury and Venus are known as the anthropic spheres. Beyond the shadow of the earth, the souls Dante sees will appear as light alone.

Dante knows that he and Beatrice have reached the third heaven when he sees her grow more radiant, a fact that also bespeaks his growing capacity to receive that radiance.

Practically speaking, this means that Dante has been fast tracked into a spiritual growth plan that hasn't yet been shared with any of the souls who manifest themselves to him in heaven.

If it wasn't clear before, it should be now that he is being groomed for something unique to happen to him when he meets God face-to-face, and we won't find out what that is, exactly, until the very last canto.

Of course, this doesn't mean the other souls are not experiencing growth – we learn from Peter Damian in the seventh sphere that they are due to their being plugged directly into the source of light and life. It's just not happening as quickly for them as it is for Dante.

What causes spiritual growth? Nothing less than love. And we happen to find ourselves in a sphere devoted to lovers.

The first soul Dante meets is Charles Martel, who talks to him about how God's love emanates through man's design in that we are created in His image and likeness, and He is love.

After Charles Martel finishes speaking, the soul of Cunizza da Romano appears and recounts her fate. Cunizza had three husbands and, like the woman Christ met at the well, various lovers. So, why is she here and not in 2nd circle of hell?

The reason has to do with redirected passion: at some point in our idolatry, any one of us may suddenly realize that the created thing after which we're lusting presupposes a Creator who put it there in front of us.

Bam! Who is this Creator? What's my relationship to him?

In this, we find our hope, which is bound up in the idea that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. Cunizza most likely spent time on 7th cornice of Purgatory, just as Justinian likely spent time on the 1st cornice, but eventually all souls in grace make it to heaven.

Sphere 4: The Sun

Having sensed that he is in a new sphere through a demonstration of increased capacity, Dante takes note of the presence of others – some of whom are doctors of the Church - who have appeared as a garland.

The first soul to reveal himself to Dante and Beatrice is that of Thomas Aquinas, who introduces Dante to the other eleven souls who have descended with him. These other souls include Dominic, Gratian, Peter Lombard, Solomon, Dionysius the Areopagite, Paulus Orosius, Boethius, Isidore of Seville (whom we now know as the patron saint of the Internet), the Venerable Bede, Richard of St. Victor, and Siger of Brabant.

Bonaventure identifies himself and the other souls who are with him in that second garland. They include Illuminato and Augustine (two of St. Francis's early followers), Hugo of St. Victor, Peter Mangiadore, Peter of Spain, the prophet Nathan, John Chrystostom, Anselm, Donatus, Rabanus, and Joachim of Fiore.

To demonstrate the harmony of heaven's gift of both mendicant orders, Dante has Thomas, a Dominican, praise the life of Francis and will later have Bonaventure, a Franciscan who appears in a second garland, praise the life of Dominic. The two, in addition, lament the degeneration of their own orders.

We can see what's happening over the course of these spheres is a real growth in community, a demonstration that the greater capacity we have for loving God with all our

hearts, minds, souls and strength, the greater capacity we have for communion with others.

Sphere 5: Mars

Dante notices a third ring of light appear in circumference around the first two and, blinded but recovering his sight, he gradually realizes he's risen to the fifth sphere.

Within this fifth sphere, the souls of the warriors of God manifest themselves. When Dante offers God his soul as a holocaust for this new bliss, he receives a sign in the form of a cross that his prayer is has been heard.

The souls of the great cross are engaged in song and prayer at the moment they reveal themselves to Dante but suddenly they all stop singing. Every bit of attention is focused on the person who has arrived in heaven still in his body and with divine revelation as his guide.

One soul immediately descends to the foot of the cross and, after adjusting his speech to Dante's level, identifies himself as Cacciaguida, Dante's great-great-grandfather who died a martyr's death while on Crusade.

Not only does Cacciaguida announce Dante's own salvation but also resolves the riddle for him of his future exile, about which he'd learned while in hell. The purpose for his exile will be to provide him with the leisure time to write the *Divine Comedy*. The *Comedy* will outlive all present animosity and bring Dante a great deal of earthly fame that will ultimately be for the greater glory of God.

Cacciaguida explains the details of the exile, and from his words, we learn the purpose for everything that has happened or will happen to Dante, not only his exile but his present journey through the afterlife.

Dante had to see everything and experience a direct vision of God for the purpose of proclaiming it to men in the clearest manner possible using examples that his readers could understand.

Sphere 6: Jupiter

Dante realizes when he again sees Beatrice transfigure that they're on the move to the next sphere. "With such serenity," he writes, "she surpassed the vision of every other accustomed beauty in which she had shone, including even the last."

It's important to note, if we haven't noticed it until this point, that it really isn't Beatrice who's changing, for as divine revelation, she's already perfect in every way and any change from perfection would include within it some defect.

It's Dante who's changing in his capacity to see her in her fullness, and as the two get closer to God's physical location in heaven, she's able to reveal herself more fully to him. In short, when Beatrice is shown to change, what's happening to Dante is that his cup of grace is getting larger.

The souls Dante meets in this sphere manifest themselves in the form of a modern day billboard spread out across space. Their lights appear to Dante in the form of words: "Diligite Iustitiam. Qui Iudicatis Terram."—"Love Righteousness, ye that are judges of the earth." Here, we are in the sphere of the wise and just.

The final "m" in Terram comes alive and takes flight around Dante in the form of an eagle. The form first demonstrates its corporate nature when all souls speak as one. It then demonstrates its nature as a composite of unique individuals in each soul's singing as a choir in its own voice. It follows its song by drawing Dante's attention to its eye and to the souls that comprise it.

The soul who makes up the pupil is the psalmist, King David. The soul next to him is the Emperor Trajan. Also here are Hezekiah and the Emperor Constantine. William II, King of the Two Sicilies, is here, and shines more brightly than do others, demonstrating variance in bliss even within the spheres themselves. Finally, we find Ripheus, who died a pagan Trojan a thousand years before Christ.

The presence of Trajan and Ripheus is a point of consternation for Dante because they were both pagans. According to what Dante has come to learn so far, they should be in

Limbo. But Trajan was resurrected by Pope Gregory and baptized, and Ripheus was given a direct vision of Christ that he accepted.

The takeaway for us is to follow the advice St. Thomas gave to Dante back in the 4th sphere – namely, never jump to conclusions. God’s smarter than we are.

Sphere 7: Saturn

When Dante and Beatrice ascend to the seventh heaven, the sphere of Saturn, in which the contemplatives manifest themselves, Beatrice tells Dante that she will not smile. Her reason is that if she were to do so before Dante’s physical body has adjusted itself, he would be turned to ash just as Semele had been “when she saw Jupiter in his full Godhead.”

Dante looks from Beatrice to the heaven that unfolds before him and finds a golden ladder, like that described by Jacob in Genesis 28:12, on which ascend the souls of the blessed contemplatives, those who devoted their lives to prayer in the way Martha’s sister did when Christ told Martha that Mary had chosen the better part.

At this point, Peter Damian—a Doctor of the Church, a Benedictine monk, and Cardinal of Ostia—descends to a rung of the ladder nearest Dante and answers his questions as to why there is no heavenly choir singing in this sphere.

The short answer is the same as that given by Beatrice as to why she doesn’t smile: the sound, until Dante’s ready for it, would consume him. Peter Damian adds that it is he who addresses Dante rather than anyone else in that sphere because he is prompted to do so by the power of the love of God whose reasons are too deep for even him to plumb.

Dante is next approached by St. Benedict who identifies his own origins, the charism of the souls within Saturn (they are all contemplatives), and the ladder as the one Jacob saw in a vision.

At this instant, St. Benedict and all his company spin away on high, and Dante and Beatrice pursue them up the ladder to the eighth sphere of the fixed stars.

Once past this ladder, we're going to notice something we should have noticed when Dante took flight from earth. Back then in the first cantos of the *Paradiso*, we had a sense that we're shooting forward, toward God.

But just as Dante was discombobulated on finding Virgil turned around once past Satan's shanks so that he thought they were heading back into hell, Dante's about to once again become disoriented as he realizes he's not shooting toward God but is, in fact, being drawn back into God.

The distinction is subtle but so was what he experienced at the earth's center, and it will make a difference for us readers as we enter the last third of the cantic.

Sphere 8: The Fixed Stars

Entering fully into the eighth sphere of the fixed stars, Dante sees "above a thousand thousand lights one Sun that lit them all" through which he sees Christ himself revealed. Though this vision overpowers Dante, he finds that it also strengthens him considerably so that he is now able to gaze upon Beatrice's smile of ecstasy without being consumed into ashes.

With this new strength, twice doubled upon itself, Dante is able to look back at Christ and notices that Mary and the Apostles are with him. At this, Christ ascends on high, withdrawing in order for Dante's eyes not yet fully accustomed to his glory to see these other persons who had arrived with him.

No sooner does Christ depart than does Dante perceive the next brightest ray among the gathered host. She is Mary, ever Virgin, the Mother of Christ and the Queen of Heaven. She's attended not only by all the apostles but also by her chaperone, the Archangel Gabriel, who descends to where she is and circles around her, beckoning her to come back to the Empyrean and rejoin her Son.

She follows Gabriel, and Dante's mortal eyes cannot follow her. He yearns upward in the direction she has flown. Remaining below are the apostles, singing the *Regina Coeli*. Dante focuses on one of them rather ardently: St. Peter himself.

St. Peter represents the theological virtue of faith and begins at Beatrice's request to examine Dante on his faith. Pleased as can be with Dante's examination, St. Peter dances three times around him.

St. James represents the theological virtue of hope and offers to strengthen Dante with his radiance and with the chance for Dante to articulate his understanding of Hope.

St. John represents the theological virtue of love and examines Dante on the nature of caritas, which he passes as easily as his examinations concerning the other two virtues. At this point, Adam, the first man, arrives on the scene and answers questions that Dante puts to him concerning his life and the Fall.

Sphere 9: The Primum Mobile

Dante and Beatrice enter the ninth heaven, the primum mobile, the first moved sphere, which is so uniform that Dante loses his reference point as to where he is in space and time. We're about to realize, further, that we're not really in a small space.

We've had the simultaneous sense this whole journey from the earth that, on the one hand, we're moving through the ripples of a pond toward a center point within which is contained the source of all the ripples, and, on the other, that we're moving outward from a center point into spheres that surround the earth.

So, we have two center points, one is anthropocentric and the other is theocentric. The trick to visualizing this is to understand that man is not the center of his own being but finds that center in God who is the all-containing source of being.

What we're looking at is a demonstration of centripetal force, a pulsing outward, to which we respond with centrifugal force, a returning inward. As St. Augustine explained, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Once we rest our center within God's center, we will find true rest.

Sphere 10: The Empyrean will be the subject of a close narrative reading in the final lecture. The short description for now is that it contains all souls equidistant from the mind of God.

And with that brief introduction and narrative map, we are ready to begin!