



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual
Tradition

Mission Integration & Ministry

Fall 2010

Dante, Existential Hero

Joseph L. Nagy
Sacred Heart University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/mission_seminar



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nagy, Joseph L., "Dante, Existential Hero" (2010). *Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*. 11.

https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/mission_seminar/11

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Mission Integration & Ministry at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact santoro-dillond@sacredheart.edu.

Abstract: Dante, Existentialist Hero

"Whoever battles monsters should take care not to become a monster too, for if you stare long enough into the Abyss, the Abyss stares back into you." - Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, "Fourth Part: Maxims and Interludes," section 146

Love, loss, longing, and regret – here is the ground zero of the human heart. Poets and philosophers have long sensed that we are haunted by a deep, existential dread that we are somehow incomplete. Add to that catalogue of passions one more: hope. It lifts us up and out of ourselves. We seek transcendence, a connection with the other who will be our salvation. It is the source of much that is worthwhile in religion, philosophy, psychology, and literature. And for Dante Alighieri, the early-14th century Italian poet, the "other" was Beatrice, the great unrequited love of his life.

Beatrice gave him a New Life, he tells us in *Vita Nuova*, the major prose-poem of his youth. When she died in 1290 at the age of 25, the shock was so profound that it haunted him for the remainder of his life. In 1302 Dante was banished from his beloved Florence when his political party, the Whites, lost a power struggle with the rival Blacks. Dante died in exile nineteen years later, at age 56 (Hollander, "Introduction" (xxiii-xxiv). In his wanderings, he once more turned to Beatrice – this time as allegory – to create in the last decade of his life what is universally recognized as one of the greatest narrative poems in any language, the *Comedy*.

So much has been written about the *Comedy* in the seven centuries since its creation that it is hard to imagine that there is something new to add. But like all great art, it harbors a mystery. By what magic did Dante create this wonder? Where in the labyrinth of the human soul did he find the inspiration to synthesize classical Greek and Roman philosophy and literature with scholastic theology to create a work that has often been described as the equivalent of a medieval cathedral?

We come back to ground zero. We come back to Beatrice – "the one who blesses" (Singleton, "An Essay" 119) – whom we know only from Dante's account in *Vita Nuova*, the major prose-poem of his youth. Through his encounters with Beatrice, Dante underwent a profound, soul-wrenching conversion, first described in *Vita Nuova*, and later allegorized in the *Comedy*. He discovered the transformative power of love. He suffered his way to the knowledge that the beloved is always tantalizingly beyond our reach and ultimately unfathomable, but in the reaching, we save our soul. He learned that the love of one person for another is but a reflection of the Divine. In loving another, Dante teaches us, we touch the face of God.

The *Comedy* was the last act of Dante's life. It was a final, heroic attempt to resolve a spiritual crisis. Lost in a dark wood of longing and loss and exile, a stranger in a strange land, he was an Odysseus on a journey of consciousness. In his epic struggle to transform Beatrice of Florence to Beatrice the Divine, Dante followed in the footsteps of St. Augustine, whose spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, has earned a place as one of the earliest existential sources (Barrett 95). If we strip away the academic preoccupation with Dante's medieval scholasticism, we may come to see him as a pioneer in man's search for meaning.

Dante, Existential Hero

Joseph L. Nagy

Instructor of English

Sacred Heart University

Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Fall 2010

Dante, Existentialist Hero

"Whoever battles monsters should take care not to become a monster too, for if you stare long enough into the Abyss, the Abyss stares back into you." - Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, "Fourth Part: Maxims and Interludes," section 146

Love, loss, longing, and regret – here is the ground zero of the human heart. Poets and philosophers have long sensed that we are haunted by a deep, existential dread that we are somehow incomplete. Add to that catalogue of passions one more: hope. It lifts us up and out of ourselves. We seek transcendence, a connection with the other who will be our salvation. It is the source of much that is worthwhile in religion, philosophy, psychology, and literature. And for Dante Alighieri, the early-14th century Italian poet, the "other" was Beatrice, the great unrequited love of his life.

Beatrice gave him a New Life, he tells us in *Vita Nuova*, the major prose-poem of his youth. When she died in 1290 at the age of 25, the shock was so profound that it haunted him for the remainder of his life. In 1302 Dante was banished from his beloved Florence when his political party, the Whites, lost a power struggle with the rival Blacks. Dante died in exile nineteen years later, at age 56 (Hollander, "Introduction" xxiii-xxiv). In his wanderings, he once more turned to Beatrice – this time as allegory – to create in the last decade of his life what is universally recognized as one of the greatest narrative poems in any language, the *Comedy*.

So much has been written about the *Comedy* in the seven centuries since its creation that it is hard to imagine that there is something new to add. But like all great art, it harbors a mystery. By what magic did Dante create this wonder? Where in the labyrinth of the human soul did he find the inspiration to synthesize classical Greek and Roman philosophy and literature with scholastic theology to create a work that has often been described as the equivalent of a medieval cathedral?

We come back to ground zero. We come back to Beatrice – “the one who blesses” (Singleton, “An Essay” 119) – whom we know only from Dante’s account in *Vita Nuova*. We do not know if Beatrice was her real name. Scholars debate whether she existed. Boccaccio, a Florentine whose literary career intersected with Dante’s, believed she did (Hollander, “Dante” 14). Dante scholar Robert Hollander concludes that the specificity in *Vita Nuova* suggests that Beatrice was real (“Dante” 35-36). Certainly Dante’s arranged marriage to Gemma Donati, in 1285 when he was 19, was a fact, but it did not inspire any poetry. It was Beatrice who held the key to Dante’s heart.

Her veracity is grounded in his longing. Through his encounters with Beatrice, Dante underwent a profound, soul-wrenching conversion, first described in *Vita Nuova*, and later allegorized in the *Comedy*. He discovered the transformative power of love. He suffered his way to the knowledge that the beloved is always tantalizingly beyond our reach and ultimately unfathomable, but in the reaching, we save our soul. He learned that the love of one person for another is but a reflection of the Divine. In loving another, Dante teaches us, we touch the face of God.

1. The Search for Salvation

If philosophy can be described as “the soul’s search for salvation,” as existentialist philosopher William Barrett writes (5), then one can argue that Dante broke new ground in the human quest for meaning and purpose. Dante did not write the *Comedy*, as Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, to justify the ways of God to man. Dante’s goal was more urgent – he was writing to save his soul. What is more, Dante feared the loss of his soul not in the next life, but in this one.

The *Comedy* was the last act of Dante’s life. It was a heroic attempt to resolve a spiritual crisis. Lost in a dark wood of longing and loss and exile, a stranger in a strange land, he was an Odysseus on a journey of consciousness. In his epic struggle to transform Beatrice of Florence to Beatrice the Divine, Dante followed in the footsteps of St. Augustine, whose spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, has earned

a place as one of the earliest existential sources (Barrett 95). If we strip away the academic preoccupation with Dante's medieval scholasticism, we may come to see him as a pioneer in man's search for meaning.

In his art, Dante battled with monsters, stared long and hard into the abyss of his own soul, and emerged transformed to tell the tale. Dante was an existential hero whose psychological and philosophical insights were far ahead of his time, if we can only penetrate the medieval world view in which they are encased. If Dante does not survive the restructuring of departments of literature in our academic institutions, then he deserves a place alongside Augustine and Aquinas in the departments of philosophy.

This is not to deny Dante's medieval roots. In his openness to the wisdom of the past, and his desire to relate all knowledge to a greater whole, Dante was unquestionably one of the architects of the Catholic intellectual tradition (Hellwig 15-16). He learned Latin so that he could read Plato and Aristotle in translation, and borrowed from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to construct the moral geography of Hell. He read Cicero, Virgil, and Ovid: the *Aeneid* was his model for the archetypal journey. Augustine and Aquinas were his theological mentors (MacAllister 10-11). Indeed, the *Comedy* is in no small way an encyclopedia of Thomistic thought. As Princeton scholar Archibald MacAllister points out, "Dante had for his subject the whole world, the entire universe, all of man's history, his learning, his beliefs, plus his own particular message" (14).

In forging his own message, however, Dante broke free of the medieval worldview. His yearning to understand human suffering was a pioneering intellectual journey that foreshadowed the humanism of the Renaissance. In profound ways, Dante not only transcended his time, but reached out into ours. Dante's literary pilgrimage from the *Vita Nuova* to the *Comedy* can be read as a road map of the soul.

2. Sublime Blasphemy

Both Princeton's Hollander, who ranks as America's premier Dante interpreter, and Yale scholar Harold Bloom have noted that there is something strikingly subversive in Dante's *Comedy*. In the first stages of his journey, through Hell and Purgatory, Dante is guided not by a Christian archetype, but by the pagan Roman poet Virgil. Hollander considers this "something of a scandal" (115). Whether we interpret Virgil as an allegory for human reason, or, as Hollander suggests, as "a historical figure" who was in fact Dante's literary mentor ("Dante" 115), he does not belong to the Communion of Saints. In the *Comedy*, Dante consigns Virgil to the first circle of Hell, Limbo, the home of virtuous pagans. It is achingly clear in the poem that Virgil has fallen short of salvation: "I am Virgil, and for no other failing / did I lose Heaven but my lack of faith" (*Purg.* VII.7-9), the poet says in greeting a soul at the entrance to Purgatory.

At the top of Mt. Purgatory, in the Garden of Eden, Virgil transfers Dante to Beatrice, who guides Dante up through the nine spheres of heaven to the presence of the Divine. If the choice of Virgil as guide was scandalous, then Dante's choice of Beatrice is just short of blasphemous. Bloom points out Dante's audacity in choosing his earthly love – albeit an unrequited one – to represent God's saving grace. He writes: "Nothing else in Western literature, in the long span from the Yahwist and Homer through Joyce and Beckett, is as sublimely outrageous as Dante's exaltation of Beatrice, sublimated from being an image of desire to angelic status, in which role she becomes a crucial element in the church's hierarchy of salvation" (72). Not the Son of God, no saint or martyr or Christian scholar, but a sublimely beautiful woman is Dante's savior.

So the questions arise – Why Virgil? Why Beatrice? Virgil was the poet whom Dante most admired. Beatrice was the great love of his life. Neither has any overt theological status. If we want to understand Dante's choice of spiritual guides, we must understand his existential dilemma.

Dante wishes to save his soul, but he never tells us exactly how he had “forsook the one true way” (*Inf.* I.12) and “came to myself in a dark wood” (*Inf.* I.2) that “pierced my heart with fear” (*Inf.* I.15). Those who have suffered through depression or spiritual despair – the dark night of the soul – will recognize the place. What drove him to this pit of despair, and why did he require the intervention of Beatrice and Virgil?

Scholars debate the source of Dante’s angst. Was he referring to his quest, following Beatrice’s death, to find answers in philosophy (Aristotle) rather than theology (Aquinas)? Was he experiencing guilt over his infatuation with another woman, hinted at in the *Vita Nuova*? Was he troubled that his drive for artistic fame was leading him away from the narrow path of salvation? For as much as Dante wishes to escape the dark wood of worldliness, at the same time he wishes to write a great poem, an equal to Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Or was he castigating himself for spiritual sloth, drifting through life much like the condemned opportunists he describes in the *Inferno*, abandoned at the vestibule of Hell, who are scorned by both Satan and God for refusing to take a stand? Perhaps he was afraid that his despair would condemn him to the ninth circle, where those who betray the trust of loved ones are frozen along with Satan in ice. We cannot look into the soul of Dante. We can, however, look into his works.

In the *Inferno*, Dante gives few clues to the source of this spiritual turmoil, except to suggest that he was asleep to his predicament. The British novelist and critic Charles Williams points out that the setting of the *Comedy*, Easter in the year 1300, coincides with Dante at the height of his worldly success (104). At age 35, “midway in the journey of our life” (*Inf.* I.1), Dante was a husband, father, a recognized poet, and a government leader. His political exile was two years away. His despair, then, did not come from outside, but from inside. It was the despair of a man who, in the first flush of worldly success, had forgotten who he was.

A close reading of Dante suggests that his despair was real, deep, and shattering. He does not tell us its source, because it was not specific to him. It is our dilemma, too. It is a universal human predicament – estrangement from being itself. “You have made us for yourself,” St. Augustine writes, “and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Book I.i).

The great Lutheran existential theologian Paul Tillich describes this universal estrangement and its accompanying longing for connection in his famous meditation on sin and grace. Sin, writes Tillich, is separation: “separation among individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from the Ground of Being.” This experience of alienation, says Tillich, is universal; it is the fate of every person. “And it is our human fate,” he tells us, “in a very special sense” (ch. 19).

It is special for us because we are conscious of our fate. “We know that we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we *should* be united,” writes Tillich. What is more, we are complicit in our fate, and so we experience it as guilt (ch. 19).

Dante awoke to his fate. He found himself separated from his best self, from his neighbor, from “the mystery, the depth, and the greatness of . . . existence” (Tillich ch. 19), and the knowledge pierced his heart with fear.

Dante wrote of his despair because he understood that it was not his fate only, but ours as well. Says Tillich: “*Existence is separation!* Before sin is an act, it is a state” (ch. 19). Because our estrangement is a state of being, we cannot escape it by an act of our own. It is not within our power to reconnect to ourselves, to our neighbors, to being itself. Grace strikes, says Tillich, and reconnects us with that which was lost: “Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself” (ch. 19).

Grace comes unexpected, and unearned. Grace strikes, says Tillich, "when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged" (ch. 19).

Just so grace struck Dante, and it visited him in the person of Beatrice.

Dante's guide to the underworld, Virgil, tells him that he was summoned from Limbo to aid Dante by "a Lady so blessed and so fair, that I implored her to command me" (*Inf.* II.53-54). She identifies herself as Beatrice, and tells Virgil that "my friend, who is no friend of Fortune, / is so hindered on his way upon the desert slope / that . . . I fear he has gone so far astray / that I arose too late to help him" (*Inf.* II.61-66). In one of the pivotal lines in the *Comedy* around which the entire poem revolves, she tells Virgil, "The love that moved me makes me speak" (*Inf.* II.72). Love is the prime mover in Dante's universe. It is Divine love that reconnects us to the ground of our being, and for Dante, it is human love that is the gateway to the Divine.

3. The Miracle of Beatrice

Human reason has its limits, Dante discovers. Reason can point the way, but it is the heart which lifts one into the light. Virgil guides and protects Dante through the darkest recesses of the human soul, and then leads him on a mission of penance up the seven terraces of Mt. Purgatory. Further than that, reason cannot go. Dante must commit himself to Beatrice for the final ascent to the light.

Beatrice was a miracle, says Harvard's Charles Singleton, a pioneer in Dante studies. And the miracle was "that mortal creature, a woman, could be the bearer of a beatitude reaching beyond the bounds of nature, reaching back to heaven because it had come from heaven" ("An Essay" 6). Beatrice is the moral center and motivating force in both the *Vita Nuova* and the *Comedy*.

To understand Dante's obsession with Beatrice, one must go back to his earlier work, the *Vita Nuova*. A collection of 31 poems linked by autobiographical prose, it is a spiritual memoir of Dante's "new life" under the spell of Beatrice. Singleton describes the *Vita Nuova* as "a progressive revelation of the miraculous nature of Beatrice . . . Love itself can be observed to undergo a transformation, revealing itself to be always something more than it had at first seemed to be. And the direction is always upward" ("An Essay" 56).

Dante composed the *Vita Nuova* in 1292, when he was 27. It is a highly symbolic account of his love for Beatrice, who had died two years earlier. He tells us in the *Vita Nuova* that he had met her only fleetingly three times, beginning at age nine, when he glimpsed the eight-year-old Beatrice dressed in crimson. Nine years later he passed her in the street, and she smiled at him. In their third encounter, she rebuffed him, and he was in turmoil. Her death at age 24 left him disconsolate.

Dante scholar Mark Musa calls the *Vita Nuova* "a youthful drama of the psyche in search of a goal or final resting place" (viii). Singleton describes the work as "the journey of the unquiet heart" and compares it to Augustine's *Confessions* ("Journey" 4). Dante would never find a resting place in this world. Instead, he transformed his unrequited love for Beatrice, and his unfulfilled longing for his home in Florence, into a higher, spiritual quest.

Dante's two great works, the youthful *Vita Nuova* and the mature *Comedy*, are a record of love, loss, longing, and ultimate redemption. Beatrice indeed rescued him, but his redemption required that he travel "by another way" (*Inf.* 1.89). He had to go down into the dark before he could rise to the light.

4. A Cry from the Heart

"There are only three things to be done with a woman," writes novelist Laurence Durrell. "You can love her, suffer for her, or turn her into literature" (13). Dante did all three. Like Augustine, Dante at first

sought a resting place in philosophy and in the arms of a woman. Like Augustine, he suffered an existential crisis of faith. Like Augustine, he experienced an awakening. But while Augustine recounts his spiritual odyssey in the language of theology, Dante expresses his journey of the soul in the language of poetry. If Augustine had to write *Confessions* before he could write *The City of God*, Dante had to write the *Vita Nuova* before he could write the *Comedy*.

The *Vita Nuova* is not so much an autobiography as it is a psychic diary filled with visions, dreams, and symbols. It is a cry from the heart. T.S. Eliot refers to the *Vita Nuova* as a "youthful" and immature work" (55) in "the very ancient tradition of vision literature" (56). It is this visionary quality of the *Vita Nuova* that both captures the modern imagination and leads some to dismiss it as fiction. Eliot reminds us that if the modern observer discounts visions as delusions or hallucinations, there was a time when they were accepted as a higher form of knowing.

Dante "lived in an age in which men still saw visions," says Eliot. "We have forgotten that seeing visions . . . was once a more significant, interesting, and disciplined kind of dreaming" (15). One thinks of the visions of Abraham and Isaac and the prophets: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (*King James Bible*, Joel 2:28).

Hollander considered Dante's visions to be analogous to those of St. Paul and St. John ("Dante" 25). Whether we accept Dante's description of his encounters with Beatrice as dream, literary symbolism, religious ecstasy, or reality, we can find in them a window to his soul.

In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante bares the soul of a young man in the grip of first love. Recalling his first encounter with Beatrice at age nine, he states that the instant he saw her, "I say truly that the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the least pulses of my body were strangely affected; and trembling, it spoke these words: 'Here is a

god stronger than I, who shall come to rule over me." Dante declares that "from that time on, Love governed my soul" (4; sec. II).

Not the words of a nine-year-old, certainly, but the emotions would be recognized by any young lover who in the absence of the beloved cannot eat, or sleep, or think. Dante tells us that the *Vita Nuova* is a "Book of Memory" (*La Vita Nuova* 3; sec. I), the reflections of an adult on the first formative experience of adolescence. He is reformulating his memories in light of Beatrice's death. It is her death, her new life in God's presence, which shapes his memories. She must be a miracle sent by God, because she saved him from himself.

He encounters her nine years later – the symbolism of the Trinity times three is apparent, and is repeated: In "the ninth hour of the day, 3 o'clock in the afternoon . . . While walking down a street, she turned her eyes to where I was standing faint-hearted, and because of her indescribable graciousness that today is rewarded in the eternal life, she greeted me so miraculously that I felt I was experiencing the very summit of bliss" (4; sec. III).

Afterwards, alone in his room, Dante falls into a "sweet sleep" and dreams: "I seemed to see a cloud the color of fire in my room and in that cloud a lordly man, frightening to behold, yet apparently marvelously filled with joy. He said many things of which I understood only a few; among them was, 'I am your Master'" (5; sec. III). It is the Lord of Love. Obsessed, Dante says that he "became so weak and so frail that many of my friends were concerned with my appearance" (7; sec. IV). To avoid revealing the source of his obsession, Dante allows his friends to believe that he is infatuated with another "worthy lady of very pleasing aspect," and for several years he makes use of "this good lady as a screen for the truth" (7; sec. V). He is not yet spiritually mature enough to seek the higher good, so he settles for the lesser.

This screen lady leaves town, however, and Dante is visited once again by the Lord of Love, in the guise of a pilgrim. He directs Dante to another woman “who will be your new defense as was the previous one” (14; sec. IX). Dante seeks out this other woman, and “in a short time I made her so completely my defense that many people commented more than courtesy would permit.” There is gossip surrounding his new relationship. He becomes embroiled in a scandal “that viciously stripped me of my good name.” As a result, when he next encounters Beatrice, “scourge of vice and queen of virtue,” she rebuffs him (15; sec. X).

5. A Change of Heart

Dante is grief-stricken and retreats once again to his room, sobbing like a child. Twice now he has run from himself, and from the source of his longing. In his sleep he dreams of a boy dressed in white, who admonishes him: “My son, it is time to do away with these pretenses.” When he queries the boy, he is told: “Do not ask for more than is useful to you.” Dante is informed that Beatrice is upset by his new relationship. The boy – the Lord of Love – asks Dante to write a poem to Beatrice expressing “the power I have over you through her” (17; sec. XII). In the sonnet, Dante asks the Lord of Love to tell Beatrice, “Judge for yourself why Love made his eyes rove, / Remembering his heart has never strayed” (18; sec. XII).

Afterwards Dante is overcome with self-pity. He writes another sonnet: “I want to speak but don’t know what to say. / Thus do I wander in a maze of Love” (22; sec. XIII). When he sees Beatrice from afar, he is distraught, and tells a friend: “I have placed my feet on those boundaries of life beyond which no one can go further and hope to return” (24; sec. XIV). He is literally at a spiritual dead end – lost in a dark wood of pity and despair. He has journeyed inward for too long. He is staring into the abyss, and must find a way out.

Dante has an abrupt change of heart. He resolves "to take up a new theme, more lofty than the last" (29; sec. XVII). Until this time, "the end and aim of my love formerly lay in the greeting of this lady . . . and in this greeting dwelt my bliss which was the end of all my desires." From henceforth, he declares, his bliss will be "In those words that praise my lady." He will write "in praise of this most gracious one" (30; sec. XVIII). And no higher praise is there than the *canzone* that he composes in Beatrice's honor. Heaven is incomplete without her: "Heaven, that lacks its full perfection only / In lacking her, asks for her of its Lord, / And every saint is begging for this favor" (31; sec. XIX). But God asks heaven's patience, for Beatrice is still needed on earth: "And while it pleases me, let your hope stay / With one down there who dreads the loss of her, / Who when in hell shall say unto the damned, / 'I have beheld the hope of heaven's blessed'" (32; sec. XIX). Dante is already contemplating the plot of the *Comedy*.

He goes so far as equating Beatrice with the Godhead: "This too God Almighty graced her with: / Whoever speaks with her shall speak with Him" (32; sec. XIX). Indeed, the analogy of Beatrice to Christ is striking (Hollander, "Dante" 18). Beatrice is more than herself: she is the measure of all beauty: "She is the highest nature can achieve / And by her mold all beauty tests itself" (32; sec. XIX). Higher praise than this, no poet has ever written.

It is Dante's coming of age. No longer will he wallow in self-pity. He will lift his sights higher. He will turn outward rather than inward. Dante is beginning to understand that love, the most powerful force in the universe, comes from a higher source. His devotion to Beatrice is leading him beyond himself. Through his poetry he will exalt Beatrice – she will become an allegory for Divine love.

However, before she can achieve that status, she must take on a new form. She must leave her earthly body and be resurrected in the spirit. Dante recounts that after a sickness lasting nine days – that mystical number again suggesting that Dante is speaking symbolically – he has a sudden revelation:

"I said to myself: 'Some day the most gracious Beatrice will surely have to die'" (43-44; sec. XXIII). He has a vision – the second in the *Vita Nuova* – this one of ladies weeping and angels singing, and he sees Beatrice lying dead: "And it seemed that ladies were covering her head with a white veil, and it seemed that her face was so filled with joyous acceptance that it said to me: 'I am contemplating the fountainhead of peace'" (44; sec. XXIII).

Though Beatrice is still alive, Dante writes a sonnet describing his vision of her death. In another sonnet, Beatrice has taken on attributes of the Divine: "Sweet decorum and such graces / Attend my lady's greetings as she goes / That every tongue is stammering then mute, / And eyes dare not to gaze at such a sight" (56; sec. XXVI).

When Dante announces Beatrice's actual death, his words are serene, resigned, dignified. Gone are all emotions of self-pity or personal sorrow. She has been elevated to her rightful place in heaven: "The God of Justice has called this most gracious one to glory under the banner of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose name was always spoken with the greatest reverence by the blessed Beatrice" (60; sec. XXVIII). Singleton notes that when Dante recounts her death, it "seems less like a death than it does an ascension" ("An Essay" 19). Dante goes on to write not of her earthly existence, but of her symbolic identification with the number nine, having died in the ninth month of the year, whose square root is three, which represents the Trinity.

Dante's journey through an underworld of pity and longing has purged him of self-serving desires, and he is rewarded with a glimpse of the Divine. But it is as yet only a glimpse. He has his sights on greater things. At the conclusion of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante has one more vision – the third of the book. In one of the most prescient passages in all literature, Dante writes: "There appeared to me a miraculous vision in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this blessed one until I should be capable of writing about her in a more worthy fashion. And to achieve this I am striving

as hard as I can, and this she truly knows. . . I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other lady" (85-86; sec. XLII).

6. Escape to Freedom

It would take him 15 years of preparation before he would begin writing his masterwork, the *Comedy*. Eight years after composing the *Vita Nuova* Dante was 35, "midway in our life's journey," when, he tells us in the memorable opening of the *Inferno*, he "went astray from the straight and narrow." Two years later, at age 37, he would be exiled from Florence by the Blacks, a political faction aligned with Pope Boniface VIII. He would never return. In his last years, he tells us in the *Paradiso*, he experienced "how bitter as salt and stone is the bread of others, how hard the way that goes up and down stairs that never are your own" (*Par.* XVII. 55-60).

Yet he was able to transcend the travails of his life. He transformed his suffering into literature, and in the writing of it, he transformed himself. It would be a mistake to read the *Vita Nuova* and the *Comedy* as a medieval exploration of salvation in the next life. Dante sought to rescue his soul from the existential hell of this life. He teaches us in the *Comedy* that sin creates its own suffering, that in full freedom we choose – we yearn for – the sin that will cause our suffering, and that we carry our own hell within us wherever we go.

In the *Inferno*, while Dante watches the monster Charon ferry the damned across the river Acheron from Hell's vestibule into the lower circles, Virgil informs him that "all pass over eagerly, for here/ Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so / their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear" (*Inf.* III.121-23). Hell is not God's creation; the divinity does not torment us for our faults. We are free beings. When we have corrupted our soul, it freely seeks its own damnation.

Jean-Paul Sartre understood this well. Sartre's one-act play *No Exit* is his version of Dante's *Inferno*. In the course of the play, Garcin, one of the three characters seemingly imprisoned for eternity in a drawing room, comes to understand that he is in fact in hell, and that hell is not fire and brimstone, "hell is –other people!" (45) Garcin attempts to escape, banging fiercely on the only door while wailing: "Open the door! Open, blast you! I'll endure anything, your red-hot tongs and molten lead, your racks and prongs and garrotes – all your fiendish gadgets, everything that burns and flays and tears – I'll put up with any torture you impose. Anything, anything, would be better than this agony of mind, this creeping pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses one and never hurts enough" (41).

Suddenly, the door opens on its own. Yet none of the three will walk out. Garcin shuts the door. There is "no exit" because we will not have it any other way. Sartre echoes Dante's insight: We are condemned by our own free choice. We are the authors of our own fate. There is no escape from ourselves.

The contingency of human existence, the limits of reason, the experience of alienation and estrangement, indeed the feeling of separation from being itself, are the hallmarks of 20th-century existential thought. So too is the possibility for an individual to make authentic choices, to suffer the consequences, and in the process to achieve authentic existence. Dante's literary journey through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise reflects these themes, and none more than the primacy of human freedom.

When, toward the end of the *Purgatorio*, Virgil hands over Dante to Beatrice, having done all that reason can do to prepare him for grace, he declares that Dante is free to follow wherever his desires lead him. He can do no wrong, because his intellect, his will, and his spirit are now oriented toward the Divine. In his final words to Dante, Virgil says: "No longer wait for word or sign from me. / Your will is free, upright, and sound. / Not to act as it chooses is unworthy: / over yourself I crown and miter you" (*Purg.* XXVII.139-142).

Dante's will leads him to follow Beatrice, and Beatrice leads him to God. At the conclusion of the *Comedy*, Dante has a direct vision of the Divine, an experience reserved in scripture for Moses only, the greatest of the prophets. He is overwhelmed and surrounded by an all-encompassing light – the light of God's love. He is restless no more. He has discovered, says Singleton, that "Through love we return from the exile of this earth to God" ("An Essay" 61).

Dante's journey was from Beatrice to God. He could not have the one without the other. The closest that we can come to the Divine in this life is in the love of one person for another. According to Williams, Dante's literary depiction of "The Way of Affirmation," the discovery of God's presence in the things of this world – was his greatest achievement (9). Says Williams: "Dante himself is the Knower, and God is the Known, and Beatrice is the Knowing" (231).

But Dante could not experience the sacred without first making the terrifying journey to the underworld, where both terrors and wisdom await. He had to journey within, where monsters lurked, monsters that only had to be faced to be overcome. He then had to climb upward to the light, and having been transformed by the light, to return to the exile of this earth.

He had to return, for Beatrice's mission was to redeem Dante's soul in this life, not the next. Transformed by love, Dante returns to tell his story. And in the telling, he fulfills his promise: to "write of her that which has never been written of any other lady." The tribute was worthy of his benefactor. Dante's *Comedy* is a gift of grace, a guide to the lost, the estranged, the disconnected – that is, a guide for us all.

Works Cited

- Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1998. Print.
- Barrett, William. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1962. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. 1994. New York: Riverhead, 1995. Print.
- Dante Alighieri. *The Inferno*. Trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. 2000. New York: Anchor, 2002. Print.
- *La Vita Nuova*. Trans. Mark Musa. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1965. Print.
- *Purgatorio*. Trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander. 2003. New York: Anchor, 2004. Print.
- Durrell, Lawrence. *Justine*. 1957. London: The Folio Society, 2008. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. *Dante*. 1929. London: Faber and Faber, 1965. Print.
- Hellwig, Monika K. "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University." *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*. Eds. Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan. Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2000. 1-18. Print.
- Hollander, Robert. *Dante: A Life in Works*. New Haven: Yale U P, 2001. Print.
- Hollander, Robert. Introduction. *The Inferno*. By Dante Alighieri. Trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. 2000. New York: Anchor, 2002. xxiii-xl. Print.

King James Bible. Oxford authorized edition, 1769. Online.

MacAllister, Archibald. Introduction. *The Divine Comedy*. By Dante Alighieri. Trans. John Ciardi. New York: New American Library, 2003. 5-15. Print.

Musa, Mark. Introduction. *La Vita Nuova*. By Dante Alighieri. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1965. VIII-XXII. Print.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. New York: Vintage International, 1989. Print.

Singleton, Charles S. *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1949. Print.

--- *Journey to Beatrice*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1958. Print.

Tillich, Paul. *The Shaking of the Foundations*. New York: Scribner, 1955. Online.

Williams, Charles. *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*. New York: Farrar, 1961. Print.