

The Literary Club
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A Heavenly Journey

Actually, it was my wife's idea that we tackle the daunting task of reading the *Comedia* – the Divine Comedy -- from beginning to end. She proposed that we study each of the 100 cantos, accompanying Dante as he descends into the *Inferno*, then upward through the *Purgatorio*, before finally reaching the *Paradiso*. To do justice to the scope of this masterpiece, we resolved to spend the equivalent of a full academic year on our pilgrimage with the great Italian poet.

For our literary climb up Mount Everest, we would be led by no sherpa. Our doughty band of fellow seekers, who gathered biweekly, included only an artist, several teachers, a writer, a nurse, two gentleman farmers, and – fortuitously -- a physics professor. The latter's presence would prove invaluable in deciphering the sophisticated mathematical and astronomical concepts we were to encounter through the poem's 14,233 verses, concepts as familiar to the medieval mind as they are alien to ours.

Like so many others, I had once or twice picked up John Ciardi's translation of the *Inferno* only to be stymied, before venturing very far, in my own hell of slothfulness. So I was personally eager to undertake this project before I was overtaken by advancing years. This time we would use a new translation by a dynamic young professor from Providence College, Anthony Esolen.

I guess I was feeling pretty special about my upcoming literary pursuit until I ran into the humbling experience that membership in The Literary Club often represents. Again I was reminded that there are always some souls in the crowd who know more about a subject than the one who comes with a paper. One evening I was telling our poet

in residence, Bill Pratt, about my reading project. What a coincidence, he replied; only that evening, driving in from Oxford, he confessed that he found himself reciting the first canto of the *Inferno* – from memory, of course – all 136 verses. He does this from time to time, he explained, to keep his mind sharp. Later, as I sought to brag about my year-long mission with “Professor” Jim Bridgeland, he sniffed: “Only a year? Why, you’ll hardly scratch the surface.” Then, in the unkindest cut of all, one of our brethren asked, didn’t we plan to read the poem in the original Italian since no translation can possibly do justice to the beauty of Dante’s original *terza rima*.

I was thus chastened, yes, but hardly deterred. Instead I found myself eager to weigh the assessment of critic A.N. Wilson that the *Comedia* is “one of the supreme aesthetic, imaginative, emotional and intellectual experiences on offer.”

It is all too obvious that not everyone in this post-modern world would agree with Wilson’s judgment. Some, steeped in the secularism of political correctness, argue that the *Comedia* – which didn’t acquire its title of *Divine Comedy* until rechristened later by Boccaccio -- is too medieval, too Catholic and – horror of horrors – too spiritual. Hearing these objections brought to my mind the story of the museum visitor who, viewing the gallery, remarked to an attendant: “I don’t understand the big deal people make with these pictures. I don’t see anything in them.” To which the attendant archly replied: “Excuse me, sir, the pictures are not on trial.”

I nonetheless had to admit how little I truly knew of this poet who has been called perhaps the most gifted ever to live – right up there with Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare.

My scant knowledge was mainly limited to a visit my wife and I made years ago to Ravenna, where we had looked up the disarmingly modest mausoleum erected in 1780

to mark Dante's burial site before the door of the city's principal church. He had come there in 1318, an exile at age 53, to finish his *Comedia*. We had also viewed the more imposing memorial erected to him outside the church of Santa Croce by a later contrite city of Florence, this in the beloved place of his birth from which he had been exiled for getting at cross purposes in its maddeningly complex political tides.

Other than these bookends, though, the details of Dante Alighieri's life were mostly a blank. My ignorance was soon to change, however. For I found that once one enters the "dark wood" of his great poem, the biographical data becomes so intertwined with the journey he records that one cannot escape learning much about him, about those he loved and those he hated, about the medieval air he breathed, and about how his *Comedia* came to be.

Thus did my epiphany begin.

Dante's poetic journey, I learned, was inspired by an actual event from his life. In the year 1300, he had gone to Rome during Holy Week with thousands of other pilgrims from throughout Europe to observe the first Holy Year in the history of the Christian church. It had been instituted by a brilliant but cynical pope, Boniface VIII, in a revival of the Hebrew jubilee custom of releasing debtors and granting amnesty every half century. Although Dante was appalled by the avarice he saw, by the priests literally raking in the alms from the altars, in those three days leading to Easter, the Florentine visitor conceived the whole framework of the epic he contemplated.

He didn't, however, immediately undertake the actual writing. It would only be a few years later, after Dante's political ambitions had vaulted him into a position as one of the six electors of Florence, that he ran afoul of the same treacherous Boniface. Trapped

in the struggle between the papal monarchy and the Holy Roman Empire, the man already acknowledged as Italy's leading poet was banished, stripped of his citizenship and penniless, with an executioner awaiting him if ever he dared to return.

Writing the *Comedia* then became his obsession over the next 16 years.

Even those with only a passing familiarity with the *Comedia* nonetheless can hardly forget the two memorable partners Dante chooses to accompany him on his journey – his classical pagan hero Virgil and the mysterious Beatrice. About Virgil, he proudly writes that “thou art my master. . . thou alone the one from whom I took the beautiful style that has done honor to me.” Needless to say, he is never bashful about his own talents. About Beatrice, well, books have been written without fully satisfying the curiosity she has spawned through the centuries. She was a little girl wearing a bright red dress, the daughter of a wealthy banker, when on May Day of 1274 Dante first cast eyes on her at a party. He was so enamored by her beauty that from then on Beatrice became his deepest desire, even though in real life she ends up in an arranged marriage to someone else and dies early at age 25, probably in childbirth. Thus, in the poem, Virgil is able to lead Dante only up to a point in Purgatory but it is Beatrice, the Lady, his object of worship, who transports him through the very gates of Heaven.

It has been said that the *Comedia* represents the final synthesis of the literary and religious tradition of the Middle Ages, embodying all the vital elements of medieval culture – the theology of the Christians, the science and philosophy of the Arabs, the courtly ways of the troubadours, the classical tradition of Virgil and the Romans, the mysticism of Dionysius, the piety of Saint Bernard, the national pride spawned by Marian devotion. The more I delved into the majesty of the work, the more I sensed my own

inadequacies in the face of such erudition. What about all that Enlightenment nonsense that scoffed at the medieval mind, I had to ask myself.

Once our little group embarked on our year-long journey with Dante, it seemed that his every line sent me combing first the footnotes, then stacks of resource books, and finally some of the countless volumes that have been written about this or that aspect of the poem and its enormous impact on Western culture over the past seven centuries. I felt like a poor unprepared undergraduate cast adrift.

To my relief, the early cantos of the *Inferno* did seem somewhat familiar, starting with the famous entrance instruction to “abandon all hope, you who enter here.” Once our descent began, who among us flesh-obsessed moderns could fail to experience a strange sense of relief to learn that lustful appetites are punished only in the upper reaches of Hades, well before the suffering becomes too excruciating? Despite the hellish surroundings, who also cannot summon heartfelt sympathy for that pair of doomed adulterers we meet, Paolo and the lovely Francesca, whose passion undermines reason? How is it that we grow so intrigued by the lives Dante condemns to the depths as he and Virgil journey along, and how we almost inevitably find ourselves arguing with his verdicts of damnation?

Yet the hissing serpents, the two snake-claws that burst out of a man’s penis, the traitor being dragged by the tail of a runaway animal, the submerged miser in boiling pitch mixed with fecal matter -- these come as reminders that we are, after all, passing through an underworld filled with terror and anguish. One of the things which makes the *Comedia* such electrifying reading, more than one critic has noted, is Dante’s unpredictability – “the sudden blazes of anger, its passionate intensity, its impenetrable

hatreds.” It is as if the scholarly poet sits shoulder to shoulder with a vengeful madman “and the reader never knows which of them is going to frame the next taut” verse.

Surprises do indeed abound. I was brought up short to find that Dante had consigned the heroic Ulysses to the eighth ditch of Malebolge for straying beyond the Pillars of Hercules and losing his crew in the Southern Hemisphere due to his quest to know the forbidden. It’s a strange verdict to impose on intellectual curiosity but Dante has his reasons. For me, though, no surprise was greater than Dante’s description of the climactic depths of the *Inferno* and who he found keeping company there with Satan. No, one does not encounter the legendary fires and molten lava flaring from the very center of Hell but rather an icy expanse of nothingness, Lucifer impotently frozen into place, his wings flapping in futility, shackled in an eternal prison made of his pride. Among the trio Dante envisions with him are those he sees as the ultimate traitors of the spiritual and the temporal. One expects to find Judas, the betrayer of Christ, but it was a jolt for me to meet the betrayers of Caesar, Brutus and Cassius.

More of my epiphany was awaiting as our study advanced to the *Purgatorio*, which was new territory for me. Not until the 13th Century were theologians formalizing the idea of an in-between place for souls not bad enough for hell but not quite ready for heaven. It was Dante who put purgatory on the map, popularizing a place for it in Christian doctrine.

The *Purgatorio* is for many readers the sleeper of the *Comedia*’s three books. It surely was for me as I discovered the hopefulness, the beauty, the brilliance of Dante’s descriptions. On his winding ascent up the Mount of Purgatory, he finds those saved yet tarnished souls being purified for their ultimate destination. Their crooked ways are being

made straight. With what tender ingenuity does he frame the punishments they are undergoing to purify them. The prideful carry boulders that press them to the ground. The envious have their eyelids sewn shut. The slothful are forced to run incessantly.

Symbolism abounds, as do Dante's wicked commentaries on the wiles of evil popes and the chicanery of prideful princes. Corruption in the church and the empire he treats as the second fall of man. "Now you can see," he writes, "that evil at the head has caused the world to turn to wickedness." Still he yearns for the Good Place where man can be "godly and quietly governed."

More than anything else, though, for me the *Purgatorio* became a subtle treasure hunt. It is at the very center of the entire poem, at the precise line marking the middle of the second canticle, where one can mine Dante's essential vision for the *Comedia*. Here he is found listening as Virgil, his faithful escort, tells him that every human deed is motivated by a kind of love – love that is found misdirected in Hell, love being made whole in Purgatory, and love being ultimately fulfilled in Heaven. For all humans, that love is discovered in friendship "as beams of light stream to a light-filled body."

Along the way, though, Dante is forced to lose one treasured friend, only to gain another. Because he is unbaptized, toward the conclusion of the *Purgatorio*, Virgil is allowed to go no further in the climb to the Empyrean. He is made to disappear at the same moment that "a lady appeared to me – her mantle, green, her robes beneath, as red as living flame." It is Beatrice, the beautiful Beatrice, who will lead him over the river Eunoe and into heaven and the fulfillment of all human desire.

Those who have spent their careers pondering the fascinations of the *Comedia* find the final canto, the *Paradiso*, is the least accessible and most medieval of the three

canticles. I was too freshly smitten with the poem to be restrained from plunging ahead with abandon. I found those concluding verses brought to a fitting conclusion Dante's arresting view of the human condition. I did wonder, though, whether those without religious belief or those unaccustomed to theological speculation might well argue otherwise – or whether they might simply abandon the journey that ultimately takes Dante to that heavenly state where there is no time or place, only light.

Even admitting these differences, I nonetheless agree with the critic who observed, "Once read, the *Comedia* will take on a life of its own inside you." Dante's epic may be about himself, but he is Everyman. His story is about everything of meaning in human life. When we read of his journey, we read of our own. We, too, are creatures of time. Where are we going and what is the path to lead us there?

We, of course, live in an age saturated with notions of love but are muddled in our true understanding of love and its source. Real love – that most radical form of dependence, the antidote to hellish pride. Dante came to believe that love encompassed all things. For him, love is the answer to the deepest questions of life and the deepest needs of the heart.

Having accompanied him on his pilgrimage, and having relished every step of the journey, his epiphany has become mine as well, summed up in his final line about the Godhead he at last encounters:

"L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele" – The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Sources:

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