



Notes to Literature

Weekly
reading
booklet

#4 : Dante's
*Divine
Comedy: The
Inferno*

NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

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Alighieri, D. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, translated by Robert M. Durling. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Auerbach, Erich. *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961

Gross, K. "Infernal Metamorphoses: An Interpretation of Dante's 'Counterpass,'" *Modern Language Notes* 100, no. 1 (1985)

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Dante

I am Beatrice who cause you to go; I come from the place where I long to return; love has moved me and makes me speak.

From *The Divine Comedy: Inferno* (c.1320), Canto 2

...

But I, why come there? or who grants it? I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul; neither I nor others believe me worthy of that.

Therefore, if I abandon myself to the journey, I fear lest my coming may be folly. You are wise, you understand better than I speak."

And like one who unwilld what he just now willed and with new thoughts changes his intent, so that he draws back entirely from beginning:

so did I become on that dark slope, for, thinking, I gave up the undertaking that I had been so quick to begin.

"If I have well understood your word," replied the shade of that great-souled one, "your soul is wounded by cowardice,

which many times so encumbers a man that he turns back from honorable endeavor, as a false sight turns a beast when it shies.

That you may free yourself from this fear, I will tell you why I came and what I heard in the first moment when I grieved for you.

I was among those who are suspended, and a lady called me, so blessed and beautiful that I begged her to command me.

Her eyes were shining brighter than the morning star; and she began to speak gently and softly, with angelic voice, in her language:

'O courteous Mantuan soul, whose fame still lasts in the world and will last as far as the world will go, my friend, not the friend of fortune, on the deserted shore is so blocked in his journey that he has turned back for fear;

and I am afraid that he may be already so lost that I have risen too late to help him, according to what I have heard of him in Heaven.

Now go, and with your ornamented speech and whatever else is needed for his escape help him so that I may be consoled.

I am Beatrice who cause you to go; I come from the place where I long to return; love has moved me and makes me speak.

When I shall be before my lord, I will praise you frequently to him.' Then she was silent, and I began:

'O lady of power, through whom alone the human race rises above all the contents of that heaven whose circles are smallest,

so pleasing to me is your command that obeying, had it already taken place, is slow; no more is needed than to unfold your desire.

But tell me the reason why you do not shrink from coming down here, into this center, from the spacious place where you desire to return.'

'Since you wish to know so deeply, I will tell you in brief,' she replied, 'why I do not fear to come inside here.

One must fear only those things that have the power to harm; not other things, for they are not fearful.

I am made by God, in his mercy, such that your misery does not touch me, the flame of this burning does not assail me.

There is a noble lady in Heaven, who grieves for this impediment to which I send you, so that she vanquishes harsh judgment there on high.

She called Lucia in her request and said: – Now your faithful one has need of you, and I put him in your hands. –

Lucia, enemy of all cruelty, moved and came to the place where I was sitting with the ancient Rachel.

She said: – Beatrice, true praise of God, why do you not help him who loved you so, who because of you came forth from the common herd?

Do you not hear the anguish of his weeping, do you not see the death that attacks him there, by the torrent where the sea has no boast? –

In the world there have never been persons so swift to seek their advantage or to flee their loss, as I, after hearing such words spoken,

came down here from my blessed throne, trusting in your virtuous speech, which honors you and those who have heeded it.'

After she had spoken all this to me, she turned her shining eyes, shedding tears, which made me quicker to come here.

And I have come to you as she willed: from before that beast I have taken you, that deprived you of the short path up the mountain.

Therefore what is it? why, why do you stand still? why do you nurse such cowardice in your heart? why do you not have boldness and freedom,

seeing that three such blessed ladies have a care for you in the court of Heaven, and my speech promises you so much good?"

As little flowers, bowed and closed in the chill of night, when the sun whitens them straighten up all open on their stems:

so did I become with my tired strength, and so much good boldness ran to my heart, that I began like a person freed:

"Oh full of pity she who has helped me! and you courteous, who have quickly obeyed the true words she offered you!

Your words have so filled my heart with desire to come with you, that I have returned to my first purpose.

Now go, for one same will is in both: you are leader, you lord, and you master." So I said to him; and when he had set forth

I entered upon the deep, savage journey.

From Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1961)

In entering into the consciousness of the European peoples, the story of Christ fundamentally changed their conceptions of man's fate and how to describe it. The change occurred very slowly, far more slowly than the spread of Christian dogma. It faced other obstacles that were harder to overcome: resistances which, insignificant in themselves, were impervious to the political and tactical factors that favored the acceptance of Christianity, because they were rooted in the most conservative element of a people's being, namely the innermost sensory ground of their view of the world. To that view of the world the apparatus of Christian dogma could be adapted more easily and quickly than could the spirit of the events from which it had grown. But before we enter into the history of this change and the phenomena it produced in the course of time, let us try to describe the nature of the change.

The story of Christ is more than the *parousia* of the *logos*, more than the manifestation of the idea. In it the idea is subjected to the problematic character and desperate injustice of earthly happening. Considered in itself that is, without the post-humous and never fully actualized triumph in the world, as the mere story of Christ on earth, it is so hopelessly terrible that the certainty of an actual, concretely tangible correction in the here-after remains the only issue, the only salvation from irrevocable despair. Consequently, Christian eschatological conceptions took on an unprecedented concreteness and intensity; this world has meaning only in reference to the next; in itself it is a meaningless torment. But the otherworldly character of justice did not, as it would have where the classical spirit prevailed, detract from the value of earthly destiny or from man's obligation to submit to it.

The Stoic or Epicurean withdrawal of the philosopher from his destiny, his endeavor for release from the chain of earthly happening, his determination to remain at least inwardly free from earthly ties—all that is completely un-Christian. For to redeem fallen mankind the incarnated truth had subjected itself without reserve to earthly destiny. That was the end of the eudaemonism which was the foundation of ancient ethics: as Christ had taught by his presence on earth, it was the Christian's duty to do atonement

and suffer trials by taking destiny upon himself, by submitting to the sufferings of the creature. The drama of earthly life took on a painful, immoderate, and utterly un-classical intensity, because it is at once a wrestling with evil and the foundation of God's judgment to come. In diametrical opposition to the ancient feeling, earthly self-abnegation was no longer regarded as a way from the concrete to the abstract, from the particular to the universal. What presumption to strive for theoretical serenity when Christ himself lived in continuous conflict! Inner tension was insuperable, and, like acceptance of earthly destiny, a necessary consequence of the story of Christ. In both cases man's individuality is humbled, but it is, and must be, preserved. Not only is Christian humility far more compelling and more concrete, one might almost say more worldly, than Stoic apathy, but through awareness of man's inevitable sinfulness, it also does far more to intensify man's awareness of his unique, inescapable personality. And the story of Christ revealed not only the intensity of personal life but also its diversity and the wealth of its forms, for it transcended the limits of ancient mimetic aesthetics. Here man has lost his earthly dignity; everything can happen to him, and the classical division of genres has vanished; the distinction between the sublime and the vulgar style exists no longer. In the Gospels, as in ancient comedy, real persons of all classes make their appearance: fishermen and kings, high priests, publicans, and harlots participate in the action; and neither do those of exalted rank act in the style of classical tragedy, nor do the lowly behave as in a farce; quite on the contrary, all social and aesthetic limits have been effaced. On that stage there is room for all human diversity, whether we consider the cast of characters as a whole or each character singly; each individual is fully legitimated, but not on any social grounds; regardless of his earthly position, his personality is developed to the utmost, and what befalls him is neither sublime nor base; even Peter, not to mention Jesus, suffers profound humiliation. The depth and scope of the naturalism in the story of, Christ are unparalleled; neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity had the opportunity or the power to narrate human events in that way.

From Kenneth Gross, “Infernal Metamorphoses: An Interpretation of Dante’s ‘Counterpass,’” Modern Language Notes 100, no. 1 (1985)

The pains of the damned are more revelation than retribution; they compose difficult moral emblems which shadow forth sin’s inward nature. The Gluttonous, for example, who neglected their souls to pleasure their bodies, their “muddy vesture of decay,” wallow eternally in mud—like the pigs which are also emblems of their crime. Tempestuous lovers are whirled forever in a mad, windy storm. Hypocrites walk weighed down by leaden cloaks with ornate gilded surfaces, symbolizing the sinful, false exteriors which burdened their souls in life. Dante’s didactic method becomes less objectionable when one realizes that the fallen reader is to be deterred from sin not by threat of retroactive punishment, but by seeing how horrifying his crimes are in themselves, from the perspective of God or the poet. Dante does not predict a future but says, with prophetic literalness, “this is what you are.” More generally, we might suggest that the forms of punishment, whatever their pathos, have the ironic structure of satirical images, reflecting Augustine’s notion (as explicated by Burke) that sinful “perversity” equals “parody”—the fatal turning of sin yielding a demonic turn or trope on the authentic forms of Christian virtue. For rather than correcting sin, Dante’s symbolic ironies show how the infernal states actually perpetuate the spiritual disorder which constitutes sin.

In this sense, we should observe that the moral function and metaphoric structure of the punishments in the *Inferno* are not strictly commensurable with those of the sufferings meted out in Dante’s *Purgatory*. There, the burdens of the souls eventually blessed are not so much ironic allegories of sin as antithetical, curative conditions: the proud are weighed down with stones, the gluttonous are gaunt and starving, and the envious—the name of whose sin, *invidia*, derives from the Latin for evil or improper looking—have the eyes with which they sinned sewn shut. The Purgatorial states are simpler than those of Hell; they never involve any complex or grotesque reshaping of the human form; and they allow for real spiritual change, as the sufferings of Hell do not.

...

That each damned soul knows only the partial truth about his or her moral and symbolic state is a consistent feature of experience in the Inferno. But the *conversio* of the pilgrim and the trial of the reader depend largely on the continual effort to bridge the gap between the remarkable things which the self-limited souls say about themselves, and the ironic qualifications or additional knowledge which arise from a more detached view of their words and sufferings.

...

In some sense, then, the damned souls are like those condemned prisoners in Kafka's parable, "In the Penal Colony," criminals who are strapped to an intricate ancient machine (the "harrow") which incises into the back of each an exact account of his transgressions, executed in elaborate, hieroglyphic script.

...

Likewise, those souls trapped in that machine which is the Inferno have been turned into animated hieroglyphs of sin, pages written on by the hand of God. But in Dante, only the pilgrim and the reader seem to have the potential for real enlightenment; the damned cannot fully decipher themselves, since they have lost true *caritas*, the key to all divine coding. They also lack the free will necessary to pursue fully any restorative act of interpretation. Nor, as in Kafka, will the machinery break down or they die into oblivion, since Hell is eternal and the sinners already dead.

Further Reading Suggestions

Recommended Secondary Literature:

- * Auerbach, E. *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1929)
- * Barolini, T. *The Undivine Comedy* (1992)
- * Barolini, T. *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (2006)
- * Gilson, E. *Dante and Philosophy*. Trans. David More (1949)
- * Thompson, D. *Dante's Epic Journeys* (1974)
- * Waley, D. *The Italian City Republics* (1960)

You can find a full list of suggestions for further reading and secondary literature on all of the primary texts in these booklets on the website:

<https://www.notestoliterature.com/twelve-books-to-have>

About Notes to Literature

Notes is an e-learning project that offers personalised higher-education tuition in European literature, history and philosophy. At its core are 12 short courses on modern and classical authors, including (among others) Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Karl Marx, and James Joyce. The courses can be taken on a one-to-one or a small group basis, and starting dates are flexible. Just sign up for modules of interest on the website. Notes was set up with the specific idea of creating a short series of courses that would provide adult and young adult learners with a foundational, integrated and critical study of the history of Western thought and literature. This idea reflects our belief that creative and critical response to this tradition has an important role to play in understanding our current selves and predicaments, as well as in imagining and fashioning our possible futures.

If you would like more information about Notes to Literature, please do get in touch with me at jonathan@notestoliterature.com or visit the website: notestoliterature.com.

If you are a school, or a company, and would like to inquire about arranging courses for your students or employees, please reach out. I can provide further details on the different kinds of approaches and services I offer depending on the particular learning contexts.

If you would like to pursue further independent reading on any of the authors in the booklet, or if you are setting up a reading group, I'm always happy to send on reading lists and guided reading questions that might be helpful for your discussions.

And of course, if you are interested in taking a course with Notes, I'd be delighted to hear from you. I offer free no-obligation meetings to discuss your goals, talk about some aspects of my approach, and think about how the courses could be tailored for you.

Happy reading.



About Me : Jonathan Gallagher

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: <https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work>

<https://edinburgh.academia.edu/JonathanGallagher>