



## “Sinners and Saints in Dante’s *Commedia*”

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Week Two: *Inferno* 1-3, 5, 10  
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## Recapitulation of Week One

- Dante is the father of Italian, though not the inventor of Italian, nor is he the first Italian poet. He is part of a “fourth wave” of Italian poets ([1] the first Italian poets write in Old Occitan, [2] Sicilian poets at the court of Federico II, [3] *siculo-toscani* and Bolognesi in the Communes of northern Italy, [4] Dante & Company])
- Dante writes the *Comedy* while in exile and amidst a fractured and divisive political background
- both Liberal Italy and the Church claim Dante
- Italy’s literary unification precedes and perhaps supercedes its political unification (1861)
- The Church calls Dante “ours” (Pope Paul VI, Pope Benedict XV) despite Dante’s willingness to condemn popes and others to hell in the *Comedy*, and despite Dante’s argument, in the *De monarchia*, that the pope ought to concentrate on being Christ’s vicar on earth (“the two suns [Emperor and Pope]”)
- the *Comedy* presents a unified cosmos, consisting of “death, love, and God” that ends with God himself, who has “bound the universe in a single volume” (see also *Letter to Cangrande*)
- the *Inferno* is not enough - we must read on through *Purgatory* and *Paradise*
- “From the abyss of crimes punished, through the serene realms where human spirits purify themselves, toward the arduous summits of perfection, to which a multiplicity of ways lead to holiness and splendor, there are those who model the many different forms that holiness takes -- panegyrics woven for St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Peter Damian, St. Benedict of Norcia, St. Romuald, St. Bernard -- all rising toward a summit.” (*motu proprio* of Pope Paul VI, 1965, VII centenary of Dante’s birth)

Incipit prima cantica l'opus comedie dantis d  
his q' sic in seculis que icarus diuidit esse in  
Incepit prim' nq' p'ham. sic ad totu opus

**C**omeo tel chamun d'inostra uita  
miratua p'una selua ostant  
chella diruta ma em firarrita.  
**E** quando adur quale cosa d'una  
essa selua seluaaggia - aspra - forte  
che nel pensier rinoua la paura.  
**T**anto camara che poche piu morte  
mappetatar tel ten chio introua  
d'oro tellalre cose chio uo scoua.  
**C**o non lo benedire ch'nono uirtua  
tanto era piu d'isorno aquel punto  
chella uenue ma alantona.  
**A** poi chio fin apu d'un colle guinto  
laoue eminaua quella ualle  
chemanea d'apaua ilcoz com punto  
**G**uarda inuilito emdi lesue spalle  
uelfuegia del taggy del pianeto  
chemena uenue altrui p'ogne calle  
**I**llei fu lapaua un poco cheta  
chenellago delcoz mem durata  
la nocte chio passai con tanta pietà  
come quei che cholera affannata  
uifito fuoz del pelago alla ruina  
finoige allacqua perigiosa guata  
**C**osi lammo mio tanto faggua  
fuolle anetro arimmar lo passio  
chene l'alto giamai p'fona uita  
**P**oi che polio un poco ilcorpo l'alto  
m'p'chi ma p'p'aggia d'isera  
si bel pie fermo sempre eral puo basso  
tacho quasi alcominciar tellerta  
una lenca leggier e presta molto  
ched'era maculato era ceuto in  
nomi di parti d'ingangi aluoto  
angi in perua tante amio sanuato  
chio fin p'ritenar piu uolte uolo

**T**empo era telpanapio telmatino  
il sol montaua su con quelle stelle  
che in collu quanto lamoz diuino.  
**C**esse dapaua quelle cose belle  
sichabene spar meia ragione  
diquella fieta la gicra pelle  
**O**ra tel tempo ella telcie stagione  
manosi chepaua nommi tesse  
lausta che ma parue d'un leone  
**Q**uesti p'p'era che cona me uenisse  
colla tesse - con abbiosa fame  
si che parca che lair me temesse  
**D**una lupa che tu dice brame  
sembrana chiara nella sua magrea  
emote genti se gia uiuer giame  
**Q**uesta impoze tanto d'ingame  
colla paua ch'foca d'isua uita  
chio p'ri lasp'ingia tellaltea  
**E** quale quei che uoluneri aquista  
eguenel tempo che p'ce lofice  
ch'entati suoi pensier piange elatista  
almitec la bestia l'anga p'ce  
che uenemto mincontro apoco apoco  
**D**enar chi rumaua in basso loco  
rimana agloch m'fisi offerro  
che plungo silene parca ficeo  
**Q**uanto uidi colui nelgian d'iserto  
miserere d'ime grida - allui  
qu'el che tulle ombra homo certo  
risuosemi non homo homo gia fu  
eti p'uenti mie siron lombardi  
manouani p' patria ambidui  
**A**capui foguio anco che fosse tardi  
emisi arroma socto buono aquillo  
nel tempo teli dei false bugardi

italiana



The oldest known manuscript of the *Commedia*, [Ashburnham 828](#) (c. 1r). Now held at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence. Datable to 1335 to northern Tuscany, probably Pisa or Florence.

# The Structure of the *Comedy*: Form as a Reflection of Content

- set in the Jubilee year of 1300 (March 25 or April 8) [likely composed between 1302-1321]
- The language is Dante's (Florentine) Italian, with many neologisms, provençalisms, frenchisms etc
- three canticles, each composed of 33 canti [*Inferno* has 34]
- contains 14,233 verses, almost all of which are in *terzine* (tercets)
- Dante uses *terza-rima* (a method of rhyming by which the second verse of every *terzina* provides the rhyme for the first and third verses of the successive tercet)
- the meter is *endecasillabo* (hendecasyllable), wherein there is a stress on the tenth syllable, which is (usually) the second-to-last syllable. There is another stress on the fourth (*a minore*) or on the sixth (*a maggiore*):
  - Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore (Guido Guinizzelli)  
○ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
  - Nel mez-zo del cam-min di nos-tra vi-ta (Dante, *Inferno* 1.1)  
○ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
  - Mi ri-tro-vai per u-na sel-va os-cu-ra (Dante, *Inferno* 1.2)  
○ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

- Inferno:

- the *selva oscura* (canti 1, 2)
- Gate of Hell (canto 3)
- Circle One (canto 4, Limbo)
- Circle Two (canto 5, lust)
- Circle Three (canto 6, gluttony)
- Circle Four (canto 7, avarice, prodigality)
- Circle Five (canti 7-8, wrath; canti 8-9, Dis)
- Circle Six (canto 10, heresy)
- Circle Seven (canti 11-17; murder, suicide, blasphemy, sodomy, usury)
- Circle Eight (canti 18-30, fraud, simony, political corruption, theft, fraudulent rhetoric, schism, falsity)
- Circle Nine (canti 32-34, treachery)

**TO CRITICIZE  
THE CRITIC  
AND OTHER  
WRITINGS  
BY T.S. ELIOT**

“No verse seems to demand greater literalness in translation than Dante’s, because no poet convinces one more completely that the word he had used is the word he wanted, and that no other will do.”

(T.S. Eliot, “What Dante Means to Me,” 1950)

“May those ladies who aided Amphion  
to build the walls of Thebes now aid my verse,  
that **the telling be no different from the  
fact.**” (*Inferno* 32.10-12)

Ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso  
ch'aiutaro Anfione a chiuder Tebe,  
**sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso.**  
(*Inferno* 32.10-12)

## Dante's metapoetic declaration: *Inferno* 32

S'io avessi le rime aspre e chiocce,  
come si converrebbe al tristo buco  
sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce,  
io premerei di mio concetto il suco  
più pienamente; ma perch' io non  
l'abbo,  
non senza tema a dicer mi conduco;  
ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo  
discriver fondo a tutto l'universo,  
né da lingua che chiami mamma o  
babbo.  
Ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso  
ch'aiutaro Anfione a chiuder Tebe,

Had I the crude and scrannel rhymes to suit  
the melancholy hole upon which all  
the other circling crags converge and rest,  
the juice of my conception would be pressed  
more fully; but because I feel their lack,  
I bring myself to speak, yet speak in fear;  
for it is not a task to take in jest,  
to show the base of all the universe —  
nor for a tongue that cries out, “mama,” “papa”.  
But may those ladies now sustain my verse  
who helped Amphion when he walled up Thebes,  
**so that my tale not differ from the fact.**  
(*Inf.* 32.1-12)

## The appearance of common themes in vertical cantos

Rispuosemi: "Così com'io t'amai  
nel *mortal corpo*, così t'amo sciolta:  
però m'arresto; ma tu perché vai?"  
(*Purgatorio* 2.88-90).

"Even as I loved you in my mortal flesh (**mortal corpo**), he said,  
so do I love you freed from it - yes, I will stay.  
And you, what takes you on this journey?"  
(*Purgatorio* 2.88-90).

Io rispuosi: "Madonna, sì devoto  
com'esser posso più, ringrazio lui  
lo qual dal *mortal mondo* m' ha remoto.  
Ma ditemi: che son li segni bui  
di *questo corpo*, che là giuso in terra  
fan di Cain favoleggiare altrui?"  
(*Paradiso* 2.46-50).

"My Lady, with absolute devotion  
I offer thanks to Him  
who has removed me from the world of death (**mortal mondo**).  
But tell me, what are the dark spots on this body (**questo corpo**)  
that make those down on earth repeat their preposterous tales of  
Cain?"  
(*Paradiso* 2.46-50)

Io ch'era d'ubidir disideroso,  
non gliel celai, ma tutto gliel' apersi;  
ond' ei levò le ciglia un poco in suso;  
poi disse: "Fieramente furo avversi  
a me e a miei primi e a mia parte,  
sì che per due fiata li dispersi."  
"S'ei fur cacciati, ei tornar d'ogne parte,"  
rispuos' io lui, "l'una e l'altra fiata;  
ma i vostri non appreser ben quell' arte." (*Inferno* 10.43-51)

Noi salavam per una pietra fessa,  
che si moveva e d'una e d'altra parte,  
sì come l'onda che fugge e s'appressa.  
"Qui si conviene usare un poco d'arte,"  
cominciò l' duca mio, "in accostarsi  
or quinci, or quindi al lato che si parte." (*Purgatorio* 2.7-12)

Vero è che, come forma non s'accorda  
molte fiata a l'intenzion de l'arte,  
perch' a risponder la materia è sorda,  
così da questo corso si diparte  
talor la creatura, c'ha podere  
di piegar, così pinta, in altra parte;  
e si come veder si può cadere  
foco di nube, sì l'impeto primo  
l'atterra torto da falso piacere. (*Paradiso* 1.130-138)

Leva dunque, lettore, a l'alte rote  
meo la vista, dritto a quella parte  
dove l'un moto e l'altro si percuote;  
e li comincia a vagheggiar ne l'arte  
di quel maestro che dentro a sé l'ama,  
tanto che mai da lei l'occhio non parte. (*Paradiso* 10.7-12)

I, who desirous of obeying was,  
Concealed it not, but all revealed to him;  
Whereat he raised his brows a little upward.  
Then said he: "Fiercely adverse have they been  
To me, and to my fathers, and my party;  
So that two several times I scattered them."  
"If they were banished, they returned on all sides,"  
I answered him, "the first time and the second;  
But yours have not acquired that art aright."

We mounted upward through a rifted rock,  
which undulated to this side and that,  
Even as a wave receding and advancing.  
"Here it behoves us use a little art,"  
Began my Leader, "to adapt ourselves  
Now here, now there, to the receding side."

True is it, that as oftentimes the form  
Accords not with the intention of the art,  
Because in answering is matter deaf,  
So likewise from this course doth deviate  
Sometimes the creature, who the power possesses,  
Though thus impelled, to swerve some other way,  
(In the same wise as one may see the fire  
Fall from a cloud,) if the first impetus  
Earthward is wrested by some false delight.

Lift up then, Reader, to the lofty wheels  
With me thy vision straight unto that part  
Where the one motion on the other strikes,  
And there begin to contemplate with joy  
That Master's art, who in himself so loves it  
That never doth his eye depart therefrom.

## “The Abyss of Crimes Punished”: Sinners in the Inferno

*Inferno* 1: Dante has lost his way; he encounters the three beasts; meets Virgil

*Inferno* 2: Dante is uncertain and fearful; Dante “meets” Beatrice through Virgil; Dante’s hope is renewed

*Inferno* 3: the (in)famous Gate of Hell; first shades (the ‘neutrals’); the infernal boatman Charon

*Inferno* 5: Second Circle of Hell (lust); encounter with Minos; ancient shades (Semiramis, Dido, Cleopatra); ‘modern’ shades (Francesca and Paolo)

## How does Dante describe sinners and Hell?

1. ...Loco eterno / ove udirai le disparate strida, / vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti, / ch'a la seconda morte ciascuna grida" (*Inferno* 1.114-117)

(“...Through an eternal place / where you shall hear despairing cries / and see those ancient souls in pain / as they bewail their second death”)

1. E io a lui: “Poeta, io ti richieggo..../che tu mi meni là dov’or dicesti, / sì ch’io veggia la porta di San Pietro / e coloro cui tu fai cotanti mesti.” (*Inf.* 1.130, 133-135)

(“And I answered: “Poet, I entreat you..../lead me to the realms you’ve just described / that I may see St. Peter’s gate / and those you tell me are so sorrowful.”)

1. “Ma dimmi la cagion che non ti guardi / de lo scender qua giuso in questo centro / de l’ampio loco ove tornar tu ardi.” (*Inferno* 2.82-84)

(“But tell me why you do not hesitate to descend into the center of the earth from the unbounded space you long for?”)

1. Intra per lo cammino alto e silvestro. (*Inf.* 2.142)  
(I entered on the deep and savage way.)

## How does Dante describe sinners and Hell?

- “Città dolente” (‘city of woe’) (*Inferno* 3.1)
- “Eterno dolore” (‘eternal pain’) (*Inferno* 3.2)
- “Perduta gente” (‘lost people’) (*Inferno* 3.3)
- “Le genti dolorose” (‘miserable sinners’) (*Inferno* 3.17)
- “L’anime triste” (‘wretched souls’) (*Inferno* 3.35)
- “Misericordia e giustizia li sdegna” (‘mercy and justice hold [sinners] in contempt’) (*Inferno* 3.50)
- “Sciagurati” (‘wretches’) (*Inferno* 3.64)
- “Anime prave” (‘wicked souls’) (*Inferno* 3.84)
- “Tenebre etterne” (‘eternal darkness’) (*Inferno* 3.87)

## *Inferno* 1 and 2

1. “the realms [Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise] [he] has just described.” (*Inferno* 1)
2. “I am made such”, says she to Virgil, “by God’s grace / that *your affliction* does not touch, nor can these fires assail me” (*Inferno* 2. 91-93).
3. “not rebellious and not faithful to God, who held themselves apart” (*Inf.* 3.38-39).
4. “Io non Enea, io non Paolo sono”, he says (*Inferno* 2.32). ‘I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul.
5. “holy Rome and her dominion” (v. 21); the journey of Virgil’s protagonist “prepared the Papal mantle” (v. 27). (*Inf.* 2)
6. “‘If,’ says Virgil to Dante, ‘I have rightly understood your words, your spirit is assailed by cowardice’” (vv. 43-45). The Latin poet attempts to allay Dante’s fears; he recounts how he was called by Beatrice; she in turn relays that it was St. Lucy, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, who requested that Beatrice “help the one, Dante, who loved you so that for your sake he left the vulgar herd” (*Inferno* II, v. 105).
7. What are you waiting for?,” asks Virgil. “Why, why do you delay? Why do you let such cowardice rule your heart? Why are you not more spirited and sure, when three such blessed ladies care for you in Heaven’s court?” (vv. 121-125)

## *Inferno 2*

“And as one who unwills what he has willed, / changing his intent on second thought / so that he quite gives over what he has begun, / such a man was I on that dark slope.” (*Inferno* 2.37-42)

From his initial doubts and cowardice, Dante is reinvigorated, buoyed, by Virgil’s account of Beatrice’s comforting words. His second thoughts are countered by the radiant sun that is Beatrice’s speech: “As little flowers, bent and closed / with chill of night, when the sun / lights them, stand all open on their stems, / such, in my failing strength, did I become” (vv. 127-131). Dante, newly resolute, concludes the second canto with an allusion to the very first verses of the *Comedy*: “Intraì per **lo cammino** alto e **silvestro**”: “I entered,” he writes in the final verse of *Inferno* II, “on the deep and savage way”. He uses the Italian adjective, *silvestro*, from the noun *selva*, “wood”, with which he had begun his epic: “Nel mezzo del **cammin** di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una **selva** oscura.”

## Dante's distinction from the sinners of *Inferno* 3

1. “Woe unto you, you wicked souls, / give up all hope of ever seeing heaven. / I come to take you to the other shore, / into eternal darkness, into heat and chill” (*Inferno* 3.84-87).
1. “And you there, living soul, / move aside from these now dead. / .../ By another way, another port, not here, you’ll come to shore and cross. / A lighter ship must carry you.” (*Inf.* 3.88-93)
1. “removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis”),

## *Inferno 5*

1. “[a]s doves, summoned by desire” and “borne by their will to the sweet nest” [vv. 82-84].

1. Poscia ch'io ebbi 'l mio dottore udito  
nomar le donne antiche e ' cavalieri,  
pietà mi giunse, e fui quasi smarrito. (*Inf.* 5.70-72)

(When I heard my teacher name the ladies / and the knights of old, pity overcame me / and I almost lost my senses.)

1. The pilgrim then hears from Francesca how Love (fantastic anaphora “Amor...Amor...Amor”) has caused them to end up here in Hell (*Inf.* 5.100-108):

Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,  
prese costui de la bella persona  
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende. 102

Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,  
mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,  
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona. 105

Amor condusse noi ad una morte.  
Caina attende chi a vita ci spense".  
Queste parole da lor ci fuor porte. 108

## *Inferno 5*

1. Quando rispuosi, cominciai: “Oh lasso,  
quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio  
menò costoro al doloroso passo!”  
Poi mi rivolsi a loro e parla' io,  
e cominciai: “Francesca, i tuoi martiri  
a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio. (*Inf.* 5.112-117)

(In answer I replied: “Oh, / how many sweet thoughts, what great desire, / have brought  
them to this woeful pass? / Then I turned to them again to speak / and I began:  
“Francesca, your torments make me weep for grief and pity)

1. Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse,  
l'altro piangëa; sì che di pietade  
io venni men così com'io morisse.  
E caddi come corpo morto cade. (*Inf.* 5.139-142)

(While the one spirit said this / the other wept, so that for pity / I swooned as if in death. / And down I fell as a dead body falls.)

22. Theology and philosophy also have a consistent relation with beauty: because beauty lends its garment and ornamentation to their doctrines; with sweetness of song and the visibility of the figurative and plastic arts, beauty opens the way, so that its precious teachings may be communicated to many. At times, high dissertation and subtle reasoning are inaccessible to the untrained and to the many who hunger for the bread of truth; they are otherwise informed through sensing and appreciating beauty's influence, it is more easily through this vehicle that the truth shines and nourishes them. This understood, justifies Dante as the "lord of sublime song", for whom beauty became the servant of goodness and truth, and goodness the subject of beauty.