

Unveiling Mythopoeia: A Short Essay on the Dantean Aesthetic of Contrapasso

Jake Bernstein

LITTRANS 253: Of Demons and Angels. Dante's Divine Comedy

Professor Jelena Todorović

April 2, 2021

Pride comes before the fall, and few can fall further than those who think highly of themselves. In the case of Jeopardy's greatest contestant, Ken Jennings's humiliation at the hands of IBM's Watson is such a fall from the heights of pride. As the folk hero John Henry was bested by the steam drill, human technology's advancement made a once proud man obsolete. In the face of this obsolescence, Jennings took the loss with a healthy dose of humility. In his TED Talk, the seventy-four-game win streak grand champion remarked that "It's nice to see proud people get their comeuppance," and that is why his story, or that of John Henry, is ever compelling and resonant within cultural memory. In this sort of cosmic justice, the catharsis, punishment, and account for personal and interpersonal faults are best captured by the contrapasso found in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri. However, at first glance, through all the horrors and wonders, the place of the sinners and the saved, the nature of sin, often doesn't seem to follow a stringent rule or logic. For example, in purgatory, the prideful carry great weight and the wrathful choke on smoke, both chanting prayers as they suffer. While the levels of his cosmology are meticulously crafted, the placement of souls can seem contradictory to the uninitiated; the placement is at times not logical, but they are ultimately satisfactory because the feeling of catharsis they evoke is aesthetically pleasing. In the one-hundred cantos spanning the depths of Hell, the heights of purgatory, and the heavens of paradise, Dante's contrapasso, Dante's punishment, redemption, and salvation sin, and sinners serve to complete an aesthetic rather than form an absolute theology.

To better address the Dantean aesthetic of contrapasso, aspects of its non-Christian aestheticism will be assessed. Before diving into the text, it is essential to note that Dante is not alone in the Christian appropriation of nontraditional symbology into its liturgy—or, in Dante's case, his literature. One very brief example of this adoption of symbology is that of the

aestheticism of St. Augustine. From a young age, Augustine adopted a Manichean aesthetic that permeated his cosmology.¹ In the absolute and eternal clash, the duality of good and evil is present in works such as Augustine's *City of God*, where this Manichean aesthetic features prominently. What was classically regarded as sin in the Christian world was reimagined as the eschatological embattlement between good and evil. Dante mirrors the borrowing and cross-pollination of cultural iconography in adopting Greek imagery to fill his *Inferno*. The first inhabitants to come to mind are the beastly Cerberus and the demonic boatman Charon. Dante calls the boatman "*Caron dimonio (Inf. III, 109)*,"—the demon. In contrast to his classical appearance, the once ferryman of the River Styx is now the host of dull embers and a fitful temper, striking all who clamor within his oar's reach. Cerberus also shares this reimagining. As one of the fierce guardians of Tartarus, the three-headed Cerberus is now chained to the muck of the third circle of Dante's Hell, "His eyes are bloodred; greasy, black, his beard; / his belly bulges, and his hands are claws; / his talons tear and flay and rend the shades. (*Inf. VI, 16-18*)."
 A far cry from the virile beast slain by the great Hercules, this hound is bloated and ravenous to embody his surroundings better—this new perspective, this synergy with his worldbuilding, is the foundation that Dante creates his aesthetic.

With Dante's otherworldly aesthetic divergent from the established Christian understanding, the next step is to examine what could be conceived as inconsistency or lack of cohesion in his vision of sin. One very contentious point issue is Dante's attitudes towards Muslims and Jews. Before assessing Dante's tone, it is vital to note that he incorporates much of Judaic and Islamic traditions within his cantos. A distinct feature of his worldbuilding is his conceptions' eschatological nature; the linearity and momentum of his worlds share much in

¹ John E. Toews, *The Original Story of Sin*, (2013) 73-89.

common with Jewish and Islamic traditions. For example, in *Purgatorio*, Dante focuses much on the indissolubility of the body and the soul; eschatologically, the form of the body in the afterlife, or the absence of it, is generated by the soul and is available until the Last Judgement. However, this may not solely be born from Dante's reimagining:

For example, Christian and Muslim eschatology coincide in many aspects because they developed in parallel—but independently—from remote, pre-Islamic sources. Or they coincide because of a fundamental cultural parallelism or a universal similarity in the way human psychology conceives of the otherworld.²

The notion that these adoptions are not to be interpreted as understanding but instead as happenstance feels unsatisfactory and requires more evidence, more than superficial name-calling as seen in the aforementioned Hellenic figures. It is easy to point to the treatment of figures like Caiaphas and Judas and call Dante Alighieri an anti-Semite; it is equally easy to point to his treatment of the prophet Muhammad and call him an Islamophobe. Arguably, pointing out excerpts in this way is evidently reductive. While Dante does reserve the lowest low in Hell as “Judecca,” a name for a Jewish ghetto, a closer look reveals more complex intertextuality to his work. Besides the stereotypical portrayal of Caiaphas and Judas, the *Commedia's* lengths contain no explicit insults or pejorative references to Jews. The anti-Semitic use of the lines, “Be men, and not like sheep gone mad, so that / the Jew who lives among you not deride you! (*Par.* V, 80-81).” seems to be molded by the ever-present blood libel in European discourse rather than by Dante's prejudice; in the context of *Paradiso*, these lines are anything but disparaging. In fact, from the burning tombs of the heretics to the users and counterfeiters, Dante does not mention one Jew in their ranks.

If this incongruence is true, then the Dantean nature of sin does not rest purely in either his contemporary or traditional concepts of sin. For Dante, his account of sin seems rooted in a

² Vicente Cantarino, *Dante Studies*, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society, (1965) 42.

soul's defining features, the mark that brands how someone lived their life. All three of the sinners devoured by Satan, at the bottom of Cocytus, the very bottom of Hell itself, all committed suicide, but they are not higher up in the seventh circle reserved for the violent; Dido, who also took her own life, is forever punished for her lust, a less severe sin than killing herself.

The punishment encapsulates what they embody, what life they lived:

A single act may or may not accurately represent a person's character, and the only way to be sure is to describe the salient characteristics of both the action and the underlying dispositions, a process in which literary modes are of immeasurable help. Dante's presentations often do highlight a single act, but they do so because that act magnifies and focuses the central features of a person.³

Caiaphas's most salient sin is his abandonment of Christ, his hypocrisy; Judas betrayed Christ, his suicide is not what brands his soul; Mohammad preached contrary to Christ, his blasphemy is not as significant as the discord he brought into the world. The case of Pier della Vigna best demonstrates this distinction between what marks the soul. Pier was falsely accused of *lèse-majesté*—insulting the monarch—by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, and as punishment, his sight was extinguished, forever condemned to darkness. In his despair, he dashed his brains out on the floor of his cell. Pier's disembodied voice describes the condition of the wood that harpies peck at:

Like other souls, we shall seek out the flesh
that we have left but none of us shall wear it;
it is not right for any man to have
what he himself has cast aside. (*Inf.* XIII, 103-106).

Those who forsook their God-given body, no matter how disfigured, are still made in the image of God, and thus their soul is stripped from the body they willfully abandoned. Pier believed in his innocence, and if he continued to live with his blindness, God would forgive the treachery he did not commit. His rejection of God's grace is what damns him to be the perch for the harpies, to be pecked at, to be reminded of what he forsook—this is *contrapasso*. The irony, the sort of

³ Lee H. Yearly, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, (2004) 327.

old testament, Hammurabi code that these punishments, purging, and redemptions of sins forms the Dantean aesthetic.

Returning to the sin that initiated this discussion, the redemption of the prideful is one of Dante's best *contrapasso*. On the first terrace of Mount Purgatory, the most serious of the forgivable sins is purged by the sinners carrying heavy stones and boulders, forcing their prideful gaze to the feet of others. Dante encounters Umberto Aldobrandeschi, who was a great and well-known noble. Umberto, unable to look Dante in the eyes, imparts that, "Until God has been satisfied, I bear / this burden here among the dead because / I did not bear this load among the living. (*Pur.* XI, 70-72)." —this is pure *comeuppance*; to see those who had their heads held high in life forced to grovel in a Sisyphian fashion is *contrapasso*. Dante's account of pride, of the root of sin, is not predetermined or vengeful; it is poetic. The nature of sin then does not deal in Christian concepts of right and wrong, Manichean good and evil, Augustinian ideals of angelic and sinful, Aristotelian virtue and vice, or black and white. For Dante, sin is not to be viewed as such. Sin is the conscious, the purposeful part of the self. In the darkness of the terrace reserved for the wrathful, Marco Lombardo echoes this concept of free will and sin:

You, who are free, depend; that Force engenders
The mind in you, outside heaven's sway.
Thus, if the present world has gone astray,
In you is the cause, in you it's to be sought; (*Pur.* XVI, 80-83).

Upon interpreting these tired whispers, muffled by the eternally billowing plumes, the choking realization of the human condition's culpability encases the entire *Commedia* in this beautiful sense of fallibility, vulnerability. To be wrathful is to be blind to a sense of justice and to suffocate and suppress natural and true feelings; piercing through the haze, the wrathful invoke *Agnus Dei*, the lamb of God, while they continue to gasp for their penance. The err that suffocates those in the third terrace of purgatory is the same err that smothers all the other

pilgrims in purgatory, the saints in heaven, and the denizens of hell. This erring marks all who inhabit creation. Dante interweaves his aesthetic beauty with the unbroken thread of human choice.

The adhesive that binds Dante's worldbuilding is the aesthetic of *contrapasso*; the sin and the err in humankind are best understood in the totality of rawness. Dante's argument for human errs and, the hereafter shares many similarities with Plato's myth of Er. At the top of Mount Purgatory, the Edenic paradise on Earth, Dante chooses to reference the end of *The Republic* with the inclusion of the River Lethe. As Socrates argues against Glaucon for the indissolubility of the soul, Dante's inclusion of Lethe at the top of Purgatory is the final word on where his intentions lie; his goal is to utilize myth to discuss the metaphysics of the soul and build upon his aestheticism. There are moments where modern sensibilities may clash with the work's ideas, but the mark that defines this work's soul cannot so easily be discounted. What elevates the *Commedia* is simply not cultural relevance alone; the work of Dante is indelible not just for its technical skill, his craftsmanship of *Terza Rima*, or the commentary on his time—the epic has become indelible because of the reader's ability to glean something regardless of their understanding of the complexities and intertextuality. The mythopoesis of Dante captures the viscera of human emotion, a universal language, surely felt through even the most basic translation.

Bibliography

Cantarino, Vicente. "Dante and Islam: History and Analysis of a Controversy (1965)." *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 125 (2007): 37-55.

Dante Alighieri, Allen Mandelbaum, and Barry Moser. 1980. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: a Verse Translation with Intros. & Commentary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Toews, John E. "Augustine's Theology of Original Sin (354–430)." *The Story of Original Sin*, 73-89. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Lutterworth Press, 2013.

Yearley, Lee H. "Genre and the Attempt to Render Pride: Dante and Aquinas." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2004): 313-39.