

# Commentary on canto i of dante's inferno



With concision and swiftness, Dante introduces us to the world of his Christian epic. That it is to be an allegory is apparent from the first stanza, with its mention of a "dark wood" (p. 368, l. 3). The poet finds himself in this menacing wood "midway in our life's journey" (p. 368, l. 1). He does not say it is in the middle of his personal life history that he discovers himself isolated in a wasteland. We are to understand that he is one of mankind—a representative, seemingly, of whatever is universal in the human experience.

As he describes his terror at being lost in "so rank, so arduous a wilderness" (p. 368, l. 5), he does not personalize the experience very much. Details that would identify him as the individual he is are withheld in favor of more archetypal expressions of fear and the pain of knowing that, however he got to this place, it is a "valley of evil" (p. 368, l. 13). The effect of this handling is to create both a distance from the sense of lived reality and a sort of opening into which it is not very difficult to place oneself.

Dante is indicating that, as he is the protagonist of his own tale, so we are all protagonists of separate but classically similar tales wherein such feelings and apprehensions as the poet describes are as familiar as a certain type of recurrent dream. In other words, it is as if one had already dreamed what Dante is recounting as an "actual" undreamed experience. Since this is a poem based on a Christian reading of human experience, there is a shaping that seems rather obviously based on scriptural images and basic theology: "the straight road" (p. 368, l. 2), "God's grace" (p. 368, l. 9), "the True Way" (p. 368, l. 12).

This adherence to a formalized theological scheme and diction is mirrored in the formalized verse scheme, with its regular, intertwining rhymes. As the

narrative unfolds there is a sense of inevitability in each episode. Just as each rhyme seems pre-determined by its predecessors and its place in its stanza, the appearance of “ the little hill’ (p. 368, l. 15), the Leopard, the Lion, the She-Wolf, the figure of Virgil seem mysteriously to emerge from within a psychically deep fabric of foreknowledge.

As portentous as the images and episodes all are, they are none of them truly startling. There is little Inferno 4 sense of surprise in what occurs. There is a generalized curiosity about the fabulous details—to what bizarre and perverse revelations about hell and its denizens the whole narrative will tend later on. But there is also some sense of dread that the dreariness and morbidity of the situation, and the density of the verse at the opening of the poem will prove to be its dominant traits throughout.

Nevertheless, there is a narrative “ pull” to the poetic technique that, if not irresistible exactly, is at least very powerful. The phenomenon of curiosity may actually account for a good deal of the allure that this first Canto of the Inferno exerts. Qualifying the above observations somewhat, the three allegorical beasts give the impression of being first installments in an overall package of intense, protracted imagery and storytelling. The translator’s notes identify the beasts as representatives of particular types of sin, but the identifications are not fully apparent in the text.

It appears not quite certain “ who” the beasts are, allegorically speaking. When Virgil tells the poet that the She-Wolf who “ tracks down all, kills all, and knows no glut” (p. 368, l. 92) will eventually be overthrown by the great and glorious Greyhound who rises “ between Feltro and Feltro” (p. 368, l. 98), and when the notes tell us that by this Greyhound Dante means a

certain Italian political leader of his acquaintance, how credible is it that the She-Wolf represents Incontinence? Can lust be vanquished through political governance?

It is, to say the least, a strange notion, however elevated as a gesture of praise and encouragement to a promising aristocrat. By the same token one might ask in what sense, with regard also to the She-Wolf, it can be said that " Envy first released her on the world" (p. 368, l. 104)? Despite the belief that they are both sinful, there seems no clear causal connection between Incontinence and Envy—the assertion is puzzling. So it is not as if the allegorical structure of the Canto does not remain somewhat murky—again the analogy of dreaming comes to mind.

It is certainly dreamlike, in the wish-fulfillment sense, that the poet/narrator meets the spirit of Virgil, his artistic forebear and idol, just at his moment of greatest peril when the lustful She- Inferno 5 Wolf has driven him back into " the sunless wood" (p. 368, l. 60). For Dante, it would seem, salvation is as much a matter of poetic genealogy and inspiration as it is of Christian piety. Virgil offers himself as a guide to the nether regions of the universe, but it is as a guide to his artistic work that Dante acknowledges him during their initial encounter. Glory and light of poets!

Now may that zeal And love's apprenticeship that I poured out On your heroic verses serve me well. (p. 368, ll. 79-81) What contemporary American poet has not, in all probability, dreamed of being led through the maze of the world's indifference into the light of fame by, say, the ghost of Walt Whitman? Murk is our aid in the enterprise of self-praise, so akin to the configurations of dream. In dreams, however, we often strive in vain to

achieve a balance between the feelings of triumph we want to experience and the sense of personal limitations that dogs us and frustrates our self-esteem.

Dante actualizes this balance by his poetic depiction of himself as the humble admirer of his hero, who also enjoys that same hero's personal attention and self-denying gift of advice tending to his, Dante's, salvation. One is prompted to ask oneself just how large an ego Dante must have had—just how full a sense of personal triumphalism must have informed his inner life, that he could have made himself both the universal human, the Everyman of his own allegory, and the exceptional being whom a great Ascended Spirit attends on with such tender concern.

By the end of the Canto he learns that he is even to be afforded privileged access to Purgatory, the “ burning mountain” (p. 368, l. 111) and to Paradise itself, “ the blessed choir” (p. 369, l. 114). Whatever the follies that brought him to the “ dark wood” and its spiritual perils to begin with, in his own self-conception it is clear that he is destined for great things. Literary history seems to have borne him out in this. We are still writing essays about him 800 years later.