

Pitiless piety



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Pity plays a huge role in Dante's *Inferno*. It is the key emotion that Dante confronts during his passage through hell. Those in hell feel sadness, and this sadness, being an ordinary human emotion, is expected to result in the ordinary human response of pity from those who observe, but cannot share the sorrow. This normal human response is incorrect, since those feeling the sorrow are doing so on account of their transgressions, and in paying their penance are unworthy of receiving any pity. This is the complication that Dante must reconcile with himself as he travels through the levels of hell. Dante must learn from his encounters with the sinners in order to lose his pity. This is accomplished through an understanding of the nature of the sins. These sins are divided into three main categories: indulgence in animalistic desires, the use of violence, and the use of deceit. He must also learn that the fundamental characteristic that all the sinners share is a certain vain pride that does not allow them to repent their transgressions. Dante is placed in a difficult situation; in order for him to understand the nature of the sinners, Dante must encounter them while confronting the danger of being tricked by them. They try to trick him in an attempt to obtain his pity. They also try to use him to help them overcome their limitation of not being able to know the present. Since Dante is human, he has great difficulty bypassing his natural response of pity. In order to overcome this, Dante must essentially disseminate himself from his humanity and only then will he fully transcend hell. It is ironic that only through becoming a worse human being, and committing the same transgressions that these sinners have committed, is he able to accomplish this. An important distinction is that Dante is committing these transgressions against the sinners and that seems to make his actions more

justifiable. Through the loss of human pity, Dante essentially becomes more pious and is capable of transcending hell. In the beginning of the *Inferno*, Dante is very confused. He is attempting to reconcile the fact that he is still alive with the fact that he is in hell. He does know, however, that he must attempt to leave hell. He is lucky to meet Virgil who serves as his guide. Virgil, unfortunately, has the crutch of believing that fate is absolute and that it always works to his benefit. This is a problem because in Dante's world fate is not absolute. Virgil's misplaced faith puts him and Dante in dangerous situations. A more accurate representation of their relationship than the one Dante claims is that Virgil and Dante travel through hell together, acting as each other's guide. Virgil who is jaded by his own beliefs often makes mistakes, which Dante must correct. Regardless, Dante still regards Virgil as his guide even at the end since Virgil assumes the mentor role at the outset. Dante never really shatters the illusion that Virgil is knowledgeable about hell. At the first gates of hell Dante tells Virgil " Master, their meaning is difficult for me" and Virgil seeming informed replies " Here one must leave behind all hesitation"(III, 14). Dante is somewhat comforted by this. This early reinforcement of Dante's faith in Virgil prepares him for his confrontations with the sinners. The sinners in hell exhibit limitations that their ordinary human counterparts did not have. Dante finds this difficult to comprehend initially since he is experiencing no such limitations. Virgil prepares Dante, by telling him that in hell he will encounter " those who have lost the good of the intellect" (III, 19). What this means is that those in hell have lost the ability to see into the present. They know the future but lose that knowledge when it becomes the present. Dante is their only source of knowledge dealing with the present. Consequently, all of the dead try to

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trick Dante into pitying them so that they can gain what they want from him. This limitation is first revealed to Dante by Guido who wants to know whether his son is still alive and cannot for the life (or death) of him figure it out (X, 67-69). This limitation is very distressing for the sinners and motivates them to try and take advantage of Dante. Dante is initially suckered but as he progresses through hell he becomes wiser. The sinners must then cope with their limitations. One of the most shocking things about this hell is that despite their limitations, and even though they are receiving extreme punishments, the sinners actually want to be there. They have been instilled with some sort of desire to remain in hell. The inscription on the gates of hell insinuates that love created hell. Also, when the souls are crossing over to hell, they appear to be “eager...because celestial justice spurs them on, so that their fear is turned into desire”(III, 124-126). If justice causes the sinners to want to go to hell than they must deserve their eternal fate. This is the conflict that Dante has the most difficulty with. Dante must not pity these people since they have given in to their desires. Yet even though they are doing what they desire, they still do so in extreme sorrow. Dante naturally feels pity when he sees their sorrow. Just as hell is able to turn fear into desire, it is equally capable of turning fear into compassion. Virgil is a victim of this switch. He defies it by explaining to Dante that he has been touched by the “compassion you mistake for fear”(IV, 21); Virgil has been so deceived that he believes that compassion has been turned into fear. Dante initially accepts Virgil’s reversed definition and as a result feels compassion for all. Although compassion in hell is only intended for those who never had a chance to be anywhere other than hell, it becomes more lax and is extended to sinners as well. Dante encounters Francesca de

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Rimani who has committed the sin of adultery. She attempts to receive absolution from him by explaining her actions to him in the guise of love, “Love, that releases no beloved from loving, took hold of me so strongly through his beauty, that as you see, it has not left me yet”(V, 103-104). Although her words are very poetic and seem to be blaming love for her folly, a closer inspection reveals that this is not the case. What really motivated her to commit this sin is lust. This can be inferred since she says that the love is derived from “his beauty”. Even more obvious to Dante should be that she would not be in hell if she had not done something wrong. She likens her love to the romance of Camelot, which is the saddest romance of all. Dante only pities her because he believes her lie; “Francesca, your afflictions move me to tears of sorrow and of pity”(V, 116-117). Dante pities her because he believes that she was punished for true love. Due to her deception, she may feel better about herself from his pity, but it will not provide her with absolution. Dante’s quickness to award sympathy continues to pose a problem for him since he is showing sympathy for condemned acts. Before he will be able to rid himself of this danger, Dante needs to understand the true nature of the sinners and why they are damned. Dante does not begin to understand the true reason that the sinners are in hell until he encounters Farinata. He finds that even in damnation, Farinata is elitist and contemptuous. He begins to understand that this man, who was otherwise a hero, has been condemned to hell since he is unable to detach himself from his vanity. Dante begins to see that all those punished in hell are punished due to an inability to recant their beliefs. Although Dante begins to understand this, he does not get far enough since he still pities Farinata, and the other sinners. His pity is once again extended to Pierre de

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la Vigna. Pierre who committed suicide has actively separated his body and soul and thus is given the body of a tree in this perverse punishment. Dante finds this out when he is reprimanded for snapping a branch off of Pierre. Pierre frightens him with the response “ Are you without all sentiment of pity?”(XIII, 36). Dante must feel pity for this sorrowful individual who in utter desperation took his own life and now must live an eternity as a tree. Yet even Pierre deserves this fate. Pierre is being punished for his self-absorption. He believed that only he was important and that jealousy of him caused everyone to turn against him. Thus he was left lonely and could only feel sorrow; “ my delighted honors turned into sadness”(XIII, 69). Feeling that he could escape the pain of sorrow through death he was “ made... unjust against my own self”(XIII, 72). Even though this is an act of desperation, pity is not justified. Firstly, Pierre acknowledges that he has practiced injustice and thus must be punished for it. Secondly, if he felt he could escape his problems using death to end them, then he must not have believed in the afterlife, making him guilty of being a heretical unbeliever. Despite Pierre’s heresy, Dante continues to pity him. Dante reaches his peak of pity for Brunetto Latini. Latini is being punished for being a homosexual. Dante cannot rationalize an eternity of damnation based solely on sexual preference. Dante regards Brunetto as some sort of mentor and in his admiration of him finds himself unable to condemn him even though he is damned. Dante tells Brunetto, “ If my desire were answered totally...you’d still be among, not banished from, humanity”(XV, 79-81). Dante has gone as far as he will in pity for these individuals. In some ways he has crossed the line. Hell has toyed with his desire so that now he desires something that is sinful. He is attempting to give absolution to someone who has been

condemned by the highest authority. Latini tricks Dante into regarding the Tesoro, his major work and thus his offspring, as special. Therefore, through Dante, Latini will live forever. Even though he commits this major transgression, from this point onward, Dante's pity for the sinners diminishes. Dante still feels sorrow for others: "Your present state had fixed not scorn, but sorrow in me – and so deeply that it will only disappear slowly"(XVI, 53), but at this point he has already peaked in his sorrow and although he will still feel sorrow for others he will quickly become desensitized in hell. This occurs because as he travels deeper into hell he begins to get a better sense of what crimes these people are being punished for and why they are in hell. The upper levels contain those with animalistic desires. While these desires are condemned, they are not severe sins because they are animalistic and only selfishly indirectly harmful. The next levels deal with those who committed violence or animalistic harm. These transgressions are more severe since violence requires intention to harm another. It is not the worst transgression since it still requires a certain amount of animalism. The deepest and most damned levels deal with those who did fraudulent harm to one another. This is the worst kind of transgression, for only humans, those who have the capacity for such treachery, can perpetrate it. With a better understanding of why the sinners are being punished, Dante ultimately loses his ability to pity them. Dante finally chastises someone when he confronts Pope Nicholas III. The pope, being guilty of fraud, is unable to receive any pity from Dante "Stay as you are, for you are rightly punished"(XIX, 97). This is the first time Dante turns against someone and is thus a large step forward. This reprimand symbolizes that Dante's pity is all but gone. Virgil then embraces him. This is extremely

dangerous, as this is an embrace of the damned. This signifies that as Dante goes further into understanding hell, he comes closer to being a part of that hell. Virgil continues to guide Dante further asking him to trust in fate even when dealing with the scary Malebranche. However, as fear has previously distorted emotions and reactions in hell, it once again proves effective, this time acting as a watershed. Finally Virgil concedes that his faith in the absoluteness of fate has been misplaced (XXIII, 25-30). From this point on, Dante and Virgil are coequal even though Dante still refers to and views Virgil as his guide. Together they continue encountering the sinners. Next, Dante meets the thieves who have had their bodies changed into serpents. The punishment is to represent that those who stole now have their bodies stolen from them. Through this Dante comes to realize that all these punishments are justified and that all those in hell are deserving of their fates. The last person to make a respectable effort at receiving pity from Dante is Ulysees who uses his verbal skills to try and trick Dante, but at this point Dante knows too much to be so easily tricked. He sees that Ulysees is damned for his ability at verbal treachery. Dante's has achieved an effective working knowledge of hell. With such an understanding of hell, Dante reverses the game and plays the role of the trickster rather than the tricked. His only reason for being in hell now is to escape, and he will do this while acquiring more knowledge. He no longer feels any sorrow for those in hell, as he understands that everyone in hell deserves to be there, and that they are there since their pride does not allow them repent their sins. With no sympathy left, he tricks Guido da Montefeltro into explaining his story. Guido explains to him that he tried to preemptively repent for his sins. However, it is impossible to truly repent for something that has not already been

committed, thus he is taken to hell. This is an important lesson for Dante. Unfortunately Dante, now knowledgeable about hell, is at his worst. He tries to get Bocca degli Abati into telling him who Bocca is. Bocca does not want to do so. To achieve his means Dante tries to use deceit, the worst sin, on Bocca after already hitting him in the face; “ I am alive, and can be precious to you if you want fame”(XXXII, 91-92), but Bocca refuses telling him that flattery will not work on him. Dante threatens to resort to serious violence and Bocca still refuses. Unfortunately for Bocca he is given away by another sinner. Dante’s actions show that he is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his ends. The irony is that in order to try and get through hell Dante is committing the same acts that are responsible for putting these sinners in hell in the first place. At his current state of understanding Dante needs only one more encounter in hell. Finally Dante confronts Lucifer. By this point he has seen everything else that hell has to offer and is thus as prepared for this confrontation as possible. Nevertheless, he is warned by Virgil to “ arm yourself with fortitude” (XXXIV, 21). Even with all possible preparation, Dante still feels that he “ became, deprived of life and death” (XXXIV, 28). Even though it seems odd and scary to Dante, it is essentially this state of transience which is necessary for him to accomplish his goal of transcending hell for heaven. Only through Lucifer does Dante finally realize that “ every sorrow has its source in him (Lucifer)”(XXXIV, 37). Dante finally receives the revelation that sorrow is a quality rooted in Satan and thus leads to evil. Since it is impossible to feel pity for a being so made up of evil, Dante finally understands that pity is the greatest sin of all. He then passes Satan and through hell. From the beginning of the Inferno Dante goes through a massive transformation that is only completed at the very end. Dante goes

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from an ordinary human that suffers from the ordinary human emotion of pity to a desensitized individual that feels no compassion for the sinners whom he feels deserve their fate. The danger is that in order for Dante to accomplish this, he must commit the same sins that desensitized him in the first place. Initially Virgil acts as a guide to help him through hell, but they quickly become coequal and eventually Dante even begins to act somewhat independently of him. Nevertheless he continues to regard Virgil as his guide. Those in hell are left to feel their sorrow, which is the perfect opposite of the euphoria that those in heaven are intended to feel. At the end, Dante accomplishes a complete dissemination from his former self. Even though Dante escapes hell, it is unknown whether he will be forced to return since in order to escape he embraces the damned many times both physically and spiritually. He also commits the same transgressions as the sinners making him a sinner, however, his may be forgiven since his transgressions are against the damned and may therefore be justified. Yet, these are still sins that must be accounted for and he will need to find some way of repentance. Otherwise his own vanity will have seized him and he will be committing the ultimate crime of self-indulgence. It seems strange that Dante's path through hell is only resolved through stoicism, yet it makes sense logically. Since those who are in heaven and thus blessed need no pity, then pity is useless. It will only ever be used for those who have been damned. Using pity on heretics is heretical in and of itself and cannot be condoned. Therefore it makes sense that pity is a quality of the heretical and compassion must not be shown. The path to a pitiless existence becomes the path to piety.