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The Structure of Human Redemption as Demonstrated in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*

"*Nell' mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, ché la diritta via era smaritta.*" These are the first words in one of the most influential works in all of literature, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri's magnum opus. With these words, Dante embarks on a journey that has touched the hearts and captured the minds of countless hearts and minds since its completion in the year 1321. So great has its impact been, that it even went on to influence other great writers such as Chaucer and Milton in their respective works. Dante's 14,233-line poem tells of his journey, or quest, towards redemption and enlightenment which is divided into three distinct canticos: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Due to its immense importance in literary history, Dante's *Commedia* has long been analyzed by scholars for its rich content which seems to transcend its "apparently straightforward" narrative though, like any literary text, there is an intricately complex beauty to Dante's writing which is cannot be appreciated by quickly rummaging through its pages.

The Divine Comedy is a work that can be analyzed from a plethora of theoretical frameworks and schools of thought. Perhaps one of the most popular is its analysis through a linguistic lens due to its intricate rhyme scheme in the original language of Italian and its importance in the birthing of the Italian language itself which until that point, had been an entanglement of many various dialects. For this literary analysis however, I have chosen to analyze *The Divine Comedy* through a structuralist lens drawing upon much of the writings from

Northrop Frye in addition to utilizing some of Jeffery Jerome Cohen's monster theory. To understand the overarching structure of Dante's intricate *Commedia*, it is imperative to understand the contextual situation that Dante finds himself in at the beginning of *The Divine Comedy*.

It is worth noting, however, that to grasp the overarching journey throughout *The Divine Comedy*, it is important to understand the structure of Dante's writing itself. In his acclaimed *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye states that the path towards salvation is commonly seen in Christian-themed literature but also notes how Christian literature's central theme is that of salvation, which often, in a more concentrated form, morphs into that of assumption as demonstrated in "the comedy that stands just at the end of Dante's *Commedia*" (Frye 43). In stating this, Frye operates from the assumption that Dante, by titling his poem *Commedia*, solely utilizes the comic fictional mode. Frye expands on this by explaining that "the theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it" (Frye 43). This integration into society, however, does not fit the narrative of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, but rather Dante, being the central character in his poem, throughout his journey is attempting to integrate himself into that of God's salvation, and not that of society. This distinction is one of importance for this literary analysis as it demonstrates that though the writings of Northrop Frye are a viable tool in understanding *The Divine Comedy* from a structuralist lens, they are by no means written with the intent to solely analyze Dante's world. In her book entitled *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Lois Tyson expands on the writings of Frye. She notes that according to Frye, "all narrative is structurally related because it's all some version of some part of the quest formula" or as Frye called it, the "total quest-myth" (Tyson 211). Therefore, bearing in mind that Dante portrays

himself as the central character having fallen astray from the straight path, and also depicts his "quest" through hell, purgatory, and eventually paradise, *The Divine Comedy*, as a whole, can be seen as an intermingling of the total quest-myth and that of a sinner's journey towards salvation. Therefore, Dante, throughout *The Divine Comedy,* is not only detailing the various intricacies of his imaginative quest, but also structuralizing, via his use of allegorical narrative, spatial narrative, and symbolism, that which has captured, yet baffled, the mind of humanity: the journey towards attaining redemption.

Inferno

Dante begins his quest in the first Canto of *Inferno* with the now-famous words: "Midway in our life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood" (*Inferno*, I:1-2). In this short opening passage, Dante demonstrates one of the most central concepts of his poem as a whole: the ubiquitous nature of his journey. Though the poem discusses Dante's journey, his usage of the phrase "our life" intentionally shows the reader that the journey he is about to embark on bears a universal-like quality that all humanity can relate to. It is important to also realize that Dante, within these opening lines, is not only universalizing his journey but is also giving key insight into the context of his journey. In line 1: "Midway through our life's journey," Dante is referencing the then-common belief that an individual's life was on average 70 years. This notion stemmed from the Biblical verse found in Psalms 90:10 which states, "As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years" (NASB Bible, Ps. 90:10). He follows his opening line with an immediate shift towards his environment, setting the scene and offering insight into his first major use of symbolization. "I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood" (*Inferno,* I:2-3). Dante's usage of the dark wood is an instance of symbolization that has been found in much literature

before and after his *Commedia*. Frye defines a symbol as "any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention" (Frye 71). This structuralist ideal is immensely useful in analyzing Dante's work as he heavily draws on the usage of symbols throughout his allegorical poem.

This usage of symbolism is vividly seen in the following lines of the first Canto as Dante recounts the first obstacles that hinder him from attaining and reaching the illuminated hill of salvation. Dante states, "I found myself before a little hill and lifted my eyes. Its shoulders glowed already with the sweet rays of that planet whose virtue leads men straight on every road." (*Inferno,* I:15-18). Throughout Dante's *Commedia*, sunlight is a symbol of Divine Illumination and the enlightenment that salvation brings. This is a big theme throughout the *Commedia* as Dante brings it up quite frequently throughout much of the latter *canticos*. Upon making his way toward the sunlit hill, Dante comes face to face with the first of three living symbolic representations which block his path in lines 31-60. The first to block his movement toward the sun-illuminated hill is that of a Leopard, which Dante uses as a symbol of both malice and fraud. Upon being blocked by the Leopard, Dante begins to feel discouraged and contemplates walking back into the dark wood; however, he devises that he should find another way up the hill and to the light "that illuminates men towards the straight path." It is then that Dante meets his second living symbolic representation of sin, a lion. The Lion, like the Leopard, is an embodiment of sin. This time, however, the Lion embodies the sin of violence. Its symbolization is demonstrated through Dante's depiction of the beast lunging to strike. Having turned back to escape the Lion, Dante immediately comes across the final symbolic beast which is that of a She-Wolf. The She-Wolf symbolizes the embodiment of incontinence or the lack of control over oneself as shown in

the way Dante describes the She-Wolf as “avarice, gaunt” and especially, “craving” (*Inferno,* I:49-50).

Having been blocked by the three bestial embodiments of sin, Dante begins his retreat back towards the “dark wood of terror” disheartened and devoid of hope (*Inferno,* I:54). The notion that Dante cannot make the simple “path most traveled” way up the Hill since his both physical and metaphorical movement towards the light has been blocked, is exemplative of the way that humanity cannot also attain salvation by their merit or means. It is not until Divine Intervention presents itself to Dante that he can continue his upward movement toward the light. God, through his Divine Love, presents Dante with a guide to navigate his quest toward salvation. This guide is none other than the Roman poet Virgil who symbolizes Divine Reason. Though initially frightened by the shade (or ghost) that appears before him, Dante eventually realizes who stands before him and proceeds to sing his praises to Virgil (*Inferno*, I:79-84). It is here that Virgil tells Dante that it is futile to attempt to directly ascend the hill and pass the three beasts. He goes on to explain that there is another way to attain the same light and salvation; however, it is much longer and far more treacherous. It is at this point that Dante, through Virgil, explains the grand scope of a journey that Dante must embark on. Virgil states that in order to attain salvation, Dante must first descend through the eternal place where ancient tormented spirits reside. It is only through experiencing and witnessing the extent of what a distancing from the love of God can do to an individual, that one can experience and understand the way of righteousness and salvation. Virgil follows by stating that, if Dante chooses to, he would then proceed to exit the depths of hell and climb the Mountain of Purgatory and eventually to the celestial heavens. Having his new divinely appointed guide, Dante begins his both physical and

allegorical movement towards redemption, and so he begins his downward trek towards the gates of hell.

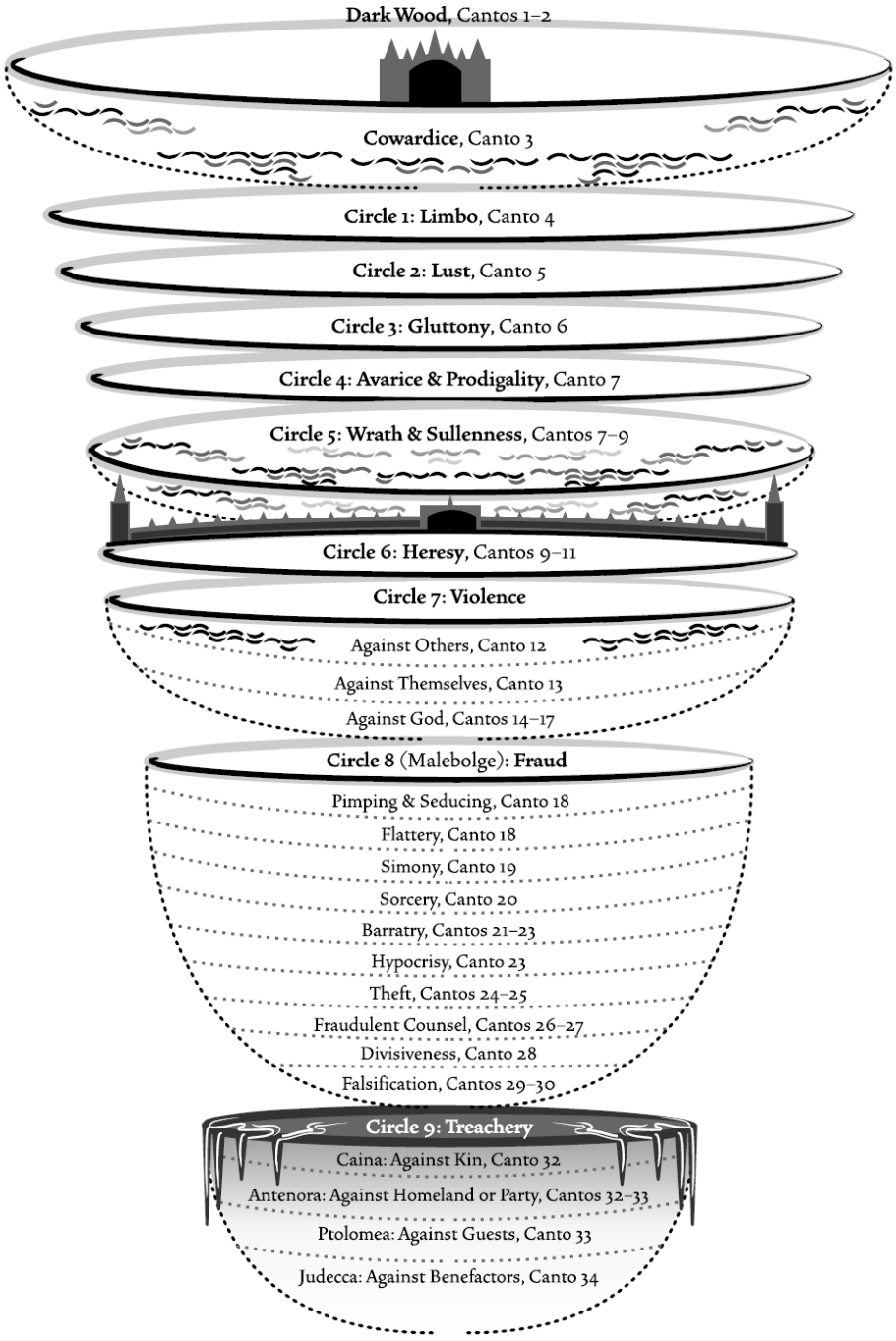

Fig. 1 *Circles of Hell Diagram*

Perhaps the most famous element of Dante's *Commedia* is that of the nine circles of hell. Throughout Dante's *Inferno*, Dante takes certain liberties in his portrayal of the most treacherous

world of the afterlife. The nine circles of Dante's *Inferno* are structuralized and categorized according to different sins, the sins that Dante finds the most abhorrent. The nine circles of Dante's *Inferno* and their subsequent sins are Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Avarice and Prodigality, Wrath and Sullenness, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery. It is important to remember that Dante lived during the Holy Roman Empire, and his categorization of Hell was neither biblically sound, nor did it reflect the view of the Catholic church at the time. Thus, Dante's decision to structuralize his *Inferno* in this manner was not a decision made with the intent of remaining theologically accurate, but rather to reflect his ideals and views toward sin. Dante's hierarchy of sin is demonstrated in the structuralizing of the nine circles in order of least to greatest sins. In a way, Dante uses this hierarchical structure to operate throughout his narrative as not only the narrator and "hero" of this quest narrative but also the orchestrator. A perfect example of this is found in Dante's first circle of his *Inferno*.

Dante's first circle of hell is that of Limbo. This circle is reserved for the souls of those who were pagans and never heard the good news of Christ as well as the unbaptized. Dante describes these individuals as "virtuous pagans." Though some scholars argue that this is not a true circle of hell as it does not pertain to a singularly specific sin, the very fact that there is not one true central sin found within is the "sin" that these individuals have committed. In the preface to Canto IV, John Ciardi, one of the most acclaimed translators of *The Divine Comedy*, writes that these individual's only "sin" was that "they were born without the light of Christ's revelation, and, therefore, they cannot come into the light of God, but they are not tormented" (Ciardi 61). As Dante journeys through this level, he discovers that this is the level where his guide Virgil, and many other of the great poets of old, reside. In fact, it is Virgil who reveals this to Dante when referencing the souls, stating: "I wish you to know before you travel on that these

were sinless. And still their merits fail, for they lacked Baptism's grace, which is the door of the true faith you were born to" (*Inferno*, IV:33-36). This notion that everyone is born sinful and must confess and accept God's divine love is a key aspect in Dante's *Commedia*. Upon making his way through Limbo, Dante eventually reaches another ledge, thereby entering the second circle of the *Inferno*. It is at the entrance of this circle that Dante comes across someone who, in addition to Dante the author's personal opinions towards sin, serves as a supplementary structurer of the *Inferno*: the famed creature Minos.

Upon arriving at the second circle of hell, Dante encounters the great mythological creature, Minos. He is depicted as a semi-bestial figure who is appointed by the upper levels of paradise (God) as responsible for assigning each sinful soul into their respective circle of hell according to their sins in the living world. He does so by coiling his serpent-like tail around the soul with each coil representing which level of hell the soul must go to. Here, Dante, yet again, draws upon classical mythology, specifically that of the Greeks. Minos is a character who appears in the works of Homer, whom Dante just encountered in the previous circle. In Homer's mythology, Minos plays a similar role to the Minos in Dante's *Inferno* as he is also appointed by Zeus as the sort of "judge of the underworld." By adopting another figure from classical mythology, Dante allows the audience of his day to find familiar figures they would have already been familiar with and studied in their scholastic upbringing. In addition, Minos in Dante's *Inferno* functions as a sort of narrative instrument by which Dante justifies the hierarchical structuralization of his hell. In a way, the character of Minos is the physical and narrative embodiment of Dante's classism as seen in his structuralization of not only his circles but his compartmentalization of the different souls which inhabit each circle.

The second circle of hell is reserved for those who fell slaves to their lustful desires. It is in this circle that Dante has one of his most famous encounters in the entire *Commedia*. In this circle, the souls of the lustful are perpetually blown about by a mighty gust, forever forbidding them of peace and rest (*Inferno*, V:43-45). During his time in this circle, Dante sees some of the ancient world's greatest figures such as Achilles, Dido, and even Cleopatra. Dante, however, despite his fascination with the ancient myths of the Romans and Greeks, does not seem to pay these prominent classical figures any heed. Instead, he is fascinated by these two figures who in his words seem "swept together so lightly in the wind, yet still so sad." (*Inferno*, V:74-75). He then, at the permission of Virgil, asks the two figures to come near to him so he can talk with them. Dante, however, does so in a very interesting manner. He begs them to come near "in the name of love," being instructed to do so by his guide, Virgil. Virgil states, "Call to them in the name of love that drives and damns them here. In that name they will pause" (*Inferno*, V:77-78). Just as Virgil predicted, they heed Dante's call. The souls present themselves to be Paolo and Francesca who were forbidden lovers during their time alive. Francesca is the one who recounts their story as Paolo is too stricken by sadness to even speak. Upon hearing Francesca recount her story, Dante notes: "I felt my senses reel and faint away with anguish. I was swept by such a swoon as death is, and I fell, as a corpse might fall, to the dead floor of Hell" (*Inferno*, V:137-140). This interaction between Dante and the two souls demonstrates an important element present in the first half of *Inferno*, compassion. Throughout much of the first half of *Inferno*, Dante exhibits a sense of empathy and compassion for many of the sinners in the first couple of circles of hell. This is imperative to understand one of the few aspects of apparent character growth that Dante experiences throughout his *Commedia*. Eventually, Dante loses this sense of compassion and empathy at the behest of Virgil, his divinely appointed guide, who constantly

reminds Dante that these sinful souls do not need any human compassion as the only thing that can spare them is divine intervention, that which is beyond human reasoning.

In the third circle of the *Inferno*, Dante encounters the souls of those whose sin was that of gluttony. The torment that these souls must endure is an endless stream of icy rain and freezing temperatures, forever writhing their naked bodies for a sense of warmth of which none shall come. As the freezing rain pours down, it creates a vile slush that further engulfs the souls in a blanket of chilling agony. In addition to the torrential downpour of ice, the souls are patrolled by the great mythical beast, Cerberus, the three-headed hound. The ravening beast forever patrols the third circle with red eyes, a swollen belly, and claws to forever "rip the wretches and flay and mangle them" (*Inferno*, VI:18). The soul's overindulgence in food, drink, and other unearthly pleasures is seen in the symbolism of the disgusting slush which forever traps them and prohibits them of any sense of peace. This is the first instance of the *Inferno* where Dante portrays certain circles of his hell as being immensely cold, as opposed to being blazing hot as is often the portrayal of hell. By depicting many of his sinners as being frozen or stuck in different scenarios, Dante shows how sin can also ensnare those who fall victim to its ways. Thus, his representation of many of the punishments that the sinful souls must endure in his *Inferno* are often symbolic in nature.

In Canto VII of Dante's *Inferno*, Dante enters both the fourth and fifth circles of hell. In the fourth circle, he encounters sinful souls whose sin was that of greed. The greedy souls are divided into two groups: those who in life were hoarders, and those who were wasters. Virgil explains how both of these groups of souls lacked all sense of financial moderation thus; they abused the light and plan that God had for them by solely thinking about money. As a result, in death, their souls are burdened by immense weight which represents the overabundant love of

money that weighed them down in life (*Inferno*, VII:55-60). Dante yet again begins to feel bad for these souls; however, he is quickly reminded by Virgil that these souls do not deserve any human sympathy or compassion – only divine intervention could save them. Following this circle, Dante and Virgil make their way down to the fifth circle of hell, home to the angered souls. Like circle four, Dante divides this circle into two different groups of souls: the wrathful and the sullen. The wrathful souls are forever fighting each other in the sloshy marshes of the river Styx. Virgil also points out to Dante the various bubbles that are formed within the river. These are the echoes of the voices of the sullen. The sullen are an interesting group within Dante's *Inferno* as their sin was one that Dante himself, in the dark wood, was at risk of. These souls refused to experience the light of the Sun and thus they are forever drowning and gurgling under the marshy waters of the river Styx. It is important to recall that the Sun, in Dante's *Commedia* as a whole, represents the Divine Illumination that Dante is in pursuit of from the very beginning of the first Canto of the *Inferno*. These souls also constantly gargle in the depths of the marsh the following words: "Sullen were we in the air made sweet by the Sun; in the glory of His shining our hearts poured a bitter smoke. Sullen were we begun; sullen we lie forever in this ditch" (*Inferno*, VII:121-124). As they make their exit out of the fifth circle of hell, Dante and Virgil see Phlegyas, the boatman of the Styx, race towards them across the black marshes of the river. Virgil then proceeds to convince Phlegyas that they both have been sent on a mission appointed by the higher powers in heaven (*Inferno*, VIII:119-127). Upon hearing this, Phelgyas reluctantly allows the pair to board his boat and proceed towards the sixth circle of the *Inferno* which is home to the capital of hell itself, Diss.

The sixth level of Dante's *Inferno* is one of the more prominent levels of hell due in part to its vivid imagery in Dante's description of hell's capital, Diss, which divides hell into two

levels, Upper and Lower. The Upper levels of hell consist of the first five circles and the Lower levels of hell consist of the last four circles. Dante's reasoning for dividing his *Inferno* into two distinct levels can be seen in the overarching categorization of sin. In the Upper level of hell, the sins pertaining to the first five circles are sins of the flesh, meaning that these sins originate from a basis of misplaced passions, emotions, and desires. The sins in the Lower levels of hell, however, are those of intellect or of the mind. These sins are premeditated and calculated as opposed to the impulsive sins of the flesh. By dividing hell into these two main divisions of sin itself, Dante is showing his reasoning by categorically assigning some of his circles in the *Inferno*. From a Marxist lens, these divisions show how Dante seems to adhere one's sins to a given class. If seen from this light, Dante operates as an embodiment of superstructure in his structuralizing of his hell in the *Inferno*. Marx defined the superstructure as the ideologies that dominate a particular era, all that "men say, imagine, conceive," including such things as art, philosophy, "politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc." (Marx and Engels 42). By operating as the embodiment of Marx's idea of the superstructure, Dante is allowed a freedom of almost "playing God" throughout his *Commedia*. The way that Dante attributes a soul's morality to a class-like system is apparent in the way he categorizes people's sins in the *Inferno*. Furthermore, Dante, having chosen the medium of art itself to write his *Commedia*, further illustrates this fact. Despite being the overarching embodiment of the superstructure, Dante, as the author, does not write himself (the hero) in the quest narrative as one void of any threat despite himself being the own orchestrator of his own quest myth. A vivid illustration of this can be seen in one of the most famous encounters in *Inferno* while the poets arrive at the sixth circle of hell.

Upon arriving at the gate of Diss, in the sixth circle of hell, Dante and Virgil are greeted by a multitude of fallen angels who guard the walls of the eternal damned city. The poets are immediately greeted by angry rebukes from the fallen angels which cry out: “Who is it that invades Death’s Kingdom in his life?” (*Inferno*, VIII:81-82). Virgil then proceeds to try to reason with the fallen angels but this time, in contrast to the other instances where Virgil’s position of authority via divine appointment allowed him to grant the pair passage, the fallen angels state that he alone can proceed to the Lower levels of hell, leaving Dante behind. Following this discourse, upon hearing that he would not be allowed to proceed on the rest of his quest, Dante, in a rare occurrence, addresses the reader directly stating the following: “Reader, judge for yourself, how each black word fell on my ears to sink into my heart: I lost hope of returning to the world” (*Inferno*, VIII:91-93). Virgil, having seen that merely stating that he is on divine business was not enough to sway the fallen angels, proceeds to call upon divine aid who comes down in the form of the Heavenly Messenger. Upon his arrival at the gate, Dante and Virgil are finally then allowed to proceed to the Lower levels of hell. This encounter is pivotal in Dante’s *Inferno*, as it shows how Virgil, the embodiment of Human Reason, is unable to sway the fallen angels who committed one of the earliest evils, betraying heaven itself. Ciardi comments on how Dante portrays the fact that “Human Reason by itself cannot cope with the essence of Evil. Only Divine Aid can bring hope” (Ciardi 94). Having been granted passage, the poets then proceed to enter the sixth circle of hell which is reserved for the heretics. Dante, however, uses the term heretics to define those who in a life committed violence toward God by preaching their denial of the concept of immortality. Because of this, these sinful souls are tormented in an eternal grave-like coffin that perpetually scorches the souls with God’s wrath. After traveling through the circle, Virgil, though miles underground, is aware of the motion of

the stars and urges Dante that they must hurry as there are two hours before the sunrise of Holy Saturday (*Inferno*, XI:112-115).

At the insistence of Virgil, both the poets then proceed to make their way to the seventh circle of hell. This circle is reserved for those whose biggest sin in life was that of violence. Dante continues his pattern by further dividing his *Inferno*. This circle is divided into three distinct sections: those who were violent against their neighbors, themselves, and lastly, against God, nature, and art. The last division of the ninth circle is especially intriguing due to Dante's apparent view on the equivalence of violence between God, nature, and art. By grouping these together in the last and most evil of violent sins, Dante demonstrates how much he values the concept of art and nature. This is perhaps one of the main instances by which it is apparent to see how Dante, as the author of his *Commedia*, operates as the embodiment of the superstructure by his correspondence of sins against God, nature, and art being seen on the same level. Dante writes how the souls in this circle are tormented in a plethora of ways depending on whom they committed the acts of violence. For the souls who in life were violent to others, they are forever swimming in a boiling river of blood named Phlegethon. The second torment is reserved for the suicides and those violent toward themselves. Their eternal punishment is to be transformed into thorny bushes and trees and forever gnawed and torn at by the mythical Harpies, a half-woman-half-bird foul creature of Greek myth. The last division of the seventh circle is reserved for those who were violent to God, art, and nature. They are made to wade in an endless plain of burning sand while fiery rain forever bombards them from above. Dante and Virgil both have various interactions within this circle through this circle though most are politically based prophecies that various souls tell Dante about his home city of Florence. One individual Dante comes across is Brunetto Latino, an author of old who was an immense influence on Dante as a writer. As

Dante begins to talk with Brunetto, it is apparent that Dante has the utmost respect for the highly esteemed author of old. Interestingly, Brunetto is the only sinful soul in the entire *Inferno* that learns of Dante's entire quest which is recounted to him by Dante himself. Upon hearing this Brunetto offers some words of wisdom to Dante, which also sets him apart from any other soul in the *Inferno*. Upon hearing Dante's quest, he states: "Follow your star, for if in all of the sweet life I saw one truth shine clearly, you cannot miss your glorious arrival" (*Inferno*, XV:55-57). Interestingly, this encounter with a sinful soul – granted not just any soul to Dante – offers him motivation to continue onward in his quest.

As the poets make their way past the seventh circle, they approach the eighth circle of the *Inferno* reserved for those who, in life, committed the sin of fraud. Dante, however, yet again divides his circles into different subsections pertaining to different types of fraud. The eighth level is Dante's most divided in the entirety of Dante's *Inferno* with a total of 10 different divisions. Like the division in the seventh circle, Dante pertains certain divisions in the eighth circle to the various types of Fraud. In addition, Dante depicts the eighth circle as a large circle containing various different divisional trenches which he calls *bolge* or "ditches."

These *bolge* together make up the eighth circle which Dante refers to as the *malebolge*, "evil ditches." The ten *bolge* include fraud, pimping and seducing, flattery, simony, sorcery, barratry, hypocrisy, theft, fraudulent counsel, divisiveness, and falsification (see Fig. 1).

Each *bolge* corresponds with its own form of eternal torment which Dante witnesses as they make their way down the amphitheater-like *malebolge*. In the fourth *bolge*, Dante notes one of the more famous punishments in this circle which offers yet another example of Dante's symbolization and binary of an individual's sin and its punishment in the *Inferno*. This *bolge* is reserved for those who in life were fortune tellers and diviners. In this *bolge*, the sins of these

souls are binarily opposed to their punishment. In this *bolge*, their punishment is to have their heads turned backward on their bodies and be made to walk backward. In his introduction to the Canto, Ciardi writes: "Thus, those who sought to penetrate the future cannot even see in front of themselves; they attempted to move themselves forward in time, so must they go backwards through all eternity; and as the arts of sorcery are a distortion of God's law, so are their bodies distorted in Hell" (193). Eventually, the poets finally pass through all of the *bolge* and, with the help of one of the giants of the tenth *bolge*, find themselves at the entrance of the final circle of hell, home to Satan himself.

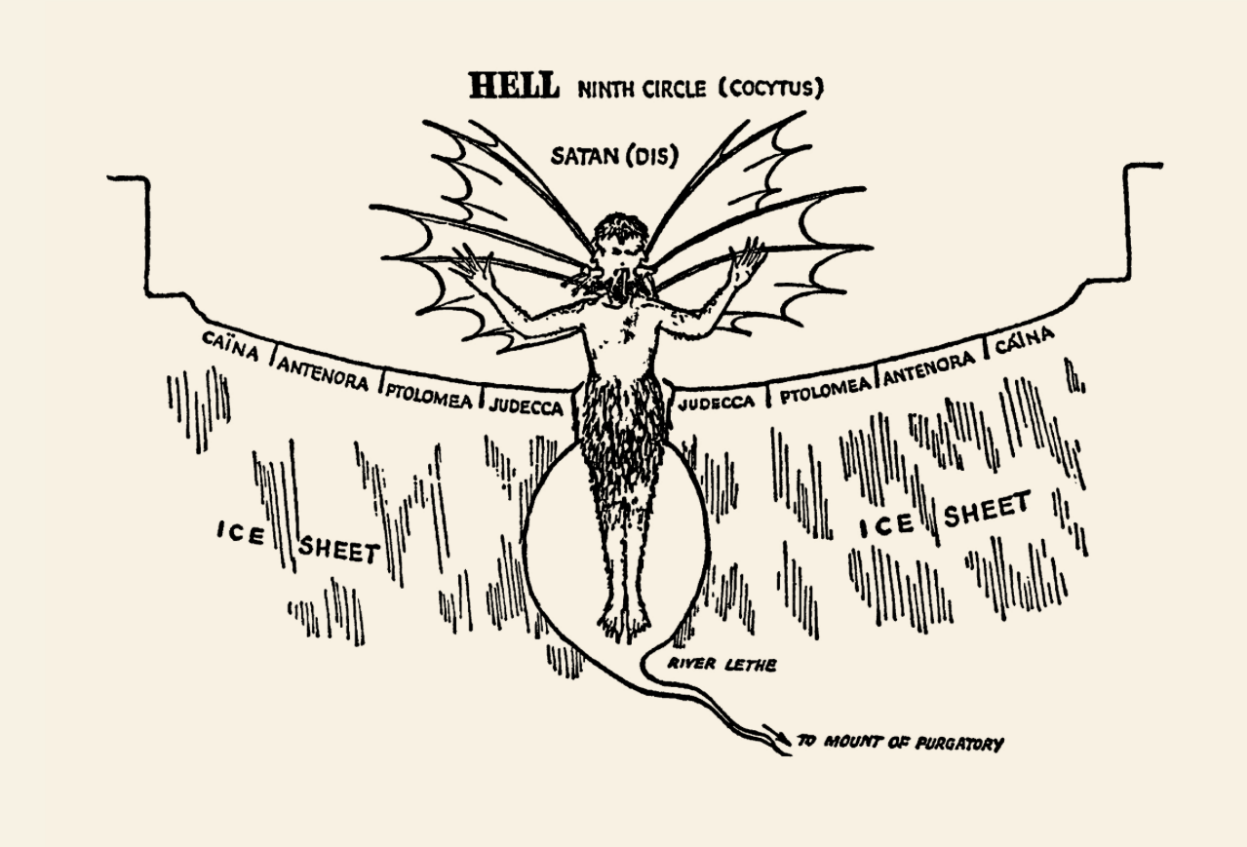

Fig. 2 *Hell: Ninth Circle (Cocytus)*

Dante's ninth and final circle of hell is perhaps one the densest in the entirety of his *Commedia*. This circle is not only home to those who in life committed treachery but also

Lucifer, or Satan, himself. In his introduction to Canto XXXII, Ciardi notes how Dante's symbolism of the sinners in this final level is directly correlated to their location in the depth of hell. He states that just "As they denied God's love, so are they furthest removed from the light and warmth of His Sun" (Ciardi 292). Bearing in mind the fact that the sun and subsequently sunlight plays a pivotal role in the *Commedia* as a whole, the fact that Dante allocates the most abhorrent sinners into the darkest and coldest location in hell. The ninth circle, like many of the latter cantos in the *Inferno*, is also categorized into different divisions. Dante divides the final circle into four frozen rings surrounding the main floor. Similar to how the *malebolge* formed an amphitheater-like structure in the eighth circle, so too do the four concentric rings form rings around the frozen lake, the center of hell itself. These rings are given four distinct names which pertain to the different divisions of the ninth circle: *Caïna*, *Antonera*, *Ptolomea*, and *Judecca*. The first circle is named after the biblical figure of Cain who betrayed his own brother Abel and committed the first murder. Thus, much like Cain himself, this ring is reserved for those who betrayed their own blood or family members. The sinners in this circle are encapsulated and frozen in ice up to their necks and can move their heads only to bow to semi-shield their eyes from the freezing wind and temperatures thereby preventing their eternal tears from freezing their eyes shut.

The second ring of the ninth circle is *Antonera*, home to those who were treacherous and betrayed their country. This circle is named for the Trojan soldier, Antenor, who is believed to have betrayed his city to the Greeks. The sinners in this ring, like those in *Caïna,* are frozen in the frigid ice up to their necks; however, they are not able to move their necks at all. The reason Dante seemingly gives a harsher punishment to those who betray their country – being that those in *Antonera*, as opposed to *Caïna*, are able to bow their heads to shield themselves from the cold

– is because Dante is demonstrating how much he truly values home and country. Throughout the entirety of the *Commedia,* Dante often mentions his beloved city of Florence which he often mourns for how astray they too, have fallen. Frye notes that throughout the *Inferno*, the "judgments of the next world usually confirm the standards of this one" (Frye 233). This perspective is, for the most part, fairly accurate throughout much of the *Inferno*; however, Dante's inclusion of treachery against one's country as one of the worst sins in his hell is perhaps the clearest example of Dante's own personal bias entering his hierarchical categorization of sin throughout the *Inferno*. It is important to note that at the time of writing his *Commedia*, Dante was exiled from his beloved city due to his political opinions. With the opposing party having won the insurrection and election, Dante and his fellow party members were ordered to be exiled from Florence. Hence, this theme of love for his beloved home city is seen and apparent in his *Commedia*. This also explains why he believes that those who have betrayed their country and people deserve to be in the second-to-lowest ring of hell hence showing how, though Dante as the author, operates as the superstructure, his ranking of classes is not always consistent with their actual sins.

The third ring of the ninth circle is named *Ptolomea* and is home to those who were treacherous towards their guests or broke the ties of hospitality. These souls are, as in the other three rings, encased and frozen in ice; however, the sinners in *Ptolomea* are covered up to the bottom portion of their faces prohibiting them from shielding themselves against the freezing wind. It is in this ring that the poets learn of how horrid the sins of those in *Ptolomea* truly are. After an interaction with one of the souls in this level, Dante learns that once a soul commits an act of betrayal, so great is their sin, that their corporal bodies are replaced with the soul of a

demon (*Inferno*, XXXIII:128-130). The poets then journey on to the fourth ring of the ninth circle: *Judecca*.

"On march the banners of the King of Hell." With these words, Virgil begins the final canto of the *Inferno* as the poets enter *Judecca*, the utmost lowest point in hell. This ring is named after Judas Iscariot who betrayed Christ and is host to the souls of those who, in life, betrayed their masters. The souls in this ring are completely encased in ice from head to toe and contorted in such a horrid way that Dante refrains from going into depth of their orientations in the ice. Being completely frozen in the ice, these souls are unable to even speak to the poets as they pass by. This final canto of Dante's *Inferno* bears the "King of Hell" that Virgil refers to in the opening line of the canto is that of Satan himself. Dante's depiction of Satan is one that would have differed tremendously from the depictions of him at the time. He writes Satan as an immensely tall, towering figure with great bat-like wings, frozen up to his waist in the ice. The more he bats his wings in his futile attempt to escape the depths of hell, the more his wings blow freezing air around him further encasing him in the ice. In addition, he further describes Satan as possessing three heads. Each head devours a separate soul whom Dante has deemed as the three most ghastly and unpardonable sinners in the history of humanity: Judas Iscariot who betrayed Christ, and Brutus and Cassius who both betrayed Julius Caesar. Dante's portrayal of this grotesque play on the Holy Trinity is no mere coincidence as he emphasizes Satan's direct opposition to everything Divine. Satan, in Dante's *Inferno*, functions in binary opposition to God. As such, his depiction as a ghastly mirror of the Trinity is meant to be an openly apparent and direct contrast to the God of his *Commedia*. Dante's depiction of Satan stands as not only

Dante not only in this final canto but throughout the entirety of *Inferno* massively draws upon humanity's natural inclination toward the Other and the Monstrous. In his book *Monster*

Theory: Reading Culture, Jerome Jerome Cohen notes how monsters are the embodiments of fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), which gives them life and an uncanny independence (4). Cohen notes that humanity has always been drawn to the concept of the monster as they "bear self-knowledge and human knowledge" thereby forever intrinsically connecting the two: human and monster (20). In addition, many of the countless souls plaguing the various circles of hell in Dante's *Inferno* possess one important commonality; their eternal punishment is often either a correlation or a binary opposition to their sins. Dante chooses to often utilize this binary opposition to aid in the central theme of his entire *Commedia*; one's journey towards Divine Redemption. By showing the stark binary opposition of the circles of hell with the latter terraces and spheres in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, Dante demonstrates how sin has contorted and disfigured that which God originally intended for humanity yet also, shows how the two of them, are intrinsically connected.

Eventually, the poets begin to move towards Satan as they must climb down his legs in order to reach and climb through the center of the Earth. Upon noting Dante's reaction to seeing the Prince of Darkness, Virgil turns to Dante and urges him to abandon all sense of dread. Dante, then, yet again, addresses the reader directly narrating "I did not die, and yet I lost life's breath" in reference to seeing the horrid image of Satan himself (*Inferno*, XXXIV:25). Virgil then tells Dante that the pair must climb down the hairy legs of Satan towards the center of the Earth where the laws of gravity are nullified. The poets proceed to do so and eventually, much to the bafflement of Dante, look back and see Satan, now hanging upside down. Noting how perplexed Dante is at this phenomenon, explains stating: "You passed the point to which all gravities are drawn. You are under the other hemisphere where you stand; the sky above us is half opposed to that which canopies the great dry land" (*Inferno*, XXXIV:110-114). Frye notes, "Tragedy and

tragic irony take us into a hell of narrowing circles and culminate in some such vision of the source of all evil in a personal form. Tragedy can take us no farther; but if we persevere with the mythos of irony and satire, we shall pass a dead center, and finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up" (Frye 239). Both Virgil and Dante now emerge, having crawled out of the depths of hell, ready to proceed to the next stage in Dante's quest as they make the climb up the mountain of Purgatory: the structuralization of repentance.

Purgatorio

Purgatorio is often the forgotten *cantico* of *The Divine Comedy*. Being bookended by its more famous siblings, it has long been overlooked and thought of as the mediary step in Dante's journey toward redemption. Dante structuralizes *Purgatorio* in a similar way to that of his *Inferno*. Dante's love of the number three and its representation of the Holy Trinity is also seen in *Purgatorio* as, like *Inferno*, it is also divided into nine different levels. This time, however, as opposed to a circular pit consisting of nine circles as demonstrated in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*'s structure is that of a mountain with nine terraces which are divided into two divisions of "Ante-Purgatory" and the other seven consisting of Purgatory itself. In addition, Dante, as he did in *Inferno*, also allots a meaning to each level of his *cantico*. In *Purgatorio*, like in *Inferno*, Dante attributes each of the nine terraces to a different sin. In contrast to the sinners found in *Inferno*, however, the sinners in *Purgatorio*, according to Dante, repented towards the end of their life. Being that they still sinned against God, they must serve time and do penance for their sins in *Purgatorio*. Having witnessed and experienced the lowest depths of Hell, Dante now begins his upward movement toward understanding Divine Love and attaining redemption.

The nine terraces on the Mountain of Purgatory in Dante's *Purgatorio* are in many ways very similar to those found in *Inferno* yet also inversely correlated. In *Inferno*, the nine circles of

hell are organized in order of lesser sins to greater sins with Lust being the least sinful sin, and Treachery or Betrayal being the worst. In *Purgatorio*, the nine terraces on the Mountain of Purgatory are inversely organized from greatest sins to lesser sins. In *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil travel through *hell* in a downward-spiraling spatial movement. In *Purgatorio*, however, the poets must begin their upward spatial movement toward Divine Illumination and redemption. Thus, the beginning of *Purgatorio* marks the start of Dante's step in the right direction toward redemption.

The nine terraces of the mountain of Purgatory are divided in an almost mirrored version of the divisions in *Inferno*. In *Purgatorio*, the terraces are that of the Unshriven, the Negligent Rulers, the Proud, the Envious, the Wrathful, the Slothful, the Avaricious, the Gluttons, and the Lustful. The first two terraces of the Unshriven and the Negligent rulers make up Ante-Purgatory, a division similar to that of Limbo and the rest of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. When comparing the nine terraces to the circles of hell in *Inferno*, one can see that the final three terraces in *Purgatorio* are the same as the first three in *Inferno*; the Avaricious, the Gluttons, and the Lustful. Dante, in showing the similarity between *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, shows their stark difference; the presence of a repentant sinner. The sinners in *Purgatorio* are allowed to attempt to do penance to cleanse themselves in order to make their way toward heaven. Therefore, in contrast to *Inferno*, the inhabitants of *Purgatario* are also partaking on the same quest that Dante is embarking on towards redemption and heaven, though theirs is a longer journey.

As the poets make their way throughout the nine terraces of the Mountain of Purgatory, they encounter many various souls whom, like in *Inferno*, Dante hierarchically places there in accordance with his own ideals. One of the most prominent souls that the poets encounter is that of Sordello, a fellow Mantuan like Virgil who joins them throughout much of the beginning of the *cantico*. The poets first encounter the soul of Sordello in Canto VI when Virgil calls out to

him immediately deducing that he is also Mantuan (*Purgatorio*, VI:75-78). Eventually, Sordello realizes who Virgil is and immediately, much like Dante at the beginning of *Inferno*, begins to laud his praises exclaiming: “Eternal glory of the Latin race, through whom our tongue made all its greatness clear!” (*Purgatorio*, VII:16-17). Sadly, despite his desire to join the poets on the remaining portion of their quest, Sordello acknowledges that he cannot follow the pair any further as he must remain in Ante-Purgatory until his time is right to transition onwards to Purgatory. The poets then continue to press on climbing up the Mountain of Purgatory until Dante is met with a tragic realization.

It is in the final cantos of *Purgatorio*, that Dante depicts perhaps one of the most moving scenes in literary history. About three-quarters into *Purgatorio*, Dante meets Beatrice, the embodiment of Divine Love. She is sent to aid Dante through the final portion of *Purgatorio* and eventually throughout *Paradiso*. As a result, Virgil, Dante’s beloved guide, is no longer the one guiding Dante throughout the remainder of *The Divine Comedy*. Instead, Virgil throughout the final cantos in *Purgatorio* is depicted as being another observer much like Dante, and finds himself in awe with much of what he sees in the final cantos of *Purgatorio*. Dante himself realizes this in a rather curious scene in Canto XXIX where the poets come across the seven golden *candelabra* or candlesticks. “I turned about, amazed at what I saw, to my good Virgil, and he answered me in silence, with a look of equal awe” (*Purgatorio*, XXIX:55-57). Virgil continues to follow both Dante and Beatrice, walking behind them as a man who has lost purpose. Eventually, in Canto XXX, Virgil, having done what was asked of him by God, vanishes; his mission to guide Dante is complete. Dante states:

> "I turned left with the same assured belief
> that makes a child run to its mother's arms
> when it is frightened or has come to grief,
>
> to say to Virgil: "There is not within me
> one drop of blood unstirred. I recognize
> the tokens of the ancient flame." But he,
>
> he had taken his light from us. He had gone.
> Virgil had gone. Virgil, the gentle Father
> to whom I gave my soul for its salvation!" (*Purgatorio*, XXIX:43-51).

Dante then proceeds to weep fervently describing that not even the sight of Mother Mary herself would be able to hold back his tears. It is then that Beatrice urges Dante to not weep, as he is yet to go through the several cleansing trials that will surely make him weep much more. Eventually, the tears begin to subside for Dante; however, in the remaining cantos, Dante still misses his old guide. Virgil's leaving marks perhaps the most important transition in the entirety of Dante's *Commedia*: the transition of operating solely from Human Reason (Virgil) to that of Divine Love (Beatrice). The disappearance of Virgil symbolizes the way in which Dante shifts his mortal and human finite understanding of his world to that of the Divine, giving way to Divine Illumination and subsequently, redemption.

Dante and Beatrice eventually make their way to the final terrace of Purgatory. Much like the structure of *Inferno* where there were nine divisions and a final extra division which in *Inferno* was home to Satan himself, so too in *Purgatorio* does Dante come across another final

division. This final level houses the Garden of Eden itself which Dante refers to as the "Earthly paradise." It is here in the Garden of Eden that Dante is made to drink from the waters of the Eunoë, one of the holy bodies of water in the Earthly Paradise. This act is Dante's final purification before entering into *Paradiso* and thus, by drinking the sacred waters of the Eunoë, Dante has "completely forgotten all sin and error; now every good is strengthened in him" (Ciardi 635). Having felt his soul "remade, reborn, like a sun-weakened tree that spreads new foliage to the Spring dew", Dante now, along with Beatrice, makes his way into his last step towards redemption; the celestial spheres of *Paradiso*. (*Purgatorio*, XXXIII:143-144).

Paradiso

Dante's *Paradiso* is perhaps the most philosophical and theologically dense of Dante's *canticos*. As a result, it is probably the most confusing and difficult *canticos* in *The Divine Comedy* to read. *Paradiso* follows Dante and his newfound guide, Beatrice, in the culmination of his quest towards attaining redemption. Together with Beatrice, Dante travels through the nine heavenly spheres which, similarly, to his previous *canticos* are structured in accordance with a certain meaning. This time, however, in contrast to *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* where each level represented a different sin, the levels in *Paradiso* are divided according to different virtues and merits. These levels are represented as the nine celestial spheres in *Paradiso* which are: The Moon (the Inconstant), Mercury (the Ambitious), Venus (the Lovers), The Sun (the Theologians), Mars (the Martyrs), Jupiter (the Just Rulers), Saturn (the Contemplatives), Fixed Stars (the Triumphant in Christ), and the Primum Mobile (the Angels). Each sphere, in contrast to *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, is home to the blessed souls who abide there having found grace and pleasure with God.

At the beginning of canto, I of *Paradiso*, both Dante and Beatrice find themselves at the edge of the Earthly Paradise of the Garden of Eden. It is then that Beatrice turns her entrancing eyes from Dante and fixes her gaze on the Sun. Assuming that she is looking for something, Dante reflexively does the same. So transfixed does Dante become from viewing the Sun in all its glory that he does not realize that he has begun to ascend through the heavens at immense speeds. It is from this point on that Dante's upward spatial movement towards the Divine transcends the human corporal bounds. In other words, Dante's upwards movement now is not conducted by his own consciousness; he no longer consciously is walking or trekking upwards, but rather he is transfixed into being able to free himself from the laws of nature and fly, despite not realizing it at first. Thus, Dante's movement is now more than ever aided by the Divine itself in allowing him the ability to transcend the confines of the laws of physics and continue his pursuit of redemption.

As Dante and Beatrice soar through the celestial spheres, Dante encounters various blessed souls who encourage and give him wisdom on morality, theology, and other heavenly topics. Perhaps the most famous of these encounters occurs in the eighth sphere of the Fixed Stars. This sphere follows that of the celestial body of Saturn which was, in Dante's time, thought to be the farthest planet from the sun. After passing through the confines of the scientifically known, Dante and Beatrice, upon entering the eighth sphere, have also transcended humanity's knowledge of what lies beyond. It is in this sphere that Dante meets the Apostles Peter, James, and John as well as laying his eyes on the Virgin Mary herself, whom he describes as the brightest star amongst the others (*Paradiso*, XXIII:101-102). Eventually, the Virgin Mary is called to go to the Empyrean, the final level of heaven, and stand by Jesus' side which leads Beatrice to urge Dante onward in their continuing journey towards the final spheres of *Paradiso*.

Afterward, Dante and Beatrice arrive at the final sphere of *Paraidso*, the Primum Mobile. This final sphere is home to a multitude of angels and is the celestial nexus of time and space. Dante struggles to retell its structure yet he tells as much as his understanding allows. It is at this level that Dante beholds the immensely radiant light of God surrounded by an infinite number of rings of angels. In awe at the light and the spectacle before him, Dante, with the help of Beatrice, makes his way to the border of the ninth sphere and the final level of *Paradiso*. Much like the structure of both *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, Dante adds a final extra level to his cantico which is generally home to the embodiment of the *cantico* itself. In *Inferno*, the final level was home to Satan. In *Purgatorio*, it was home to the Earthly Paradise or the Garden of Eden. In *Paradiso*, the final level is given a name: the Empyrean, home to God himself.

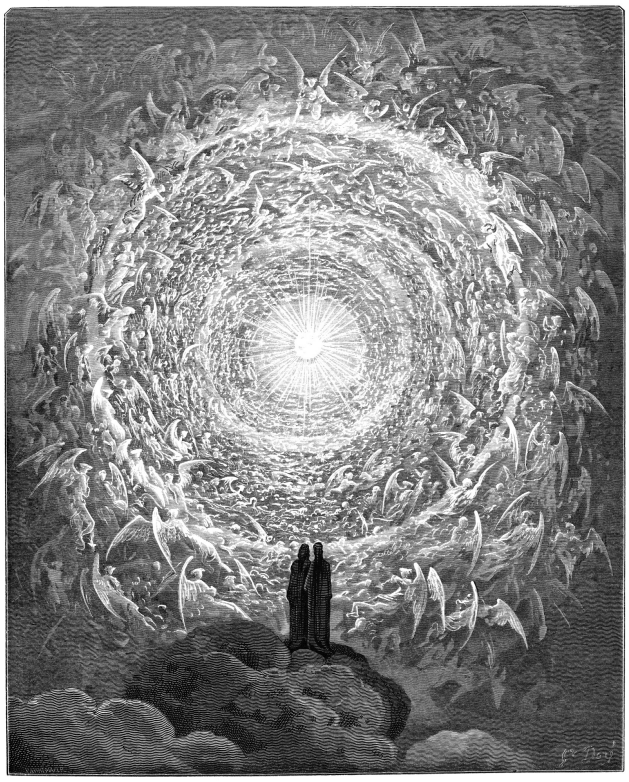

Fig 3. Paradiso: Canto XXXIII

Upon arriving at the ninth sphere, Dante remains in an almost constant state of awe at all he sees. Upon seeing the final highest level of heaven, itself, the Empyrean, Dante's quest towards redemption and Divine Illumination is concluded. It is here in the final cantos of *Paradiso* that Beatrice leaves Dante and a new guide takes her place to take Dante to the ultimate vision of God. His new guide, St. Bernard, tells Dante that she has placed him in his care (*Paradiso*, XXXI:65-66). The whole scene seems reminiscent of the scene where Virgil leaves Dante at the end of *Purgatorio*; however, this time, Dante does not weep. Instead, he lays eyes upon Beatrice's divine beauty one last time and sings her praises, thanking her for her guidance this far. Beatrice then smiles down upon Dante a final time and then permanently shifts her gaze towards God's divine glory. Dante then proceeds to the border of the ninth circle with his new guide, St. Bernard, who is the embodiment of Divine Revelation. Divine Love (Beatrice) was able to lead Dante to the confines of the celestially divine, yet it is only through Divine Revelation that Dante can come to truly experience God and all His glory. Eventually, together with St. Bernard, Dante finally reaches the edge of heaven itself and arrives at the edge of the Empyrean. It is here where St. Bernard offers up a prayer to the Virgin Mary asking her to intercede on behalf of Dante. Upon the conclusion of the prayer, Dante states: "And I, who neared the goal of all my nature, felt my soul, at the climax of its yearning, suddenly, as it ought, grow calm with rapture" (*Paradiso*, XXXIII:46-48). Afterward, St. Bernard, smiling, tells Dante to look up. Dante then lifts his gaze and his eyes are permitted to see the face of God. It is there, in that instant, that Dante achieves the goal of his quest. He has attained redemption and is granted Divine Illumination; his *Commedia* concluded. The light of that distant hill at the beginning of *Inferno* which he so longed for, is now radiating directly into his very being. His wandering from the "straight and true path", made right by gazing upon the face of God. Sadly,

Dante is not allowed to join the celestial Empyrean as he has not yet fallen victim to death. In the final lines of *Paradiso* and subsequently *The Divine Comedy*, Dante expresses his yearning to understand how one can stay and find its place in that divine lofty sphere, forever gazing one's eyes into the loving face of God, but, as he states: "mine were not the wings for such a flight" (*Paradiso*, XXXIII:136-139). It is here that Dante speaks to the reader, in the *Commedia*'s closing lines expressing how he now feels his intellect and soul balanced equally as he, through his great quest from the depths of hell, towards the celestial heavens, has come to know, experience and understand, the Divine Love "that moves the Sun and the other stars."

Dante's journey throughout *The Divine Comedy* demonstrates the intrinsic spatial heavenly movement that all of humanity possesses. His quest presents a profound exploration into the structure and essence of human redemption. Via his use of allegorical, spatial, and symbolic narrative, as well as transformative and vivid imagery, Dante is able to cohesively and masterfully incorporate an almost transcendental quality to his *Commedia* as a whole. The quest that Dante embarks on is a transformative narrative through the afterlife which takes him through the depths of hell, the steep terraces of the mountain of Purgatory, and eventually to the blissful celestial spheres of Paradise. The structured order of *The Divine Comedy* serves as a medium by which Dante emphasizes the importance of spiritual development, repentance and the transformative nature of Divine Love. In addition, Dante's structuralization in *The Divine Comedy* serves as a guide for not only the reader but for Dante as the protagonist himself which enables the *Commedia* to highlight its themes of the journey towards redemption. His decision to structuralize *The Divine Comedy* in a direct symbolization of the Trinity - demonstrated in the *terza rima* rhyme scheme and the three different *canticos* - enables Dante to highlight the essential spiritual theme of his allegorical poem. Frye states: "As long as poetry follows religion

towards the moral, religious and poetic archetypes will be very close together, as they are in Dante" (Frye 156). Thus, Dante's poetic telling of the human journey towards redemption in the *Commedia* is one that transcends the confines of the pages themselves which serves as a timeless reminder that the path towards human redemption is not solely a linear or easy path, but rather, a complex interplay of our own reasonings and the acceptance and understanding of the Divine Love "that moves the Sun and the other stars."

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