

## Dante: Christian Thought Expressed through Poetry

Dante Alighieri  
(1265-1321)

Key writings:

*La Vita Nuova*

*De vulgari*

*eloquentia Convivio*

*De monarchia*

*La (Divina) Commedia*

-*Inferno*

-*Purgatorio*

-*Paradiso*



(Domenico di Michelino, 1465)

---

### LECTURE TOPICS

---

- Beginnings, Middles, Ends
  - *The Divine Comedy*: Structure and Narrative
  - *The Divine Comedy*: Christianity and Antiquity
  - Medieval reading practices
  - Dante and Florence: politics and exile
- 

#### ANTIQUITY

Reason (philosophy)

Representative authors:

-Aristotle, Virgil

Virgil leads Dante from the gates of Hell to the ascent of Mount Purgatory

#### CHRISTIANITY

Faith (theology)

Representative authors:

-Augustine, Aquinas

Beatrice leads Dante from the Earthly Paradise through the heavenly spheres

#### STRUCTURE

3 Spaces, subdivided:

-Hell (circles)

-Purgatory (terraces)

-Heaven (spheres)

#### NARRATIVE

3 Canticles, subdivided

-*Inferno* (34 cantos)

-*Purgatorio* (33 cantos)

-*Paradiso* (33 cantos)

Organizing principle: divine love

Organizing principle: journey

Comprehended by: Dante the poet

Apprehended by: Dante the pilgrim

*"Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono"* ("I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul" *Inf.* II.32)

## DANTE'S VERSE

Dante's epic is composed in a verse form of his own invention known as *terza rima*: staggered, alternating triplets of lines rhyme, while consecutive lines are grouped into "tercets" of three lines each. The result: the first and last lines of each tercet rhyme, while the ending of the middle line gives the rhyme-sound that will appear in the next tercet. Follow this effect in the poem's opening (*Inferno* I.1-9) both in the Italian text and the rhymed translation by M. Palma.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra *vita*  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura ché  
la diritta via era *smarrita*.

Midway through the journey of our life, I  
*found* myself in a dark wood, for I had strayed  
from the straight pathway to this tangled *ground*.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura  
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e **forte**  
che nel pensier rinnova la paura!

How hard it is to tell of, overlaid  
with harsh and savage growth, so wild and **raw**  
the thought of it still makes me feel afraid.

Tant'è amara che poco è più **morte**;  
ma per trattar del ben ch'ì vi trovai,  
dirò de l'altre cose ch'ì v'ho **scorte**.

Death scarce could be more bitter. But to  
**draw** the lessons of the good that came my  
way, I will describe the other things I **saw**.

## MEDIEVAL READING PRACTICES

In his *Letter to Can Grande*, which functions as a preface to the *Paradiso* (this canticle is dedicated to Can Grande della Scala, a Veronese nobleman and patron of Dante toward the end of his life), Dante makes an orthodox distinction between four "levels" of reading—the level of the *literal* sense, plus three forms of *allegorical* sense—using the Biblical exodus to illustrate:

"For the first sense is that which is contained in the letter, while there is another which is contained in what is signified by the letter. The first is called literal, while the second is called allegorical, or moral or anagogic. And in order to make this manner of treatment clear, it can be applied to the following verses: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a barbarous people, Judea was made his sanctuary, Israel his dominion' [Psalm 114:1-2]. Now if we look at the letter alone, what is signified to us is the departure of the sons of Israel from Egypt during the time of Moses; if at the allegory, what is signified to us is our redemption through Christ [typology]; if at the moral sense, what is signified to us is the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to the state of grace; if at the anagogic, what is signified to us is the departure of the sanctified soul from bondage to the corruption of this world into the freedom of eternal glory." (Trans. R. Hollander)

Dante coordinates the literal details of his narrative to aid and suggest allegorical reading to an extraordinary degree. Both space (see diagrams below) and time (e.g. the descent of *Inferno* is made to coincide with the historical date of Good Friday, 1300) are activated to create these opportunities.

## EXODUS

The Exodus episode one of the multitude of recurrent touchstone throughout the epic, and can be clearly related both to the journey form of the narrative, and to Dante's experience of exile (see below).

and the celestial pilot stood astern  
with blessedness inscribed upon his face,  
More than a hundred souls were in his ship:

*In exitu Israël de Aegypto,*  
they all were singing with a single voice,  
chanting it verse by verse until the end.

(*Purgatorio* II.43-48)

Two at the end were shouting "All of those  
for whom the Red Sea's waters opened wide  
were dead before the Jordan saw their heirs;

and those who found the task too difficult  
to keep on striving with Anchises' son,  
give themselves up to an inglorious life."

(*Purgatorio* XVIII.133-38)

The exodus story is also the vehicle for one of Augustine's most well-known pronouncements on the relationship between Christianity and Antiquity: as the people led by Moses were not blameworthy for taking with them and making use of Egyptian treasures, so the Christian writer may, without necessary spiritual blame, take and adapt the "treasures" of classical literature.

## CITY, CHURCH, EMPIRE, EXILE

Political life in medieval Tuscany was concentrated around three poles: city, church, and empire. Italy in its present borders became a unified nation-state only in the 19th century; circa 1300, fortified towns constituted their own city-states, and Florence was among the most wealthy and influential. For that very reason it was a prize eyed by the two other forces competing for dominance: the Catholic church headed by the Pope, and Holy Roman Empire (a legacy political construct whose plausibility and coherence waxed and waned throughout this period, as did the political ambitions of the claimants).

Dante, in *De monarchia*, argued that each ought to be a supreme but separate authority in its own domain: the worldly affairs of humankind should be administered under the supreme rule of the emperor; its spiritual affairs under church and pope. This political philosophy is echoed in *The Divine Comedy*, but did not correspond with reality: Florence and the entire Italian peninsula were roiled by continual intrigue, conflict, and war, and as a result of one factional struggle in 1301, Dante was permanently exiled from his native city.

"To me, however, the whole world is a homeland, like the sea to fish—though I drank from the Arno before cutting my teeth, and love Florence so much that, because I loved her, I suffer exile unjustly—and I will weight the balance of my judgement more with reason than with sentiment." (*De vulgari eloquentia*, trans. Steven Botterill, I.vi) [Compare I.vii; *Inferno* XXVI.1-12]

Fig. 1: The Cosmos of *The Divine Comedy*

Hell and its circles [*Inferno*] opposite mountain of Purgatory and its terraces [*Purgatorio*] beneath Heaven and its spheres [*Paradiso*].

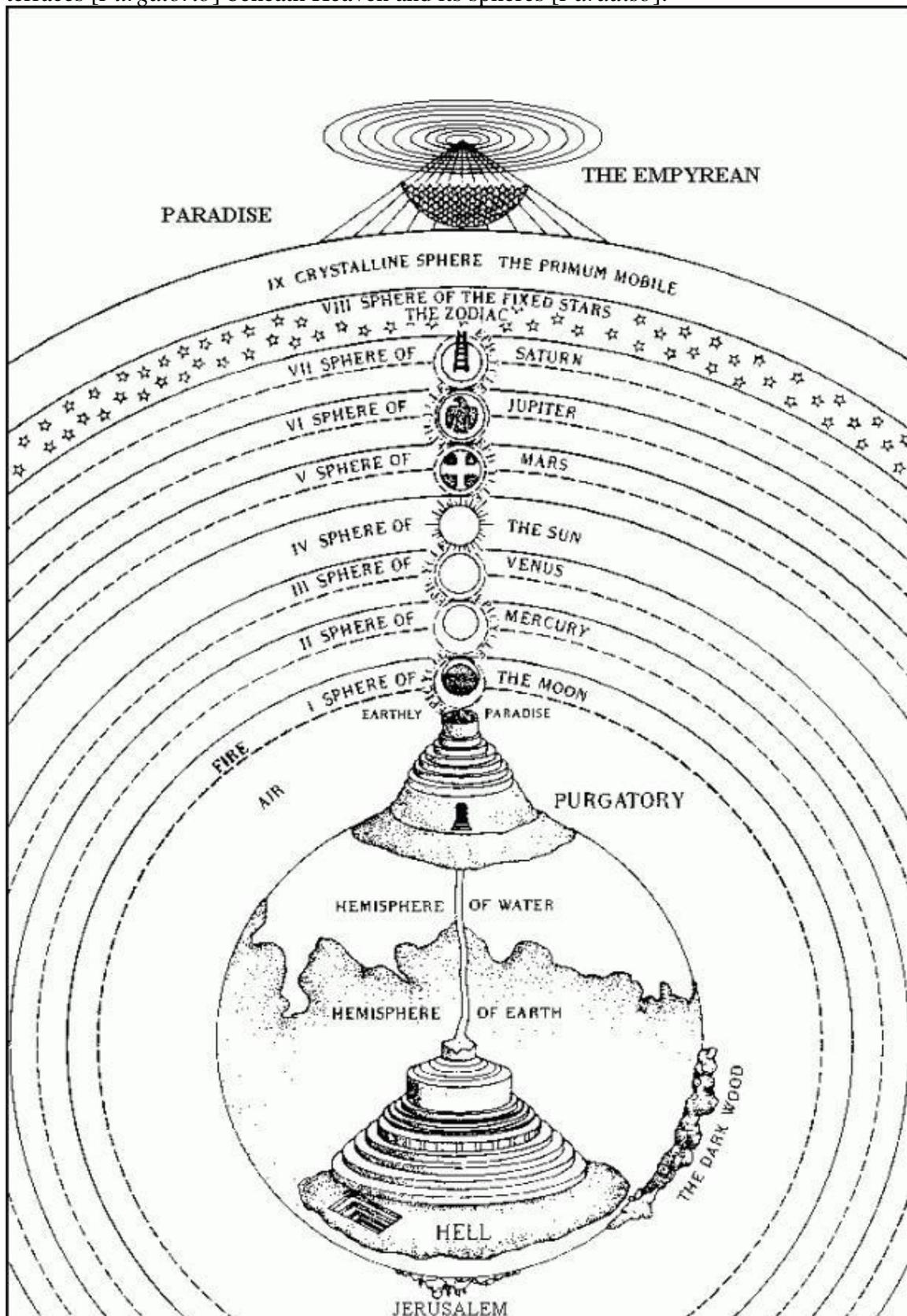


Fig. 2: The Mountain of Purgatory

Arrival area [“Antepurgatory”] leading through the gate to seven terraces over which the seven capital vices are purged, and ultimately to the Earthly Paradise.

