

## VITAL COMMUNITY IN DANTE'S *THE DIVINE COMEDY*

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One might view Dante's *The Divine Comedy* as a treatise on love. The *Inferno* shows the punishments of those who sinned by having defective love and who died unrepentant. The *Purgatorio* describes people who also loved insufficiently or to excess but because of their repentance are allowed to purge these sins by their works. The *Paradiso* makes a striking contrast in revealing the joyful result of living with correctly-proportioned love. While *The Divine Comedy* depicts the necessity of loving rightly in all directions, Dante especially stresses one type of love: the love of the community. He emphasizes this love so strongly because he believes it is the type of love most likely to go astray, as he illustrates in the middle of the *Purgatorio* in Canto 17. He thinks it is not man's tendency to hate himself, and so this defect is not widely present in the world (106-108). Dante also shows that since man depends on God for his existence, he cannot actually distance himself from God and hate Him (109-111). "Thus," Dante concludes, "ill love must mean to wish one's neighbor ill" (113).<sup>1</sup> Mankind is most prone to err in this way, and this vice negatively affects the whole community. *The Divine Comedy* illustrates the necessity of community throughout, from the self-centered sinners in the *Inferno* to the community being formed in the *Purgatorio*, finally culminating in the perfect community in the *Paradiso*. Dante shows that it is to this joy all men should aspire, and that they should order their earthly loves accordingly.

The *Inferno* is the picture of people who encouraged their different loves to become defective and of the punishments they must endure as a result. Dante lays out the sins in order of magnitude, in circles of hell that descend as the sins become baser. He arranges these circles carefully so as to emphasize his belief in the importance of community. The sins in the lowest three circles are sins which specifically harm others. The upper circles, made for less grievous sinners, hold those who sinned in an effort to form community. The first circle is known as Limbo (Canto 4). It contains the virtuous who lived unaware of Christ's atonement. Some of the most prominent figures in Limbo are the ancient philosophers. Dante joins their communion for a time, discussing the great ideas as they had done in life, though most of them meet for the first time in death. Their conversation reflects their earthly participation in a vast community of thinkers who worked together to further the understanding of themselves and others. Dante does not dole out to them a harsh punishment; rather, they are permitted

to continue their conversations together for all time. The second circle contains those being punished for sins of lust (Canto 5). Lust is also a communal sin; it necessarily involves a relationship between two people. Sinners carried out these relationships in a warped way on earth, but the sin was committed out of a desire for community. This circle contains the adulterous lovers Paolo and Francesca, who are buffeted about together forever.

In contrast to the community-affirming sins of the upper circles of the Inferno, the lower circles hold those whose sins were particularly and often intentionally harmful to others. The characters of the final three circles reveal this problem most vividly, the first of whom are the violent in the seventh circle (Canto 12). These people committed harsh crimes against others, often resulting in the loss of life. Their punishment is to toss about immersed in a river of blood which splatters them beyond recognition. In fact, the only figures Dante can recognize within this circle are the Minotaur and the centaurs. This observation symbolizes that by taking someone else's life, one loses what makes him recognizably human and becomes, essentially, a beast. The humans in this circle remain unrecognized because they have denied their human nature by hurting one another as beasts do. It also implies an important correlation between being human and having a place within the community that no one should violate by injury or murder.

The sins only grow in magnitude as Dante travels farther down into the Inferno. The perpetrators of varying types of fraud are punished within the eighth circle. Once again, these kinds of fraud are judged to be more or less severe according to the result within the community. The first pocket contains the panderers and seducers. These are serious crimes, but they, too, result from some sort of relationship between two people, however perverted. The seducer does not treat his victim well, but seduction does imply a certain amount of originally positive interaction. The next pocket contains the flatterers who commit fraud by misrepresenting the truth to others; though they deceive their listeners, this deception is still a form of encouragement, which in its true form is a community-affirming good (Canto 18). Dante later finds simonists, diviners, barrators, and hypocrites, all of whom are fraudulent, but whose crimes similarly do not bring great harm to the deceived (Cantos 19-23). In all the previous sins, the one deceived is a fairly willing party to the deception. People choose to listen to flattery, to seek out fortune-tellers, or to attempt to buy a church office or pardon.

The final four types of fraud are far graver, and those who suffer because of them did not have the chance to prevent them. For instance, thieves diminish the quality of life of their victims (Cantos 24-25). Fraudulent counselors earn a place of trust and

then deliberately misuse this position to mislead others, often causing great harm. Odysseus writhes in flames within this pocket, the result of having told a lie to his men that resulted in their deaths (Canto 26). Sowers of schism literally divide communities into smaller and smaller bits and resist forces attempting to unite them (Canto 28). The last group is falsifiers, who gain by misrepresenting themselves, the value of their possessions, or their words, with the result of deceiving and hurting others (Cantos 29-30). All forms of fraud not only harm another person, but they do so by taking away that person's ability to judge a situation correctly. Fraud is the malicious use of the intellect, that which makes man human, to the extent that it cripples the intellect of another person. This abomination is a crime against humanity and against the community.

Dante reserves the final, ninth circle for the sinners he believes to be the vilest: the traitors. Betrayal is a crime Dante experienced firsthand, and he remains bitter. The first ring holds those who have betrayed members of their own families (Canto 32). This crime is gut-wrenching, but Dante believes there are worse forms of betrayal. He possesses a great sense of patriotism and desires unification and community within a nation. He has experienced many years of turbulence and fighting within Florence and sees how detrimental infighting is for a country and its individuals. The second ring holds those who have betrayed their nation (Canto 33). Dante finds Ugolino here, gnawing on the head of his betrayer. Ugolino betrayed his nation and mistreated others in life because of his self-interest, and he continues to display his hatred in death.

An even more malignant form of betrayal is betrayal of guests (Canto 33). Guests are people whom the criminal has invited into his home and for whom he has promised to take special care. This sin is the severing of a relationship one does not possess by nature, but one that has been intentionally formed. The crime punished in the pit of the Inferno is more shocking still: betrayal of benefactors (Canto 34). These benefactors have behaved in the best sense of community to people who then disregard this grace and harm them. It is a sickening crime, and the punishment is equally terrible. Lucifer's three mouths gnaw on the heads of Brutus, Cassius, and Judas in a punishment reminiscent of Ugolino's wrath against his betrayer. All the later punishments of the Inferno are especially painful and appalling, which reflects the depravity of sins against one's fellow man.

The same progression of the magnitude of sins found in the *Inferno* is mirrored in the *Purgatorio*. This time, however, Dante climbs a slope rather than descending, so the first sinners he describes are the worst sort. The first terrace of Purgatory holds those who sinned with pride (Canto 10). Pride is one of the greatest

hindrances to community, for a vibrant community requires that members work together for a common good instead of for selfish gain. Pride always vaunts itself and causes people to believe they are more important than others. Therefore, those in Purgatory must conquer this sin before they can progress any further because the people here need to work together to help each other up the slope of the mountain.

Purgatory is the only realm of the afterlife that involves movement. The people in the Inferno are permanently mired in their sins, and those in Paradise have no need of further progress. But in Purgatory, one can and must accomplish something through movement, and this advancement is only possible by working together; pride would inhibit this process. The next two terraces also contain sins that hinder a community from working as it should. The second terrace holds the envious (Canto 13). Envy is the result of putting oneself above others, and not valuing the claims others have to blessings. It often leads to the sins which are punished below in the Inferno, such as thievery and murder. Overcoming envy helps the community develop a purer love, and draws it closer together. The third terrace contains the wrathful, whose ire is another hindrance to community (Canto 15). Once penance has been completed for these sins, the penitents have learned skills that aid them in developing a community and thus no longer sin against one another.

Purgatory is the broken, wounded community which is being healed. Love is the foundation of Purgatory, for it is Christ's love for mankind that impelled Him to come to earth to die for the sins of the world. There are many ways in which Dante shows that those in Purgatory must work together in love in order to reach their goal. When anyone ascends a terrace, the rest of the company sings together in joy and celebration at this accomplishment. Their words also show this sense of community and togetherness. They sing "Te Deum laudamus," which means "we praise you, Lord" (9.141). This chorus is the acknowledgment that it is a communal worship session, not a thousand individual ones. It is "words sung in such a way—in unison—that fullest concord seemed to be among them" (16.20-21). The fellowship together also sings beatitudes—psalms which praise groups of people, not individuals. These are meant as encouragement for the penitent to persevere in their tasks to overcome sin. Such encouragements are common and important in the *Purgatorio*. Those residing on each terrace are aware of the negative examples from antiquity who committed these sins, but they are also given positive examples of virtue in these areas to which they may aspire and by which they may be encouraged. The fact that each pilgrim is marked by seven P's to symbolize each of the sins of the terraces also signifies how the community in purgatory works together. These marks appear on

the forehead so that an individual will not think about them himself and so that those around him may better know how to help and encourage him.

Another sign of the community which is coming together is the presence of prayer in Purgatory. Characters in the *Inferno* proudly order Dante to tell those on earth to remember them; those in Purgatory humbly petition for prayers, in effect saying they recognize that they need help. Not only are they concerned for their own needs, but they also have increased concern for others in their own prayers: "This last request I address to You, dear Lord, not for ourselves . . . but for ones left behind" (11.22-24). Dante learns from their example and exhorts his readers to pray for others.

The principles of community apply even in the punishments, which have the purpose of teaching. When Dante and Virgil witness the punishments of the second terrace, Virgil explains that "the cords that form the scourging lash are plied by love" (13.38-39). The figurative "lash" refers to all the punishments in Purgatory, for they have been bestowed out of love, in order to make the penitent ones fit for Paradise. Also in this terrace, "another's shoulder served each shade as prop" (13.59). By working together in this way, they learn how to support each other in love, and prepare for ascent into Paradise.

Purgatory is the journey that allows people to reach Paradise, the fulfillment of all earthly desire for and promise of community. All finally know Christ, and so can now know love and maintain a living community. There is no disorder or sin here, but rather, perfect coexistence. Dante knows that mortal man cannot really understand this excellence, but he employs subtle ways of showing the perfection of this glorious communion. The relationships in Paradise sharply contrast with those from the *Inferno* and even Purgatory. In Canto 11, Dante meets the character of Thomas Aquinas, who was a member of the Dominican order. Rather than commend himself and the fellow monks of his order, he singles out St. Francis, founder of the Franciscan order, for special tribute. Later, St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan, appears. He conversely chooses to praise the life of St. Dominic (Canto 13). On earth, these two monastic orders competed, but in Paradise the beloved community has been born.

Consequently, all people who are in Paradise love and respect each other. There is no disorder within this community, for all are in Christ, and love each other in Him. This does not mean that the characters abide well together because they are identical. Each retains the personality given to him by God. However, these differences in personality are not sources of contention as they are on earth. Rather, those in Paradise recognize the great worth of the harmony that is formed when so many different people come

together, creating a beautiful composition (6.121-126). They all realize their own humble condition and that this state requires that their love be directed firstly toward God, then as an outpouring of that, to others; self-love is the least important facet of this love, and it is not prominent in Paradise. The disordered love of the Inferno is corrected in Purgatory, leading to perfect love in Paradise.

No characters in *The Divine Comedy* are ever alone. People must interact with one another in life and in death. Dante portrays the vital importance of people living together in a healthy community. He shows multiple examples of crimes committed against community in the Inferno, and he harshly doles out blame to those who acted wrongly against their fellow man. He needs to spend so much time in the Inferno to show this crippled state because when people sin against community, they fracture it. Dante must illustrate a multitude of shards of the former community and the sins which struck the dividing blows. Purgatory reveals how even broken communities may be redeemed and how one person cannot grow without the help of others. This process is long, as each piece of the community fuses back into its intended state. After the work of Purgatory, the community is finally perfected in Paradise, where all of creation dwells together in harmony. There is only one way for a community to be complete and perfect, and so Dante requires fewer words to describe this functioning whole, though his joy at beholding it causes him to repeat these truths over and over. Dante states that this blessed community is that for which man was made, and through his writing, encourages his readers to build community through their actions while they still live.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).