The Arc of Glory

Nature Deformed, Renewed, and Transcended in Dante's *Divine Comedy*

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The Christian life involves the death of sin paralleled with the newness of life. In a prelapsarian world, the created order reflected the divine order. However, in a postlapsarian world, sin distorted the created order and thus distorted the reflection of the divine order. Dante's *Divine Comedy* describes a three-step process of the Christian afterlife, manifested in Hell, Purgatory, and finally Paradise. In doing so, Dante begins with the first aspect of redemption, the need for redemption stemming from a distorted created order, but moves towards a reconstruction of soul in anticipation of a more orderly cosmos. The *Divine Comedy* contrasts Hell as the destruction of nature with Purgatory as the restoration of nature, setting Paradise apart as transcendence above nature.

Dante's placement of individuals in *Inferno* in their respective circles is not to prescribe a literal punishment, but rather to reveal sin's distortion of nature and God's image. The first circle, as Dante's introductory circle, reveals the intent of the allegory is to describe the deformation of nature. Of those in the first circle, Dante writes,

> They sinned not; yet their merit lacked its chiefest
> Fulfilment, lacking baptism, which is
> The gateway to the faith which thou believest.[1]

Ironically, Dante argues that the virtuous pagans did *not* sin and merely lacked the Sacraments. Definitionally, sin must precede a sacrament for it to be sacramental. Dante should not be understood to have denied original sin with his statement; instead, Dante is portraying the good of the created order even in a fallen state. By declaring that the pagans "have not sinned," Dante broadens sin's impact to the whole of creation: he is not focused merely on condemning individuals. The virtuous pagans, although separated from God, did not distort nature; they were born into what was distorted already. The first circle is sorrowful, "grief's abysmal valley."[2] It is shaped by a lack of knowledge, not a rejection of the apparent truth.

The following circles show the distortion of nature, progressing from distorted natural desires to those truly unnatural. Dante assumes humans, being created beings, are natural. Further, he assumes that by being made *imago Dei*, they have a will to act. Dorothy Sayers, in her commentary, notes, that Dante held "the belief of all Catholic Christians that every living soul in the world has to make the choice between accepting or rejecting God."[3] Nature is of God; thus, when the rejection of the

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1. Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy I: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1949), 4.34-36. Mark Musa's translation may emphasize this further by emphasizing the individual commitment to the faith: "they did not *know* Baptism…." Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy Volume 1: Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 4.35, emphasis added.

2. Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, 4.8.

3. Dorothy L. Sayers, introduction to *The Divine Comedy I: Hell*, by Dante Alighieri, trans. Dorothy L Sayers (Mitcham: Penguin Books Ltd, 1949), 14.

created order is greater, the rejection of God is greater, and thus darkness is greater. In *Inferno*, Dante's circles roughly mirror the seven sins in Roman Catholic theology. The three circles following the first consist of the lustful, the gluttonous, and the covetous.[4] Sayers notes in her commentary on *Purgatorio*, which contains the three in the same order, that the love of romantic companionship, food, and property is not itself flawed; rather, Dante is describing love in excess.[5] The sins in the circles following instead all represent malice in some form. Dante begins with noble goals: the pursuit of truth, where the Triune is lacked; love, yet in excess. However, Dante concludes with a complete perversion of goodness: the willful distortion of truth and love, and thus a fuller rejection of God. In the rejection of God, Dante displays the distortion of nature. Since humans themselves are natural beings, Dante's descent showcases the distortion of the human.

The final circle of Hell displays the will as destroyed through the distortion of nature and rejection of God. Instead of conventional images of Hell, Dante uses ice. Yet still the willful desire of Satan to be as God without God remains: of Satan's wings, Dante writes, "as they flapped and whipped / Three winds went rushing over the icy flat…."[6] Satan desires to move, presumably higher, yet the ice binds Satan from moving. The ability for the will to act for or against God results in either life or death. The closer one is to death, the closer one is to non-existence, and thus the inability to truly exercise the will. Thus, with his picture of ice, Dante portrays God as the giver of life; without God, life cannot be sustained. Thus, Dante the pilgrim comprehends neither life nor death, writing,

> This was not life, and yet it was not death
> If thou hast wit to think how I might fare
> Bereft of both, let fancy aid thy faith.[7]

The final circle is unnatural enough that natural laws seem suspended. Sin, definitionally, seeks to attain godliness without God, thus attempting to override natural order. Yet without natural order, the very *ability* to seek godliness is challenged since existence itself is challenged.

Once *Inferno* is understood as the deformation of nature, the following *cantica*, *Purgatorio*, with its parallels to *Inferno*, can be understood as the restoration of nature. Dante places his circles, or, in Purgatory, cornices, in a similar order, although the cornices of Purgatory more rigidly match Roman Catholicism's seven sins. The three final cornices of the covetous, glutenous, and lustful match the first three of Hell, and the first three cornices of the proud, the envious, and the wrathful show some parallels to treachery, fraud, violence, and anger in Hell.[8] Only the fourth cornice, the

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4. Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, 5.38, 6.30, 7.41-42.

5. Dorothy L. Sayers, introduction to *The Divine Comedy II: Purgatory*, by Dante Alighieri, trans. Dorothy L Sayers (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 67.

6. Alighieri, *Hell*, trans. Sayers, 34.50-51.

7. Ibid., 34.25-27.

8. Sayers, introduction to *Purgatory*, 62.

cornice of the slothful, does not have a parallel.[9, 10] Dante uses these parallels to reveal an opposite nature between the two places. While Hell removes individuals from the presence of God, Purgatory is "Where human spirits purge themselves, and train / to leap up into joy celestial."[11] Essentially, Purgatory is the opposite of Hell: while Hell deforms nature, Purgatory redeems it.

While Dante uses a similar structure in both Hell and Purgatory, he concludes both *cantica* with direct contrast, portraying the final circle of Hell as an opposite to the top of Mount Purgatory. The top is a complete restoration of nature, portraying the Garden of Eden. Instead of feeling a lack of life, as he did in the final circle of Hell, Dante is "like trees by change of calendars / Renewed with new-sprung foliage through and through…."[12] Beatrice tells Dante,

> The most high Good, that His sole self doth please,
> Making man good, and for good, set him in
> This place as earnest of eternal peace.[13]

She goes on to explain that this placement preceded sin, indicating a perfect aspect.[14] Perhaps most notably, however, Dante attains the ability to reach the heavens, being "Pure and prepared to leap up to the stars"—a sharp contrast to the Devil's inability to move upwards, despite his wings.[15] Dante, viewing earthly paradise as perfect, opposite the eight circle of Hell, does not see Purgatory as a state of limbo between evil and good, Hell and Paradise. Rather, he sees the journey through Purgatory as the complete restoration of nature and a journey of joyous salvation.

Since Dante is fully restored in *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso* reveals Eden was not as a final state of man, but rather as an anticipation of greater glory. Dante uses earthly paradise to indicate that, even in a prelapsarian state, Paradise was unattainable and a greater glory was anticipated. In short, the Edenic state was never intended to be eternal. Dante, in his journey in *Paradiso*, learns,

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9. Ibid.

10. Sayers argues that this represents three types of love. Pride, envy, and wrath represent a perverted love for the self while covetousness, gluttony, and lust represent excessive love for good. Sloth stands apart as love for neither good nor evil and is thus placed in the middle. Ibid., 66-67.

11. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy II: Purgatory*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 1.5-7.

12. Ibid., 33.143-144.

13. Ibid., 28.91-93.

14. Ibid., 28.94-99.

15. Ibid., 33.145.

> And when we put completeness on afresh,
> All the more gracious shall our person be,
> Reclothéd in the holy and glorious flesh….[16]

The entire comedy is an allegory of both the individual's pilgrimage to God and the restoration of nature. Hell displays the descent of man while Purgatory and Paradise present the ascent. Purgatory and Paradise, while both an upward journey, differ since Purgatory cleanses the body, bringing it to its original state; Paradise, however, brings the individual higher, joyously anticipating the eternal presence of God. Purgatory being the opposite of Hell offers insight into Paradise, displaying a transcendent, rather than a dualist, reality in divine goodness. The crucifixion and subsequent sanctification of man does more than merely undue the mistake of the fall; it renews man to a greater glory.

Dante's placement of Paradise above earth sets Paradise as a transcendent reality, one that earth's created order reflects. Dante creates a geocentric universe, which, allegorically, seems paradoxical; God is the greatest importance, not the earth.[17] Nevertheless, the earth is enclosed *within* the heavens, leaving the earth reliant upon the heavens. The geocentric universe exemplifies the heavens in the allegory since the heavens are completely above the earth. Dante notes,

> We contemplate His art, which hath designed
> Great works and flair; His goodness, which draws home
> To this high world the world of lower kind.[18]

Channeling the Augustinian notion of a city of God above the cities of men, Dante finds heaven the true reality that nature on earth reflects. The diversity of heaven, such as the differing aspects of the planets, become apparent on earth in the variation of creation and in humans themselves. All aspects of original, or restored, creation that Purgatory aspires to points to a higher goal, the cosmic order of Paradise.

Hell, then, essentially shows a need for redemption by displaying the distortion of nature from sin. After displaying this need, Dante proceeds to display the restoration of nature through Purgatory, concluding with the divine order responsible for the goodness of any initial nature. *Paradiso* is rightfully the final *cantica* of the three, although it might be understood both as first *and* last. Heaven's order forms the earth, yet all aspects of the natural earth point towards heaven as the final destiny. Dante thus showcases the image of the gospel as an arc of glory across the entire *Divine Comedy*. God makes nature, in its fallen state, completely new, fully anticipating the glory of heaven's beauty.

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16. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy III: Paradise*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 14.43-45.

17. Barbra Reynolds, introduction to The Divine Comedy III: Paradise, by Dante Alighieri, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 26-27.

18. Alighieri, *Paradise*, trans. Sayers and Reynolds, 9.106-108.

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