The Reality of Dante's Topology

In the middle of his life, at the age of 35, on March 25, 1300, 6PM Jerusalem time—sunset on Good Friday—Dante walks beneath the surface of the Earth into the Inferno. He is first greeted by the sounds of hands slapping and voices wailing in whirling black air about him. His guide, the unsaved soul of the poet Virgil, tells Dante that he is hearing the sounds of the Neutrals, angels that were both cast out of heavens. Only then does Dante, "all eyes" *(che riguardai)* begin to see the parade of these shades gathered marching under a flapping empty banner. Then "fixing his gaze" beyond them, he sees a crowd of souls standing the edge of a wide river, which Virgil specifies is Acheron. He sees a boat approaching, and the negotiation begins between Virgil and Charon, the demon ferryman, that brings Dante into the first circle of Hell.

Over a 24-hour span, Dante makes the journey from the zero-circle of the Neutrals down to the black and icy floor of hell—the dead center of the Earth and of the Christian Universe—where Satan is pitched headfirst into the ground. During that time Dante and Virgil move through the nine circles surrounding the central abyss that traces the path of Satan's fall. They cross from circle to circle, each one holding steeper descent, a narrower radius, and a harsher landscape than the one before it. The first few circles are wide sparsely populated plains. A medieval castle lies in the meadows of the first circle, a consolation for the unsaved, but virtuous souls, like Virgil, who were born before the advent of Christ. The second circle, grows darker, engulfed in storms. As they descend, the thresholds are guarded by more and more ferocious demons, and the punishments grow more brutal. The swampy Styx, the second river of Hell, engulfs all of the Fifth Circle and the violent souls cast into it. At its far shore lies the wall of the city Dis, the gateway into Lower Hell. Within the wall, a third river, Phegothon, a river of blood, marks the edge of the Seventh circle, and flows like a waterfall down the steep drop to the level below it. Much of the action, peril and grotesqueries of *The Inferno* are packed into the teeming, torturous Eight Circle. Over the third of text (cantos 18-30) is devoted to this level, called Malebolge, consisting its own ten distinct concentric circles or pits where various types of fraud are punished. And, far below, the cold despair and desolation of the the Ninth circle lies in sharp contrast to the kinetic machinery of the Eight's punishment. The floor hell is covered by the fourth river of hell, the frozen Cocytus, made Satan's tears.

The complexity of the geometry and breath of the landscapes that comprise the topography of the Inferno can get lost by the reader amidst many grotesque denizens and fantastical events of the journey. The vulgar demon guardians and tormenters, and the elaborate punishments of the souls—based on Dante's the principle of *contrapasso*, that the punishment justly mirror the sin—tend to dominate our cultural imagination of the Inferno. In the particular, the increasingly fantastical events at the thresholds of the lower circles push the poem even further into the unreal domains of Medieval allegory or, today, comic-book fantasy: an angel descends from heaven to open the gates to Dis; Dante crosses the bloody river Phelgton astride a centaur; the winged demon Geryon flies Dante and Virgil down to the Eighth Circle; and the giant Atenous carries them in his hand down to the Ninth. It seems impossible to envision this underworld, illustrated a thousand times over from the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch to the Fiend Folios of Dungeons & Dragons, as anything other in fantasy.

Yet Dante insists on the reality of his journey. Undergirding every moment of the Divine Comedy is methodical attention to the senses both of the traveler (Dante) and of the reader. The mimetic realism of Dante's descriptions are beyond anything in we would expect from the flat worlds of fancy in the Medieval Romances. Each landscape, denzisen, sound, is transmitted through the vividly measured language of the sense. He wants us to hear, see, feel, smell, even touch the world he is depicting. Often, as with his entry into the zero-circle of the neutrals, Dante employs a delay on sensory imput—the kind all of us experience upon encountering a new, dark world. He will hear or smell thing first, perhaps even ask Virgil, to tell him what he is seeing. Then only after his eyes adjust to the light or the strangeness of the scene, does he paint the landscape for reader's eyes. At the threshold of the ninth circle, Dante at first think he sees towers on horizon. Virgil corrects him, and as they draw closer, he sees that they are the head of giants.

The dynamic of Dante's physical body is always at play to heighten this realism. He, unlike the souls of hell, will cause a boat to displace water. In Purgatory, Dante has exited hell and returned to the world above ground, the souls notice that he casts a shadow. Even at the fantastical moments, crossing from one circle to the next, Dante's human body is always present in sense

and dimensionality. Dante and Virgil spend the entire duration of Canto 11 waiting at the threshold of the Seventh Circle so that Dante can get used to the stench. Even his depicition of the more outlandish event—the flight upon demon Geryon's back that brings them down to the Eighth—is treated in the hyperrealistic embodied mode. Dante clings to the neck of Geryon as the Demon leaps into the abyss, the rushing noise of the waterfall of blood beside them. Dante is awash with fear, and tightens his thighs around Geryon's neck. Dante attemps to gaze from Geyron to discern the architecture of the Eighth Circle, but blur and speed of flight is too much, and he nearly falls.

But why this focus on reality, on the senses and the physicality of the human bodies? If we look to the great fabulists of our times—Kafka, Calvino, Haruki Murakami—it would seem obvious. The stranger the world, to more mimetic work the author must do to convince us of the solidity of its reality. Amazing, in the early 1300, Dante seems to have grasped this rule of speculative fiction. That the mimetic realism of Dante's storytelling appears an innovation centuries ahead of the Christian allegories of his time, is no accident. This of imaginative act of world creation had stakes far beyond those of today speculative fictions.

The Dante scholar, Charles Singleton wrote, "The fiction of the Divine Comedy is that it is not fiction." Indeed, Dante made explicit claims to the historical fact of his journey through the three zones of the afterlife. As the scholar and translator, Robert Hollander, points this is an essentially heretical act. In Dante's time, the church made a clear distinction between poetic and theological allegory. Poetic allegory is the thing of Medieval Romance, such as the *The Romance of the Rose*. They are tale whose setting and character of unreal, of myth, but the story reveals a higher truth about the Christian soul. Theological allegory, in thirteenth century Italy, lay in the stories of the Bible. These are considered, true historical events that carried allegorical lesson for Christian life. In a letter to the nobleman Cangrande della Scala, Dante's chief patron and his chief hope for the future of the Italian state, Dante makes explicit that he is placing the Comedy in the tradition of theological allegory. The poem, Dante claims, is the recollection of an actual seven day journey through the regions of the dead.

The metaphysical complexities of this claim, especially when situated within the context of Dante's time are exceeding complex. One can argue, like Christian Moeves, that the Christain late Medieval concept of the real or the actually is much more slippery that ours. If this event a dream or a vision, such an event may hold the a claim to reality. What is more important is that by making this claim of real the theological and historical import of the poem, Dante must invent an allegorical realism unseen before his time.