

DANTE PAPER PROMPTS

Write an essay responding to one of the following prompts. The questions are directly gathered from our class discussion and will certainly not take you by surprise. Let me just add two remarks: First, as always, be in touch with your instructors in case there is anything you don't understand about the prompts. Second, if you would like to write about something else (the soundscape of hell, love as a mover, the nightride on Geryon...), please feel free to make up your own prompt, which should include the reconstruction and close reading of one particular passage of Dante's text, and the interpretation of your reading in terms of a larger question – that is, how it may be relevant to our understanding of *Inferno* more generally. To ensure commensurability of your own prompt with the other prompts, please send it to me for approval before you start writing your essay.

One more point, since last time some of you felt unsure about whether the subquestions asked in the prompts needed to be considered one by one: No – these are just questions supposed to provide some guidance in thinking about the problem under consideration in each prompt. Use good judgment in interpreting the prompt in a cohesive fashion – so you can respond to it with your essay – and don't worry if your argument does not explicitly address all of the subquestions. In any case, this seems to be a minor issue; so far all of you without exception handled the prompts very well.

(1) The poem sets off neither from a beginning, nor from an end, but from a middle: in the middle of life, in the middle of a forest, in which clarifying one's location also involves finding an orientation and a direction. From this perspective, the pilgrim's travel can be said to be all about orientation in an unknown environment, an activity often and typically manifested in acts of reading. Next to the opening scene, this includes the letters marking the entrance to hell, the roles directly attributed to poetry and to reading, or the interpretation of the devils' behaviour – but it also includes the topography of hell, with which the pilgrim becomes acquainted at every turn, as well as all kinds of challenges of physical and spiritual orientation more generally. Draw closely on one particular passage where reading is central, describe it in detail, analyze it according to what it does in its context, and develop the implications it bears for the rest of the text. Focus specifically on what your interpretation of reading tells us about Dante's understanding of his own poem. You may include a discussion of the strategies of reading that we as readers of *Inferno* are lead to perform – struggling for orientation in a work that releases its information only gradually and strategically, bit by bit, through a linear performance carried out by the reader's activity, similar to what a dance or a musical score would require.

(2) *Inferno* can be described as a 'casuistry' of human deeds and characters, an exercise to train our estimative capacity (judgment) vis a vis notoriously difficult singular cases. In Dante's poem, what a case *is* seems to depend largely on how one looks at it, in what light it is cast. But how is such evaluation done? What is the role of participation and empathy, of pathos (being affected, afflicted, infected, or overwhelmed) more generally? How does the sin relate to the sinner's character? What is the sinner's own attitude toward her/his deed and punishment? How does the pilgrim react, and is there a

development in his reactions over time? (Remember here that terms such as compassion, indifference, condemnation, or irony are just ‘raw’ descriptors in need to be qualified by detailed observation.) Select one passage that is suited to demonstrate the subtleties of Dante’s play with evaluation, the ambivalences of this play, and the struggle to decide, and discuss this passage in the full textual detail available to you in translation. What does it mean in this context that most encounters between sinners and the pilgrim are not cast as meeting someone for the first time, but as a scene of recognition – an encounter between individuals, and an encounter between fellow humans?

(3) While the principle of *contrapasso*, counter-suffering, is explicitly introduced only in Canto 28, it seems to provide a rule that determines the relationship of the punishments to the sins in *Inferno* more generally. Pick one example of *contrapasso* and analyze in great textual detail: What is the sin in question and for what reasons is it considered a sin? How does it manifest itself in the sinner’s former deeds and character? How is the sin reflected by its punishment? How does this reflection relate to other, parallel as well as contrasting, examples of sinners and their punishment? Conclude your discussion by a hypothesis about what this says about the kind of justice performed in *Inferno*. Bearing the tension between an emphasis on universal divine law on the one hand, and on the irreducible specificity of the individual sin/punishment on the other: What does this justice look like, and why (that is, what are the reasons for casting it so)? Draw for your answers on the detail of one particular passage, as well as on the wider context both of the passage in question and of *Inferno* as a whole.

Good luck!
Florian Klinger