**The Divine Comedy of Religious Death**

The works of Dante show that he has a very rich understanding of both Christian and Hellenistic beliefs, so much to the point that he often meshes them together. This is not entirely wrong -- Christianity and Hellenism have a long history of colonizing one another. Dante’s mix of religious beliefs creates a very avant-garde approach to poetry, which he shows consistently in his works. While modern art is often criticized for being “ridiculous” -- ie, Marcel Duchamp’s urinal -- much of ancient works were also on the more absurd side of art. In Renaissance Florence, one of the popular religious activities happened to be taking random parts -- both human body parts and objects -- and claim them to be “relics.” They would then be displayed in churches, which, in a way, is a really gruesome form of art. Dante’s self-insert fanfiction about Satan is quite blasphemous from viewpoint of modern Christianity, and so is the concept of displaying disembodied parts -- yet both were highly praised in their time. While both are very different art forms, they do hold one thing in common -- both of these mediums embrace the “warts ‘n’ all” nature of Christianity, and, more importantly, the meaning of death.

Ancient Rome is well-known for embracing the “warts ‘n’ all” of their leaders, yet deifying them. This is shown easily through a long history of their artwork -- for example, statues of emperor Constatine are described as “But they are all overwhelmed by the size and detail of his eyes. They are oversized and deeply cut to dramatically emphasize them as a feature. The result is an abstracted, almost geometric image, which encourages, almost requires, engagement with his eyes over any other feature” (Tuck, 337). Even though Constantine is being described with realism, it’s still impossible to have a piece of art that is fully grounded in reality. This is reflected in portrayals of the gods, who are not portrayed as perfect beings, as modern Christianity expects the Christian God to be. Ancient Roman art is known for being more truthful than Greece, which means that many of the rumors about Rome -- such as emperor Caligula being bald -- are most likely not true, because there are no artistic depictions of him in that way (Tuck, 157).

However, this essay isn’t written to ramble about that period of Rome -- that was merely brought up to In Dante’s *Inferno,* this is illustrated quite well. All of Dante’s works focus on deifying Beatrice, the girl that he loves oh so very much. All of Dante’s works focus on navigating these feelings, through metaphors of Christianity, meshed with Hellenistic beliefs of the past. By writing about Hellenism in contrast with Christianity, Dante shows that the past has a strong way of meshing with the present, and that his love for Beatrice feels godlike, as ancient as Hellenism when painted with Christian beliefs. “O blind cupidity, O wrath insane, / That spurs us, onward so in our short life” (Inferno, Canto 12, page 88). This feels like a very Daoist concept -- blind love and crazy anger are what pull someone through their life, a yin and yang to one another. “I showed / in lifting up my chin at her command; / I know quite well -- when she said ‘beard’ but meant / my face -- the poison in her argument” (Purgatorio, Canto 31, page 291). Dante also shows that he feels unseen, or, rather, only partially seen by Beatrice -- she sees his beard instead of his whole face. This is sort of like how the people in his time could only part of what they worshipped in the relics, but not the whole thing.

“And has a nature so malign and ruthless, / That never doth she glut her greedy will, / And after food is hungrier than before. / Many the animals with whom she weds, / And more they shall be still, until the Greyhound / Comes, who shall make her perish in her pain” (Inferno, Canto 1, page 11). These two stanzas clash in a very intriguing way -- the first one is about the evils and hunger of nature, while the other is about being one with nature but still being hurt and killed by it. In the Christian beliefs, God is everything, including nature. To criticize nature and the complicatedness of it is to criticize nature itself, meaning that Dante is not just saying that nature itself is evil and hungry and that he himself is one with it, but he is also saying that God Himself is evil and hungry and that he himself is one with Him.

“AS the geographical and spiritual heart of the city lay the Baptistery, Dante’s *il mio be* / *San Giovanni,* named for John the Baptist, who from the earlier Middle Ages was the patron saint of the city” (Turner, 28). I find it shocking to hear that Dante himself was actually a devout and well-respected Catholic when his work was literally self-insert fanfiction about Satan. It feels a lot like the Piss Christ that was learned about in the photography section of this program -- that piece, too, was created by a devout Christian, despite being blasphemous.

Dante refers to God as the “Emperor” … Quite intriguing since He has historically been referred to as the King (Inferno, Canto 1, page 12). This shows yet again his Roman recallings. However this doesn’t just stop at allusions to Rome -- he also literally writes about characters from Hellenistic myths and historical figures from Greek/Roman history. As Dante writes about Hell, his writings include him interacting with these people and creatures, such as “There I beheld both Socrates and Plato” (Inferno, Canto 4, page 35),“When Cerberus perceived us, the great worm! / His mouths he opened, and displayed his tusks” (Canto 6, page 45).

However, this brings to another point -- Dante’s work, often, at times, rewrites church knowledge itself. Even when the stuff about Hellenistic figures being in Hell is pushed aside, that doesn’t change the fact that some of his interpretation is widely different from the Bible and the church itself. “Two angels bearing flaming swords, of which / the blades were broken off, without their tips. / Their garments, just as green as newborn leaves, / were agitated, fanned by their green wings, / and trailed behind them; [...] / My eyes made out their blond heads clearly, but / my sight was dazzled by their faces” (Purgatorio, Canto 8, pages 69-71). First off, does this flaming sword have to do with the very same flaming sword which guarded the Garden of Eden? This description is also very different than the Biblical descriptions of angels, and the modern interpretations of angels. Does this mean that Dante’s work might not actually have quite as much of a Bible basis as was originally thought? How has Dante’s work affected the way that angels have changed from flying rings with eyes into people with wings? And why, out of all colors of the world, are they GREEN?! There is no knowledge of why there was this odd color choice, only that Dante chooses to take creative liberties with the Bible … And then it somehow becomes accustomed into the church culture.

However, even without the odd color choice, not all of Dante’s interpretation became parts of church culture. “There was a serpent -- similar, perhaps, / to that which offered Eve the bitter food” (Canto 8, page 73). Bitter? Then by Dante’s telling, it must’ve not been an apple. The historical reason why an apple is usually portrayed as the forbidden fruit is because in many cultures, a circle is said to represent god. In Old English, the word “apple” meant any round plant -- which is why a pineapple is called a pineapple, because they resemble pinecones and because of the Old English usage of the word “apple.” However, because Dante didn’t speak English, this means that it was unlikely for him to have seen it as an apple. It could be that perhaps Dante said that the forbidden fruit was “bitter,” NOT because of how it actually tasted, but because the emotions behind it became very bitter.

However, Dante himself is not new to the game of inventing church beliefs -- “By the twelfth century the Church recognized a ‘third place,’ besides Heaven and Hell, where the soul in suffering could atone for earthly sins while awaiting the Last Judgement. [...] Purgatory” (Turner, 37-38). This means that even though Purgatory wasn’t actually written in the original Bible itself, it was a new invention in Dante’s time which was exciting to write about. This means that while today churches might not take kindly to devil fanfiction, this means that Dante’s work was encouraged because he was exploring these new churchy concepts, bringing them to life, and putting them into the public interest.

This brings into an excellent point about the relics -- that, too, was a new invention in its time. The relics held importance because many people in that time couldn’t read, and thus wouldn’t be able to read Dante’s works or the Bible itself to gain more Biblical knowledge. “A relic is either a fragment of a holy person’s body or an intimate possession -- a lock of hair, a scrap of habit -- or a holy object, such as a sliver of the True Cross” (Turner, 18). This textbook description is a VERY TAME way of describing it, but it shows that having an object gave value and importance to understanding and “seeing” what God meant to the people of this time.

Much like how statues held value, a relic could also hold statue-esque qualities. “This incident, reported by Ghiberti and recorded in Sienese documents, attests to the age-old belief that sculpture somehow hovers between flesh and stone, possessing magical powers, and a potential to work both good and evil” (Turner, 51). While sculptures held importance because of their realistic qualities, this means that relics did, too. This also shows why Dante’s work was so important -- it brought realism to what the people of his time were just only beginning to understand.

“Whatever the selection of holy persons, they are placed in individual compartments against flat gold surfaces. Their arrangement makes it easy for a worshipper *in absentia* to contemplate them by recalling their placement in the overall pattern” (Turner, 104). This makes a lot of sense -- it’s a good marker for who’s holy. One has to wonder why halos were good for perspective -- and how they managed to evolve into rings that are only over angels’ heads. However, this also meant that the people wanted a very visual sight of what they worshipped, showing yet again how Dante’s works and the relics brought the world of Christianity to life.

“Fifteenth-century Florence had no umbrella term for the arts in a wider sense (ie, painting, poetry, dance, etc.), neither was there a word for the more restricted group of the visual arts” (Turner, 35). This makes one wonder how a lack of vocabulary affected the way art was viewed -- similarly to how Hellenistic Greece didn’t have a word for blue and thus couldn’t see the color, hence Homer’s “wine-dark sea.” Therefore, this means that if the people of Renaissance Florence had so much less of a concept of art in itself, then Dante’s writing and the relics had much less of a way of being blasphemous. When there is less vocabulary, there are less rules, which leads to less expectations.

However, Dante’s work isn’t about Hell and Purgatory just for the sake of Hell and Purgatory. His work is also written to make a lot of statements about Heaven, which shows that his work wasn’t there just for the sake of being edgy fanfiction -- it was there to explore what God meant (just like the relics). “Some of the beauteous things that Heaven doth bear; / Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars” (Inferno, Canto 34, page 264). This is an absolutely excellent way to end a story about the beauty of Hell -- it feels that what Dante is saying is that one cannot appreciate the beauty of the good without the beauty of the bad, and vice-versa. This must be why he chose to end the path through Hell in Heaven itself.

Much like how the relics show what it means to “see God,” Dante’s work does, too, in the verbal context. “Had you been able to see all, there would / have been no need for Mary to give birth” (Purgatorio, Canto 3, page 23). This is talking about how Jesus teaches, but this goes deeper than that. This makes a really deep statement about how no one can know everything, and how learning is a part of what makes life worth living. To see the relics is to “know,” but not fully -- because one isn’t seeing the full dead body of a saint, only the finger of one.

“Darkness of Hell and of a night deprived / of every planet, under meager skies, / as overcast by clouds as sky can be” (Purgatorio, Canto 16, page 145). Dante keeps comparing Hell to the sky, which seems like an unusual take. In *Inferno,* Dante traveled through Hell to end up in Heaven. Is it possible that maybe Dante sees Heaven and Hell as relative forms to each other, rather than as “opposites,” as modern interpretation goes? Maybe Dante’s reasoning for writing about Purgatory is to link these two concepts together, and show how they mesh in Purgatory itself. The relics, also mesh works together -- the viewer has to mesh what these individual fingers, hairs, wood slivers, and so on mean, when all put together, rather than as just random fragments.

But ultimately, Dante’s work and the relics also bring a statement about death. “My son, though there may be / suffering here, there is no death” (Purgatorio, Canto 27, page 249). Death isn’t really the ultimate suffering -- and Purgatory is different than death. “Death,” in this context, is being alluded to Heaven and Hell -- meaning that Purgatory itself isn’t actually death. While many of the relics come from dead people, they don’t mean death itself to the audience.

While Dante’s work and the relics would have been seen as blasphemous if they had been invented in modern-day times, they brought great light to what Christianity meant and the meaning of death. Without the context one cannot observe these pieces as more than just edgy statements about death and Christianity. The works of Dante and the relics bring great meaning to having only a partial understanding of the world, and so much is lost without that.

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