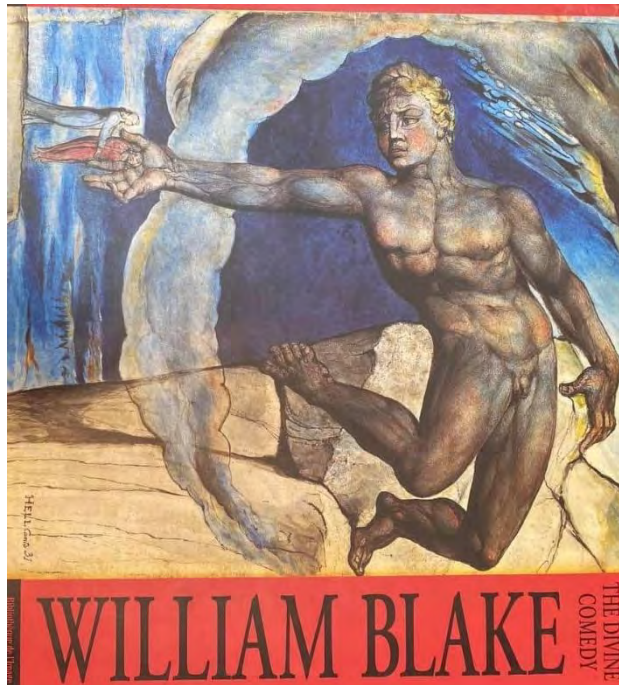


## My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 34

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T.S. Eliot wrote that "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them, there is no third." I think that, along with our tradition of limited government, the rule of law, and the separation of powers in a written constitutional framework, the great gift of the West to world civilization (and therefore, God's providence) is our literary tradition. Though I never mastered Dante or Shakespeare to the extent I desired, I will always be grateful to have been able to read and teach the works of both.

In the "Divine Comedy," Dante hijacks the classical poet Virgil to be his guide through the underworld. Considered the greatest of the classical poets writing in Latin, Virgil became the bedrock of literary taste and moral education in the Christian Middle Ages. The irony of Dante selecting a high Latin poet to be the supporting character in a poem written in the common tongue of Italian, was a radical step not lost on his

audience. The ethical cast of Virgil's writing, his emphasis on virtue, trumped his paganism in the Catholic view. To familiarize my students with Dante the Pilgrim's spiritual guide, I first assigned my students selections from Virgil's epic poem "The Aeneid," which tells the tale of the fall of Troy and the founding of Rome, before we dove into Dante's "Inferno."

By the time we finally started the poem, the students were well primed. We began "The Inferno" around the beginning of the Catholic penitential season of Lent, the perfect context for Dante's poetic exploration of sin and salvation. The opening lines never failed to captivate a class:

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray  
from the straight road and woke to find myself  
alone in a dark wood. How shall I say  
what wood that was! I never saw so drear,  
so rank, so arduous a wilderness!  
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.

We worked with the John Ciardi translation, which provided an introduction to every canto (chapter) along with detailed endnotes. Each class period, I would read a canto aloud and then we would parse the lines one by one. As the entire poem dealt with Dante the Pilgrim's journey to recognize, name, and separate from sin, the six to eight weeks we spent immersed in the text provided an excellent opportunity to explore the most profound spiritual themes. No class period could pass without raising a question with existential implications. For instance, one of the key Dantean concepts, derived from Aristotle, was the idea of "contrapasso," that is, as a person has sinned, they will suffer. The word literally translates from Latin as "suffer the opposite." In the most basic terms, if a person spent their earthly days pursuing pleasure, then he would spend eternity immersed in pain. The punishments conceived by Dante captured the imagination of my students, and led to numerous discussions as we picked through the symbolic and metaphoric language of the text.

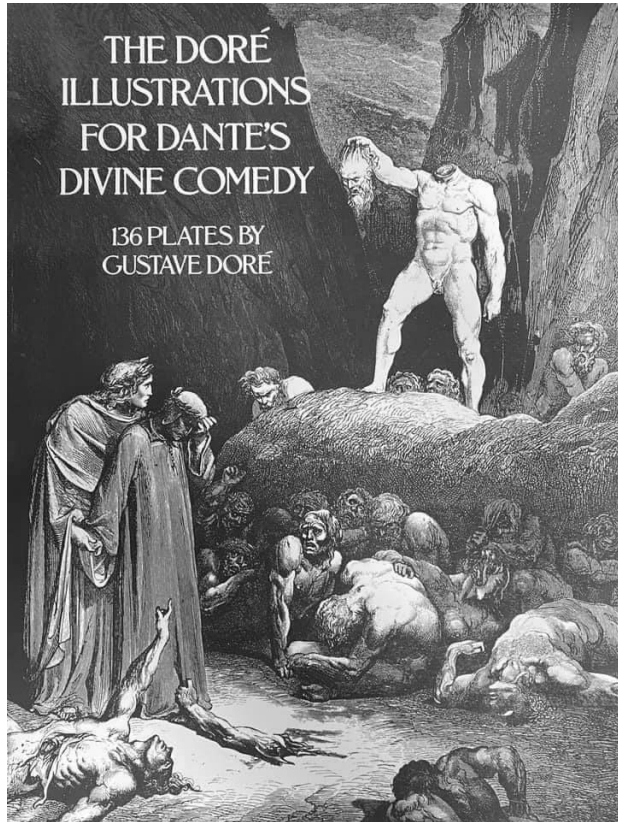


Dante truly is the poet of the grotesque: "opportunists" running through pus and blood that drips from their infected wounds as they are repeatedly stung by hornets and wasps, chasing a flag; the lustful and adulterers blown around by winds in eternal darkness, deprived of the light of reason, always close but never intimate, reminders of each other's sin; the wrathful endlessly assaulting their companions half-buried in slime, while the sullen remain eternally immersed in the River Styx, bubbling their resentments from the murky waste waters. Gluttons, Heretics, the Fraudulent, the Malicious, the Simoniacs, the Treacherous, the Grafters, Sowers of Discord, Evil



Counselors, and on and on. No sin escapes the purview of Dante the Poet, as Virgil leads Dante the Pilgrim through his course of repentance and renewal.

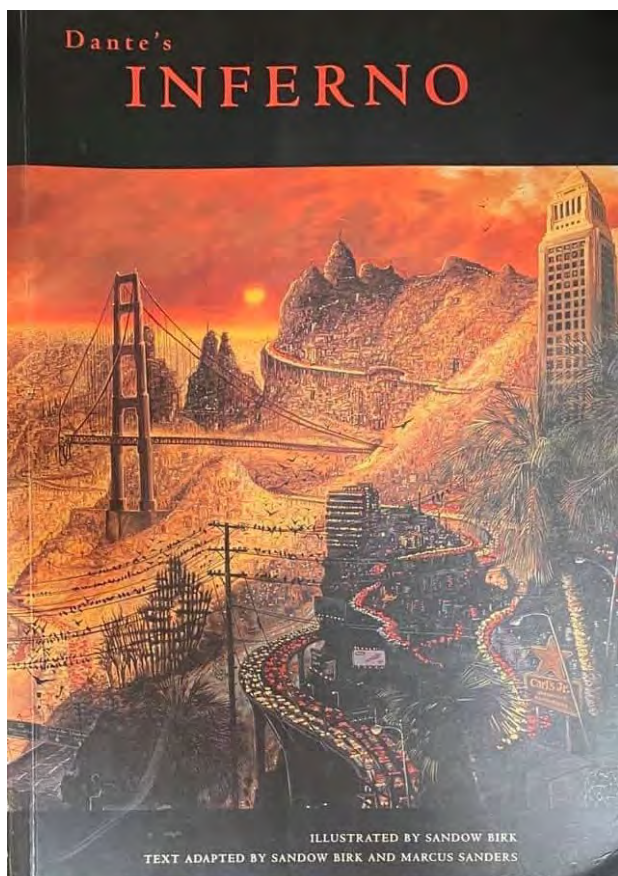
Not only did the contrapasso catch our analytic attention, but we also noted in which realm of hell the Poet had placed the sinner. The literary structure of Dante's "Inferno" has often been compared to the symmetry found in a cathedral. If the place of a person within the structure is known, that immediately discloses the spiritual state or status of the person. Significantly, the further down into hell the sinner was placed, the more distant from God. Thus, the poem has an important spatial quality. Coupled with distance is temperature: the farther from God a sinner finds himself, the colder and darker it becomes, symbolizing the degree of separation from the warmth and light of God's love and truth.



The very nature of Dante's work lent itself to discussion of Principled themes. Is there a literal eternal hell? What role does human freedom play? Are human beings predestined? What is God's justice? How does one reconcile Dante's vision of contrapasso with God's love and mercy? Is there universal salvation? What about those who are unbaptized but essentially good?

These questions naturally spilled over into discussions about popular culture and politics. Dante has populated his "Inferno" with the political and religious leaders of his day, as well as those of more distant history. It is difficult for me to choose which canto was my favorite to teach, but there were a few of striking current relevance. The "Hoarders and the Wasters" in Canto VII perfectly captures the politics of resentment, as two angry mobs with seemingly opposite sins - who in fact share the same nature - spend eternity pushing a huge weight back and forth in a Sisyphean like punishment. Enraged by the other's sin, they yell at each other, "Why do you waste?" and "Why do you hoard?" It takes only a moment of thought to catch how this allegorical animosity provides an

excellent take on our current political predicament. Our historical circumstances may differ from those of Medieval Florence, but the resentment driving our circumstances continues unchanged. Dante's insights remain as valid as the day he conceived them, and serve as an ideal opening for the introduction of "Head Wing" thought.



Through the ages, Dante has inspired artists and poets, leaving a rich body of work for teachers to draw upon. Thus, I would share the art of Gustav Dore and William Blake, as we made our way through the different levels of hell. The visual representations provided by Dore and Blake, helped students see the words of Dante come alive through the imaginations of others. Also, since we read Dante in translation, I would introduce other versions of the Inferno to assist students in understanding the complexity of the original Italian text. One of the students' favorite translations was set in California, with recognizable urban scenery drawn from Los Angeles and San Francisco.

By the time Virgil led Dante the Pilgrim out of the depths of hell, literally climbing the shaggy flanks of Satan, the class was well versed in many of the philosophical complexities which animate discussions of meaning and purpose. This prepared us for our next books, "The Great Divorce," by CS Lewis, and St. Augustine's "Confessions."