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Syncretism Is at the Heart of Your Confusion: Why Dante is so cruel to traitors

(originally posted to the class blog)

Most striking to me in this final set of Canti was the physical cruelty displayed by Dante, in two specific cases: his encounters with the sinners Bocca degli Abati in Canto 32 and Fra Alberigo in Canto 33.

Upon degli Abati's refusal to give Dante his name, Dante begins viciously tearing clumps of hair from the sinner's scalp, stopping only when another shade inadvertently delivers the information he had sought in the first place.

In the next Canto, Dante comes across a shade immobilized in ice and blinded by his own tears, which have frozen over and sealed shut his eyes. At the shade's moaning, Dante agrees to tear away the icy veil if and only if the shade gives his name; as collateral, Dante that he may "go to the bottom of the ice" if he fails to uphold his end of the bargain (33.117).

The shade follows through, explaining that he is Fra Alberigo--and that even though his mortal body still walks the earth, possessed by a demon, the treachery of his sin was so great that his soul has already been cast into one of the deepest circles of the inferno.

Dante, hatefully deeming Alberigo a man "full of all corruption," refuses to strip the ice from his eyes, writing, "it was a courtesy to show him rudeness" (33.150). (And in doing so, he has both lied and implicitly damned himself.)

Yet Dante suffers no compunction for either the physical pain he has inflicted on degli Abati or the oath he has broken to Alberigo; both Dante's actions and the disregard he shows them resonate as profoundly un-Christian.

A central tenet of Christianity is to turn one's cheek when hit across the face. Implicit in this directive is an understanding that the Christian is the sufferer, the party in the engagement being wronged. But in these two interactions with shades, Dante, the righteous Christian called by God to survey the sinful despondency of hell, is not the party being hit across the cheek, but in fact the one actively, aggressively hitting.

Dante externalizes a very real hatred for these sinners in a manner much opposite to Christian moral directives of forgiveness. Why?

Examine the nature of the sin held here in contempt: treason. Degli Abati freezes in the pit for political betrayal. Alberigo in turn violated conventions of hospitality; he murdered in cold blood guests whom he had brought into his own home under the pretense of serving them a meal.

In Christian doctrine treason is bad, but not answered in kind with hostility. The aggressive response elicited from Dante is more in line with the conventions of a different but equally familiar moral framework to the poet: Greco-Roman honor culture. Taken in the context of this eye-for-an-eye system, Dante's comment, "it was a courtesy to show him rudeness," makes a bit more sense (33.150).

The Inferno stands apart so markedly because of its highly syncretic formulation. Dante smashes pre-Christian Roman polytheistic mythology and values together with post-Christ canon to create a mythos distinctly Christian in character but fundamentally shaped by pagan conceptions.

Take the physical mechanism Vergil and Dante utilize to descend to the deepest pit of Hell and finally come face-to-face with Satan himself: the palm of a pagan-spawn giant, Antaeus, son of Gaia and Poseidon in the Greek canon. The bridge to Lucifer, the malevolent force most fundamental to comprehending the duality of the Christian worldview, is an extra-religious proto-Christian construct.

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Dante's placement of the circles of Hell themselves is colored more by Greco-Roman conceptions of wrong than Christian ones. The deepest pits in Dante's construction of the underworld are those reserved for the treasonous, to country, to party, and to guest--these high sins are Greek. Contrast this with a declaration made directly by Jesus in Matthew: "But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (12:22-32). Were Dante truly designing Hell according to a Christian schema, the innermost circle would not consist of traitors, but blasphemers.

Dante is indeed a Christian, but more specifically, a Roman Catholic. That "Roman" prefix is crucial: bundled within it is a cultural legacy extending nearly three millennia from the time of Dante back to the Mycenaean Bronze Age, one that draws on the traditions of gentiles, not the sons of Shem.

Therefore to truly understand the seemingly un-Christian idiosyncrasies of Dante and his *Inferno*, one must acknowledge that his *Comedy* is a work of fusion. Dante is a man straddling traditions, endeared to both the Greco-Roman and the Semitic; by authoring his own fantastical hellscape of pits and trenches, he seeks to bridge the starkly-real chasm dividing the two worlds in which he lives.