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EXTERIOR. A DARK WOOD – DAY

Scene 1. EXTERIOR. A DARK WOOD – DAY

We see a man lost in the wood. He looks up to see a hill with its distant summit bathed in sunlight. He tries to walk up it but is prevented from doing so by three wild beasts.

DANTE (Voice-over)

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

In the middle of life's journey I found myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered from the true path ...' These first lines will forever remain among the most famous openings of any book. The quotation is so well known in Dante's home country that no Italian will ever be impressed that you know it. They all know it: it is their 'To be or not to be'. Even to those outside Italy who may never have heard it before, the appeal of the line is immediate. It just sounds like the beginning of a story. As soon as we hear it there is some inquisitive but child-like part of our mind which cannot resist asking that most natural of questions, 'And then what happened?'

Dante had a gift for first lines. He begins the *Vita Nuova* by telling us that the first line of his private, inner 'Book of Memory' is about Beatrice; his short book about the importance of the Italian language, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, opens forthrightly with a statement that since nobody else has written on the subject Dante realises that he will have to do it himself; and his projected great work of the popularisation of philosophy, the *Convivio*, opens with a resounding quote from 'the Philosopher', Aristotle, to the effect that all people desire to know things. But in all the works of Dante, poetry or prose, there is nothing else like the opening of the *Comedy*. It is one of few works which, in the first three lines, deposits its reader in the middle of an adventure. Its beginning can be written as a film script.

As he had planned in the final paragraph of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante's change of heart and return to Beatrice in 1300 had allowed him to find a radical new writing style. From somewhere inside him, the gift which had only previously shown itself as a hidden talent for bizarre, visually striking episodes emerged as a fully formed ability to write fiction. Story-telling was a new departure for Dante but the style of narrative he chose to use was an innovation for the time: the *Comedy* was fiction written in the first person. There had been first-person accounts before, of course, but they had been (or at least they claimed to be) true. And there had been fiction before but it consisted of tales about other people, usually saints, who were not the people writing the story. Never before had readers of the late Middle Ages read an account in which the author talked about his own experiences and feelings in detail whilst (tacitly) admitting that the events he was describing were not true. There is no attempt to deceive in the *Comedy* – Dante does not wish his readers to believe that he really had gone to Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, yet he wants us to feel the events as if they were real. The *Comedy* is new because it is less like a myth or a folktale and more like a personal account, informed by the consciousness of its author. Throughout the *Comedy* we feel the voice and the mind of Dante.

Dante's change of style from the factual *Convivio* to the fictional *Comedy* did not mean that he had abandoned his desire to transmit knowledge. The image of sheep rushing blindly into a well was still in his mind and he was still convinced that the way to stop human beings from doing the same thing was through knowledge and the intellect. In everyday life we tend necessarily to make a sharp distinction between fact and fiction, but in fact the differences between them are less clear cut. Fictional narratives are seldom merely free-form patterns of untruth; they may be lies but they are meaningful lies.

Stories, true or false, are the most ancient and effective way of propagating facts. The fundamental doctrines of Christianity, for example, are not laid

out in a theological textbook but in the Gospels, a set of four collections of stories. Few people in the Middle Ages would have characterised the Gospels as fiction (although there were some who did) but, on the other hand, to have claimed that they were literally true would have been seen as ignorant and misguided. For one thing there were known contradictions between the different Gospel accounts of events, and if two Gospels told conflicting stories they couldn't both be true. That would have been a serious problem for Christianity if it had been thought to rely on the literal truth of the Bible. But it was not: the meaning of the Gospels lay in their significance as stories – they were a mystery to be puzzled over and thought about, not a straightforward concatenation of facts.

Even in our secular age, stories, untrue or part-true, continue to be the medium through which our ideas about ourselves are transmitted. Nations and peoples express their origins and identity not with dry historical facts but with myths about their creation. Even our current scientific understanding of the universe is mediated by the narrative of the big bang and the time scale of life on earth is told not through raw data but through a tale of mass extinctions and evolutionary metamorphoses. People remember stories; they enter their souls and affect their actions in a way that disjointed facts do not. The Middle Ages had the advantage of believing that at the heart of existence there was a mystical truth that was inexpressible to the extent that it could only be approached through a story. While Dante was in Rome contemplating the misdeeds of Boniface VIII he had surely realised that if he ever wanted to be able to touch the mind of the crowd and beat the power of corruption and military might, he too would have to tell a story.

By the time he started work on the *Comedy* Dante's programme of self-education was effectively complete. It had been so successful that, to this day, it is sometimes said that he was the last man in history who was able to hold in his head all the knowledge of his age. That is probably an exaggeration but he certainly did know a lot of things and, more importantly, he felt a passionate need to pass on what he had learnt. For this reason the *Comedy* is a compendium of late medieval knowledge, brimming with philosophical, historical and political allusions all held together by a web of symbolism, numerology and allegory. These are vital elements of the poem – it would be pointless without them – but no reader should ever forget that, at its foundation, the *Comedy* is a story.

Dante had invented a style of story which was able to carry the weight of factual information and at the same time convey the urgency of passionate belief. It is this element of fiction-as-opinion which makes the *Comedy* the

ancestor of all subsequent first-person^a fictional narratives. Any writer since who has used that form – and that is anyone from Marcel Proust to P.G. Wodehouse – owes Dante a debt for the idea. It really is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the introspective, obsessive poet from Florence had grown up to invent the novel.

The language that Dante uses to tell his tale is direct, even simple, and his sentence structure is (for the most part) straightforward. If you know a little French or some Latin it should often be possible to get the gist of Dante's Italian (especially with an English translation to hand). Even for someone who does not know a single word of Italian it is worth listening to the *Comedy* being read aloud at least once. The rhythmic pattern of consonant and vowel ripples like intricate music. The short, eleven-syllable^b lines of the *Comedy* rhyme, following a pattern called *terza rima* which Dante devised for the purpose: interlocking triplets (the magic number three again) following the pattern 'aba bcb cdc ded, etc.' keep his verse rolling on and hold the listener's attention as the story unfolds over 14,000 lines. Dante's language is perfectly crafted for the task. He gives the poem a powerful but unobtrusive voice, personal yet perfectly suited for a vision of the entire universe.

The language of the *Comedy* may be uncomplicated but the use Dante makes of it – the descriptions and the similes which support them – is stupendous: spirits who fade away before his eyes 'like a stone falling down into deep water'; the telling detail of a man condemned to gnaw forever at the

- a The *Comedy* was in fact not the first first-person fictional narrative in history: the Romans had got there first. There are at least two first-person fictional books that have survived from the ancient world (*Satyricon* by Petronius and the *Golden Ass* by Apuleius) and that is enough to indicate that originally there were more. Dante was certainly not aware of either of these and, in any case, the Roman examples, whilst they can achieve a high level of narrative panache, do not have the same feel of 'author-as-voice' that we find in the *Comedy*.
- b That is an average. The number can vary slightly from line to line because the structure of Dante's verse is held together by a pattern of stress rather than counting of syllables. Nonetheless, it is interesting to compare Dante's verse with Shakespeare's ten-syllable iambic pentameters. In both cases the effect is to produce a comforting world of rhythm (you miss it when it stops) which unifies the poetry. The main difference between the two is that Dante's verse rhymes. The rhymes, however, do not overwhelm the sound of the verse. In English rhymes are comparatively rare and therefore stand out more when used in verse – it takes only a small misjudgement to choose a rhyme which is a little too unusual and end with a comic effect. In Italian so many words rhyme that it is hardly a surprise to hear them.

living brain within the skull of another who, before speaking, pauses genteelly to wipe his mouth on his victim's hair; the jaw-dropping spectacle of 100,000 angels who spontaneously ascend past Dante rising 'like glowing snowflakes falling upwards'; a detailed, scale-by-scale description of a man turning into a snake. These, and a thousand other examples, demonstrate Dante's innate ability (that first showed itself with the vision of Beatrice and the flaming heart) to imagine scenes of utter strangeness with meticulous precision.

Quite frequently in the *Comedy* he confesses how difficult it is to describe what he saw: 'if only I had words to describe the horrid hole of Hell'¹ ... 'Even if I called on genius art and skill, I could not make this live before your eyes.'² On one occasion he even tells his readers that he does not blame them if they do not believe what he is describing because he himself has difficulty with it and he actually witnessed it.³ This is usually taken as a literary device, designed to heighten the realism, which of course it does, but the detail of what he does describe makes it seem quite possible that it is literally true. Dante seems to have had an inner cinema which was equipped with an ability to render scenes with an authenticity that outstrips the most modern computer-generated images. He really does seem to have written by constructing the scenes of the *Comedy* complete in his mind and then sitting down to work on describing them. Sometimes the act of description was a little frustrating for him; it is never disappointing for the reader.

The story moves on. Dante is lost in the wood but, beyond the gloom, he catches sight of the summit of a hill, bathed in the light of the sun (which Dante calls on this occasion 'the planet that leads all men on the straight road'). He is overwhelmed with relief. He feels like someone who has nearly drowned in the ocean and makes it to the shore at last where he lies for a while, exhausted, looking back at the sea which almost claimed him. As he, in his turn, looks back into the wood he gives us an extra piece of information. He calls it the valley 'from which no person has ever yet emerged alive' – this was no ordinary forest. Dante's relief is all the more for that thought and his disappointment is all the more sharp when his hopes are dashed. When he tries to make his way towards the hill he is stopped by a trio of wild beasts: a leopard, a lion and a wolf. One after another they drive him back into the darkness.

The symbolic meaning of all this is both clear and unclear. As we have seen, the dark wood is the tangle of wrong-headed ideas into which Dante has wandered with the addition of (perhaps) a dash of infidelity to Beatrice, physical or not. The light on the hilltop is undoubtedly the bliss of divine love

that Dante realises he can only obtain through Beatrice (light will become an increasingly important image as the *Comedy* progresses). The beasts, however, are not so obvious. They plainly represent three things which prevent human beings from achieving that goal of divine bliss. Several candidates have been suggested: Lust, Pride and Avarice are a likely trio, as are Anger, Violence and Fraud which have the advantage of echoing the hierarchy of sins on which Dante's Hell is organised. None of them is a conclusive interpretation and, although it is quite interesting to speculate about what the three most savage impediments that prevent each of us from achieving our true goal are, it does not really matter to the reader at this stage. The point is that the main character wants something but is prevented from getting it so, in order to obtain it, he has to go the long way round. He has been forced into an adventure: the game is on. What we need now is some dialogue:

As I fled downwards my eyes made out a figure. He looked faint, as if from a long silence.

'Help me,' I cried out in that deserted place, 'whoever you may be, whether a ghost or a man.'

'I am no longer living man, though once I was,' he replied. 'I was born in the time of Julius and lived in Rome in the reign of good Augustus in the age of false gods. I was a poet and I sang of the just son of Anchises who came from Troy.'

(*Inferno*, 1:62–75)

One of the great double acts of literature has been born. The faint and ghostly figure whom Dante has just met has already said enough to identify himself as Virgil, the Roman poet who lived from 70 to 19 BC. His best-known work is the *Aeneid*, the story of Aeneas (the 'just son of Anchises' of Virgil's introduction of himself), a refugee from defeat in the Trojan War who went on to found the city of Rome. Virgil intended his own epic poem to be the defining myth of the Roman Empire and to a large extent he succeeded. Along the way he established Latin as a language suitable for poetry. Previously Greek had been seen, even in Rome, as the language which was most suitable for artistic projects. Virgil in the *Aeneid* even described a journey to Hell, albeit to the pre-Christian underworld of Hades. Most important of all, though, he is there because he is Dante's favourite poet. Dante would like to be Virgil; he scatters the *Comedy* with illusions, references and homages to his style. In the *Comedy* he calls him 'the spring from which the river of style rises ... You are my master, the source of noble style'.⁴ He even calls him father as the story goes on. Virgil's approval must have been of enormous importance to Dante

as a writer setting out on the daunting journey of a lengthy, new (and totally uncommissioned) work in an untried style.

Virgil performs a vital dramatic function in the *Comedy*. Without his presence we would be entirely reliant on Dante's own inner voice for information about his feelings. It is, of course, quite possible to write a fictional journey which is described entirely through the lone voice of the traveller, but in order to give a well-rounded impression of Dante's reactions, especially the occasional moments when fear or despair overtake him, it is much more satisfying to dramatise them through his conversation with Virgil. Indeed, it seems that most fictional travellers need companions: Don Quixote had Sancho Panza; Phileas Fogg had Passepartout on his eighty-day journey round the world; Doctor Who has his succession of assistants; and Virgil gave Aeneas a faithful companion called Achates who accompanies him to Hell, although it has to be said that he does not get much of a speaking part. Compared with all of these, Virgil himself is given a much more authoritative role: he is the expert on Hell. The only area where Dante has superior knowledge is concerning the specifically Christian aspects of the universe.

Fulfilling his role as guide, Virgil confirms to Dante that there is no way past the three beasts. He offers to lead him out of the dark wood by another route. He is not specific but it is not difficult to guess what it is: 'Now I say for your own good, I think it best if you follow me. I'll lead you out of here through an eternal place where you will hear grisly screaming. You'll see ancient ghosts in tears howling over their second death.'⁵

Virgil's warning that the best he can offer is abject terror frightens Dante, the traveller, but for the reader it holds the exciting promise of thrills to come.

Dante's precisely imagined version of Hell gives details which previous writers had not specified. The starting point, in the Christian tradition, is that Hell is the dwelling place of those souls who are unforgiven, denied entry into Heaven and obliged instead to be tormented there. The physical geography of Hell had been discussed before but there was no orthodox, accepted view. Dante's imagination therefore had wide scope. He specified that Hell is a deep conical indentation into the earth, the lowest point of which is the exact centre of the globe. The tormented souls are distributed on a series of nine vast circular steps or terraces which descend, each one of decreasing size, down to the centre of the earth. The central axis of the cone runs directly through Jerusalem, a city whose significance for anyone writing about the history of the universe in 1300 cannot have been greater. It was the location of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the dramatic symbol of God's redemptive power. Going further back it was also the traditional location for

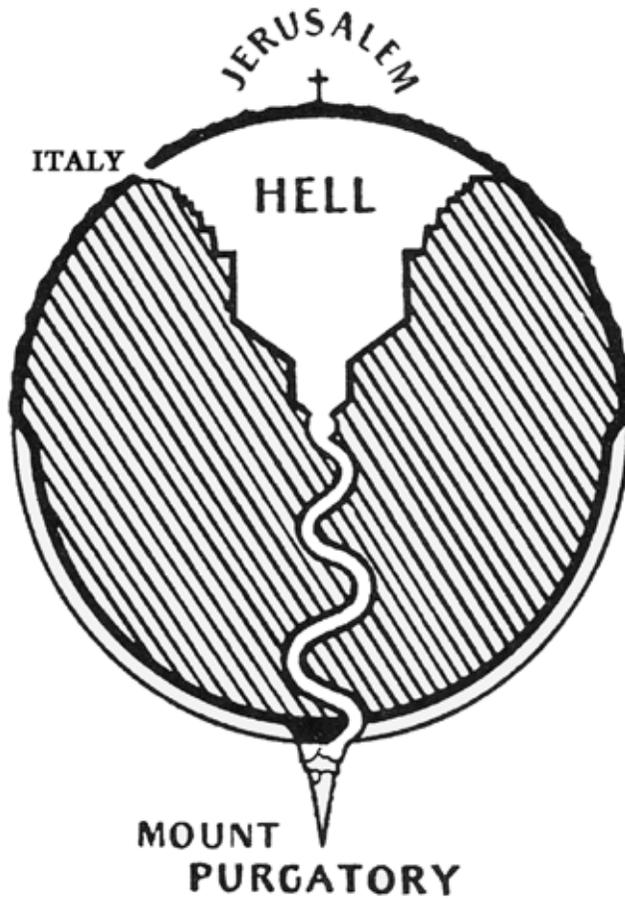
Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, one of the defining stories in the explanation of man's relationship with God. Thirdly, it was the take-off point for the Night Journey, the episode mentioned in the Koran but elaborated by later writers in which the Prophet Muhammad ascended (as Dante was to do) through the celestial spheres to Heaven itself.

Assuming that the dark wood in which Dante found himself and from which he enters Hell was in Italy,^c this enables us to map the edge of Hell – the points where the cone meets the surface of the earth – on a terrestrial globe. It is a circle of a radius of about 1,500 miles which runs through Egypt and Afghanistan, but whether other ways into the underworld can be found along its length we are not told. We do know that the journey of the travellers is a long one. Estimates of the size of the earth were quite accurate in Dante's day, and had been so for the best part of a thousand years. The circumference of the earth was known to be about 24,000 miles. Elementary geometry would indicate that the bottom of Hell, at the centre of the earth, would have to be approximately 4,000 miles down.

The first chapter of the *Inferno* ends with the simple line, 'Virgil moved off and I followed on behind'.⁶ It is evening on the day before Good Friday, the day when Christians remember the death and descent into Hell of Christ. The journey has begun and the mechanism of the story has been set in motion: a frustrated desire, a perilous journey needed in order to fulfil it, but there is one element still missing. This is not just a story of two men clambering down to the centre of the earth, it is also about great questions and the relationship between man and God. It is time now for Virgil to reveal the bigger picture and explain how it was that he came to be there when Dante found himself in the dark wood. He tells Dante the story. He was in his allotted place in the underworld when, one day, the spirit of a woman visited him: 'Her eyes were brighter than the stars ... She was so blessed and beautiful that I longed for her to command me.'⁷

It is Beatrice. She has descended from Heaven to give Virgil a message. 'With the voice of an angel' she tells him that her friend Dante is so 'impeded in his journey'⁸ that he is in desperate need of help. As the travellers make their way towards the gate of Hell, Virgil recounts her words. It turns out to be quite a long story, the gist of which is that the Virgin Mary herself, the mother of Christ, was deeply concerned about Dante's plight, both his

c If it was it would be in keeping with the account given by Dante's new friend Virgil in the *Aeneid*. He locates the entrance to Hell in a volcanic crater called Avernus, near Naples.



departure from the direct pathway and the sorrow that he was caused. It is on her authority that Virgil is now empowered to act. When Dante hears about this and realises that Virgil has met Beatrice (and that he himself may once again do so) he is overjoyed. His trepidation at the thought of entering Hell lifts: 'My strength began to blossom within me like flowers which have been closed and bowed by the chill night open when the sun comes out and rise up on their stem.'⁹

Now he has even more confidence in Virgil: "'You are my guide my lord and teacher.'" Those were my words to him as I travelled down that deep and savage way.'¹⁰

And so the second chapter of *Inferno* closes. The *Comedy* comprises a hundred chapters, divided, of course, into three parts:^d Hell, Purgatory and Heaven (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*). A chapter in the *Comedy* is normally referred to by its Italian name, *canto*, a word which can also mean either poem or song. The choice of this word reflects not only the musical nature of Dante's poetry but also the fact that, when the *Comedy* was given its first airing, each *canto* was probably performed by being read aloud to a group rather than being read quietly by an individual.¹¹ This presents an exacting test for an author. A lone reader can always flip back and read again if the sense is unclear or if the mind has wandered. In a performance there is no safety net: once the attention of the audience is lost it is very hard to recapture it. One can see the effect of this in the *Comedy*. Cantos usually have their own thematic unity – they work as little stories in themselves. They often end with a cliffhanger, designed to keep the listeners' interest and make them want to come back for the next one. Sometimes Dante also uses the *canto* breaks to move the action on. He can finish with a telling phrase, avoid too much description and let the next *canto* open in an attention-grabbing way. This is exactly what happens at the end of *Canto 2*. It finishes with a simple statement of the travellers' departure and *Canto 3* kicks off immediately with the sonorous words of the ancient inscription above the gates of Hell:

THROUGH ME IS THE WAY TO THE CITY OF WOE,
THROUGH ME IS THE WAY TO EVERLASTING PAIN,
THROUGH ME IS THE WAY AMONG THE LOST PEOPLE.

JUSTICE MOVED MY MAKER ON HIGH.
DIVINE POWER MADE ME,
WISDOM SUPREME, AND PRIMAL LOVE.

BEFORE ME NOTHING WAS BUT THINGS ETERNAL,
AND ETERNAL I ENDURE.
ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE.

(*Inferno*, 3:1–9)

d The parts comprise thirty-three chapters each. Dante wanted his three-part work to have 100 cantos. It is one of those arithmetical annoyances that plague the numerologist that the neat and significant century cannot be divided by the even more significant number three so there is a *canto* left over. He added this to *Inferno* as *Canto 1*, where, by convention, it is considered to be an introduction.

The final line of this is the most famous in the *Comedy*, '*Lasciate ogne speranza voi ch'entrate*', often rendered, slightly inaccurately, as 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here'.

The entire inscription is intended as the mission statement for Hell. It contains ideas that must be borne in mind during the journey to the centre of the earth. The first three lines (the inscription breaks naturally into three sets of triplets in Dante's *terza rima*) advertise once again the horrors to come. The final three lines emphasise the hopelessness of human souls in the face of an implacable eternity. The middle triplet is most interesting: it emphasises that God is the Creator and ultimate ruler of Hell. It is important to remember that the *Inferno* is not the headquarters of the 'official opposition to God', staffed by creatures who lurk in the darkness hiding from the Creator as they try to foil his plan. Hell is part of God's plan and, since He created the universe out of love, it follows (as the inscription makes explicit) that Hell and the torments of all the souls who remain there are all consequences of God's love. This is the tough love of divine justice (a word which in this inscription makes the first of seventy-one appearances in the *Comedy*). Everything which Dante sees in Hell, Purgatory and Heaven will be an example of God's justice and the natural rightness of the world which is guaranteed by God's love. The only things in the universe which deviate from the loving justice of the Creator are human beings. They have been given free will and are capable of going against the rightness of the universe. In most cases God's love is such that they are forgiven for any transgressions. Dante is about to see what happens to those who are not.

Many people have found the concept of a loving God who ordains cruel punishment difficult. Dante was one of them. As he continues his journey downwards, Dante the traveller shows a variety of reactions to the tormented souls he meets on the way. With some he views their plight with detached academic interest; with others, particularly when he knew the soul personally, he is even delighted and cheers the tormentors on; but there are other times when he is sincerely moved to pity by what he sees. Dante, as a student of theology, is committed to the view that God's justice is good by definition. But to maintain that view requires an inflexible moral certainty which makes for bad storytelling. A good narrative needs to reflect the complexity of experience, moral and otherwise. In a good novel the boundaries of good and evil are almost imperceptibly blurred – a totally evil character is hard to believe in. Even though he had only just invented the genre, Dante was aware of this and, as we descend with him into the depths, there are moments when the late medieval intellectual loses the battle with the novelist and a

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rogue element of sympathy appears in his descriptions. Dante knows that he is not *meant* to feel pity for souls in Hell. He notes the emotion but does not ever use it as a reason to question the authority of the divine justice. But neither does he ever say that he regrets having felt it. It would be nice to think that one of the unintended consequences of the invention of the novel was to make it slightly easier for us to empathise with the suffering of our fellow human beings.