

## DANTE'S COMMEDIA *An Unfinished Introduction*

Who is there today who would dare bring out a book which covers virtually all aspects of life, and say – this is the way it all works? This is the nature of the universe in which we live, and this is the truth about some of the people in it, and what will happen to them when they die. And, by the way, I am going to show you the hidden structure of humanity and tell you just what your lives are all about.

For this is what Dante Alighieri did some seven hundred years ago, when he wrote his great work the *Commedia*. The word *commedia* or comedy meant in those days just that it was a story with a happy ending as distinct from a tragedy. Later readers added the word *divina*, so that nowadays we speak of the Divine Comedy.

It was the first major literary work to be written in the everyday language of the Italian people instead of Latin, a change heralding the emergence of the individual nations of Europe from the long tunnel of the Middle Ages into the growing light of the Renaissance. The fact that it is still read and studied today – there are currently some nine translations available in English – testifies to its continuing fascination for the minds of men and women.

In April of 2014 a front page article appeared in the Review section of the Wall Street Journal praising it as "the most astonishing self-help book ever written." Its author says:

"It sounds trite, almost to the point of blasphemy, to call *The Divine Comedy* a self-help book, but that's how Dante himself saw it. In a letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala, the poet said that the goal of his trilogy . . . is 'to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of bliss.' The

Comedy does this by inviting the reader to reflect on his own failings, showing him how to fix things and regain a sense of direction, and ultimately how to live in love and harmony with God and others." The author of the Wall Street Journal article then goes on to explain how it helped him at a time of crisis in his own life.

While I would not wish to deny the *Commedia* its possibilities as a self-help manual, I shall be looking at it more broadly, in terms of the overall vision it embodies.

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I believe that Dante's vision as set out in the *Divine Comedy* has two distinct elements. There is the essential spiritual core, and then there is the elaborate, invented structure with which Dante surrounded it.

The first, the core, is something that I believe *happened* to him, a profound, visionary, spiritual experience, which he did his best to record and communicate. The second, the invented structure, is something he himself *put together*, piece by piece, out of the grab-bag of an active life of love, religion, intellect, politics and war, using his language skills and creative imagination to construct and shape a complex scheme like an elaborate stage presentation.

It was in the core experience that Dante found a reconciliation of all the diverse elements of a complex life in a transcendent vision of unity, whereas in the secondary structure he created a wide-flung, sometimes raw, and even brutal scenario that includes some of the nastiest aspects of humanity as well as showing the inborn human ability to transcend and transform.

In all of this Dante is the great raconteur, with a few words crisply setting scene after scene as he keeps us moving relentlessly onwards, through the depths of Hell in the bowels of the Earth, to the highest Empyrean beyond the furthest stars.

The story is divided into three books, Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. Most people start at the beginning with the Inferno, and all too many of them fail to get through to the Paradiso, which is probably the least read of the three. I shall however turn first of all to the Paradiso, because it is here that we find Dante's core experience set out, the transcendental vision that provides a special context the rest of the structure.

In the very last book of the Paradiso, Canto 33, we find Dante at the end of his travels. He has been led hitherto by various guides including Virgil and Beatrice, and has now been left alone with "*l'alta luce*", the supreme Light, into which he gazes. He says:

For my sight  
becoming purified  
went deeper and deeper  
into the radiance  
of that supreme Light  
whose very nature  
is truth

And then:

The sweetness  
born of it

is even now  
distilled  
in my heart

After asking for help in communicating what he saw, and speaking of the abundant grace that enabled him to endure the power of the Light, he says:

In its depths  
I saw  
ingathered  
and bound by love  
into one volume  
that which  
is scattered  
through the universe

This is the central vision of unity which was given to him, showing how love unites all things in a kind of cosmic "book," a wonderful volume from which nothing is omitted and which explains all the complexities and apparent contra-dictions of life.

In that Light  
one is so transformed  
one could never  
willingly  
turn away

Because that good

which the will seeks  
is all gathered in it  
and everything  
that without it  
seems imperfect  
is there found perfect

He explains that, although the Light is always the same, as his sight grows stronger he is able to perceive more and more in its depths, and he describes what he sees there: three great luminous figures – *tre giri*: three circles – interacting with one-another, and seeming in some mysterious way colored with a human image – *pinta de la nostra effige*: painted with our effigy.

Finally he brings the Commedia to a close:

High imaging  
then failed me  
but already  
my desire and will  
kept moving onwards  
like some balanced wheel  
turned  
by the love  
that moves the sun  
and the other stars

That final line is one which so many remember:

*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele*

the love that moves the sun and the other stars

Like so many good storytellers Dante has waited until the very last line to give us the key to the whole, for I believe that is what this last line is.

Recently a distinguished neurosurgeon called Eben Alexander became very ill and had an extensive near-death experience. When he came back he wrote a book about it that was on the best-seller lists for some time. In it he wrote that as a result of his experience it was his firm conviction that "Love is, without doubt, the basis for everything. Not some abstract, hard-to-fathom kind of love but the day-to-day kind that everyone knows – the kind of love we feel when we look at our spouse and our children, or even our animals. In its purest and most powerful form, this love is not jealous or selfish, but *unconditional*. This is the reality of realities, the incomprehensibly glorious truth of truths that lives and breathes at the core of everything that exists or that will ever exist." [*Eben Alexander: Proof of Heaven. Simon & Schuster, 2012*]

So when Dante talks about "the love that moves the sun and the other stars," it seems he and Alexander are both saying the same thing: love is the ultimate force that sustains the universe, the energy at back of all energies, creating the gift of life which we all receive.

So, if Dante and Alexander are correct, and I believe they are, and love is in some fundamental sense the basis of our existence, what do we do with it? What do we make of our lives? I believe the Divine Comedy is all about this.

Like any other gift we can use the gift of life for better or worse. We can use it to transform ourselves and our world in the direction of Heaven, or we can pervert its true course and nature

and enfold ourselves in negativity of one kind or another; and if we go far enough and persistently enough in this direction, we will find ourselves imprisoned in crystallized negative energy from which it is extremely difficult to extract oneself, that is to say in Hell.

If we take the Divine Comedy at a literal level only and stop there, as many have done, Dante will appear as a mean old man who enjoyed seeing his enemies and those he disliked suffer the tortures of Hell. But if we take the key Dante has given us in his last line we will see something much more profound, a picture of what people do to themselves, a vision that is essentially timeless, even if in this instance it is clothed in the outward garb of *trecento* Italy.

So, armed with this key to a basic understanding of the nature of the work, let us now go back and start the story from the beginning.

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The Commedia begins with a single introductory canto whose very first stanza is a famous passage with a powerful ring to it:

*Nel mezzo del camino di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
che la diritta via era smarrita.*

In the middle  
of life's path  
I came to myself  
in a dark wood

where the right way  
was lost

These are words that resonate with so many people - that moment of awakening to the fact that you have lost the way. It may be that as with Dante you have been blindsided by some totally unexpected life-changing series of external events; or it may be an essentially internal happening, that you thought you knew where you were going, but suddenly the momentum has vanished and you have to question all the preconceptions that were keeping you going hitherto. Traditionally that half-way point in one's life is the age of thirty-five, midway to three score years and ten, but of course it can take place earlier or later, or perhaps even for some people not at all. Probably Dante would have been about thirty-seven.

An interesting word that appears in this stanza is *ritrovaí*. *Trovare* is to find, so *ritrovare* is to re-find, that is to rediscover, implying here that the right way, though now lost, was once known, a point none of the translations make anything of, but to me it immediately has associations with Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*:

Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home . . .

And then:

Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
Upon the growing boy . . .

There can be this sense of losing the awareness of some kind of divine spark as we get ever more deeply embroiled in the business of life on Earth.

Dante in his thirties was deeply embroiled in the business of life on Earth. Having been born in 1265 into a modest but well respected family, he had become known as a rising poet and intellectual and had been drawn gradually into the politics of the city. He took part in a battle against the city of Arezzo in 1289, served on various city councils, and in 1300 was appointed as one of the six priors who governed the city for the usual term of two months.

The next year he was sent on a mission to Rome by his political party, probably seeking papal support for their cause. But it was then that he became entangled in the power-play of broader European affairs.

The pope at that time, Boniface VIII, was a ruthless person of whom it was said: "Boniface had all the qualities of a very great pope save personal holiness and restraint . . . He was admired by many, feared by all, loved by none."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> F.M.Powicke: The Christian Life in the Middle Ages, quoting Charles T Wood in Philip the Fair and Boniface VIII.

While Dante was away from Florence on the mission to Rome, Boniface secretly conspired with the brother of the King of France to enter Florence with his army and place the opposing party, the Black Guelphs, in power there. They falsely charged Dante with corruption and, in his absence, confiscated his estate, and sentenced him to be burned at the stake should he ever return to Florence.

Dante never went home again, and spent the rest of his life as a wanderer, dependent on the good will of those who understood that the charges against him were false. He wrote about these years: "I have been truly a ship without sail or rudder, carried to many ports and straits and shores by the dry wind blown by grievous poverty, and I have appeared to the eyes of many who had perhaps imagined me, through a certain fame, in another way."<sup>2</sup>

Consideration of this situation may give some understanding of Dante's state of mind at the time he was beginning to write the *Commedia*, with his external life in ruins, many of his basic assumptions blown away, and the need to find a new direction for himself and create a new life.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in George Holmes: *Dante*. Oxford 1980.

