

“Per Una Selva Oscura...”

Dante: In a Dark Wood

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On Good Friday, April 8, 1300, a thirty five year old Florentine man embarking on a strange journey came upon these words boldly inscribed upon a dark archway:

Per me si va ne la città dolente,
 (Through me is the way to the city of suffering.)
 Per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,
 (Through me is the way to eternal pain.)
 Per me si va tra la perduta gente.
 (Through me is the way among the lost people.)
 Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;
 (Justice moved my lofty maker.)
 Fecemi la divina podestate,
 (Divine power made me.)
 La somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.
 (The supreme wisdom and primal love.)
 Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
 (Before me nothing was created but)
 Se non etterne, e io eterno duro.
 (Eternal things, and I endure eternally.)
 Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch' intrate.
 (Abandon all hope, you who enter.)

(The Inferno, Canto III, 1-9)

Knowing that he was at the Gates of Hell and that he had been allowed to enter them by virtue of a higher power did not lessen the hardness of those words, nor did the admonition of his guide on this journey, the Roman poet, Virgil, stem the fears which arose at the

sounds of loud wailing and lamentation now sweeping over him through the starless air, for he had come to the entrance of no hope, of no salvation and of no return.

A short time before, broken in spirit and mind, this man, Dante Alighieri, had wandered off the known trail and onto a strange path which led him into a dark wood:

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

Unaware of how he had gotten so far off course, having been drowsy and inattentive, he, all at once, became convulsed with fear:

Ahi quanto a dir qual era e cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!

Tant'è amara che poco è piu morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch 'i' vi trovai,
dirò de l'altre cose ch 'i' v' ho scorte.

Io non so ben ridir com 'i' v' intrai,
tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai. (The Inferno, Canto I, 1-12)

Recounting the memory of that wood only rekindled this fear; however, because of the good he found there, he decides to speak to

us of the other things he saw.

Soon, he came upon three beasts which threatened to kill him when he attempted to proceed further, yet he had nowhere to retreat. On the verge of certain death, he saw a shade of a man in the distance who would come to his aid and lead him away from this immediate danger, but on towards a place from where the manifestation of all true evil and fear emanates.

"Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?"
rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.

(The Inferno, Canto I, 79-81)

Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m' ha fatto onore.

(The Inferno, Canto I, 85-87)

Ond' io per lo tuo me' penso e discerno
che tu mi segui, e io sarò tua guida,
e trarroti di qui per loco eterno;

(The Inferno, Canto I, 112-114)

Thus, over the next twenty four hours, Dante Alighieri, a poet from Florence, is led by his poetic mentor, Virgil, down through the entire nine circles of Hell only to come face to face with the supreme giver of all punishment and woe: Satan himself. At least, it was to be

in Dante's imagination...

How did Dante find himself *per una selva oscura*, after having lost the way? How had he been so distracted and *pien di sonno* at that moment, the exact midpoint of his life at thirty five, that he couldn't even remember how he had come upon this dark wood? This poem portrays a man on the verge of damnation who had so lost touch with himself and was so unsure of where he was going in his life that he was almost sure never to find his way back. What's even more intriguing is the fact that the character in this piece of fiction and the actual writer of it are one and the same. Dante uses no alter-ego as a disguise to protect himself from ridicule, nor does he imbue his fictional character with a holier-than-thou, self-flattering omniscience, but he walks into this piece of poetic fiction as if blind, carrying his real history and real name as baggage, with all of his personal failings exposed in a very honest and humbling way.

It must have been something tremendously personal and significant, indeed, for someone with Dante's ego and pride to allow himself to fall, figuratively, to his knees and open up his veins to all of eternity. Certainly, the psychic wounds he bore must have been very deep and the need for redemption palpable in his mind.

Why did Dante portray himself in this manner? What was the original inspiration for his composing *La Divinia Commedia*? This paper will discuss some of the reasons that Dante set himself on this poetical journey.

First of all, in terms of the writing itself, *La Divinia Commedia*, comprised of the famous trilogy of poems: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and

Paradiso, was meant to be an allegorical work and applicable for all who read it. Still, it is also distinctly a personal testament and reflection of a man who felt that he had lost everything of value in life. The poet, Virgil, represents earthly human reason and Beatrice, Dante's first love, is treated as an abstraction who signifies the truth discovered through faith or religion, while Dante represents the ordinary man with a soul laden with basic human desires (Alighieri, *The Inferno*, p xxix). The reason that, after seven hundred years, it is still so accessible and so resonant is because of this fusion between the personal element of Dante's actual life at that time and his creative desire to overcome and transcend his human failings in order to rescue his soul. The poem masterfully weaves Dante's historical veracity with fictional imagination, for he claims at the very outset that everything in his work actually occurred, yet the reader realizes that this cannot be so (Alighieri, *The Inferno*, p. xxxiii). Moreover, instead of writing this great work in Latin, which was the accepted practice, he broke with long tradition in order to write it in the vernacular or common, spoken Italian of the period so that all could understand and learn from it. By preserving the Italian language of his day, Dante became its new father, for it had not been read by such a global audience before (Alighieri, *The Inferno*, p. xxvii). In this way, he consciously brought a traditionally very scholarly, academic subject to the attention of the common people. This was unique, for it allowed what had been primarily a rather religious topic to take on a very human aspect.

After all, *La Divinia Commedia* is nothing less than a very personal and prolonged public confession by its writer to the scrutiny of the entire world. Yet, it was immediately popular, even during

Dante's lifetime, and was probably the first great new work of fiction since Virgil's Aeneid had been released during the first century before Christ (Alighieri, *The Inferno*, p. xxvi). It is also interesting that Dante uses a pagan poet, Virgil, as his guide throughout a very distinctly Christian poem, which must have been quite a shock at the time. However, Virgil's work, Aeneid, was the basic template from which *La Divina Commedia* was creatively inspired. Indeed, Virgil's lack of Christian faith or experience provides an important creative foil for Dante throughout the work, who teases, flatters and even condescends, at times, to his great pagan mentor in the name of his, and mankind's, ultimate, religious salvation (Alighieri, *The Inferno*, pp. xxxiv-xxxv). Virgil's ancient voice of intellectual reason contrasted with the Christian faith espoused at his every step in the poem deepens the sense of human tragedy beneath Dante's carefully crafted words.

However, returning back to the question of how *La Divina Commedia* took root: what was Dante's original inspiration? To discover the answer we must travel to the time when Dante was just nine years old. One day, he came upon a girl in the streets of Florence, who was wearing "noble colors". Her name was Beatrice, a nine year old child, who was apparently an exceptional beauty. Dante would never forget the vision of Beatrice on that day, even though it took another nine years before he mentions seeing her again. This next time, she was fully grown and dressed in pure white garments as she strolled down the street with two elder ladies. Dante saluted her and she returned the gesture which inspired him to write his first sonnet. Perhaps the final time Dante met Beatrice was at a wedding,

most likely hers, a few years later, where he became so overwhelmed by his emotion that everyone, including Beatrice, noticed. She apparently whispered and joked with her friends over it and Dante had to be taken away by a friend. (Toynbee, Dante Alighieri, pp.43-46)

Soon after this, Beatrice's father, an important high official in Florence, died. Only six months later Beatrice herself died at the age of twenty four in 1290. Plunged into grief, he began studying philosophy to assuage his suffering and decided even then that he would write a work in her honor that would surpass all others (Toynbee, Dante Alighieri, p.47). Meanwhile, Dante eventually married, it seems unhappily, and had children. He then entered politics and was elected to the highest elected office in Florence, the priorate, in June of 1300. It was this political position which would lead to his ultimate downfall and banishment from Florence in 1302 (Toynbee, Dante Alighieri, pp.68-74).

Italy, at the time, was not a unified country, but a collection of city states which all vied for power and dominion over the other. Northern Italy was dominated by two factions: the Guelfs, who were loyal to the Pope, and the Ghibellines, who paid allegiance to the Holy Roman Emperor from Bavaria. In the years before Dante's birth, these two parties had dominated much of the politics and intrigues of these city states, struggling for possession over Florence, in particular, and engulfing it in unending violence and mayhem, as one faction or the other regained, or lost, the upper hand (Toynbee, Dante Alighieri, pp.1-12).

Dante's father was a member of the White Guelfs and Dante, himself, fought for the Guelfs at the battle of Campaldino in 1289. At this time, the Guelf party had been divided into opposite factions,

the Blacks and the Whites, and were embroiled in frequent violent scuffles on the streets of Florence. As usual, the source of these conflicts was extremely personal, vendettas stemming from perceived insults and infused with the desire for retribution. Eventually, the White Guelfs sided with the Ghibelline party in opposition to the Black Guelfs. Unfortunately, the high point of this conflict hit its apex right when Dante took office in 1300. The violence became so marked that all the leaders from both factions were exiled from the city to calm disturbances. It was while Dante was a member of an embassy to Rome, as priorate, that the Black Guelfs took control of Florence and summarily sentenced him in absentia, along with others, for fraud and corruption. Soon after, a much stiffer sentence was proclaimed against him in March of 1302 that he be condemned to be burned alive if he were ever to return to Florence. Dante was innocent of all the charges, of course, except for being a magistrate of the opposition White Guelf party, yet, as long as he was in political disfavor it didn't matter, since he would not risk his life by returning to protest his innocence. Thus, all of his properties, his land and sources of income, were taken over and confiscated by the Black Guelfs. From this point onwards, Dante described himself succinctly as "a beggar" (Toynbee, Dante Alighieri, pp.75-89).

Dante was never to return to Florence again, but, instead, became an eternal wanderer from city to city, without a permanent home and, for the most part, in poverty, as he had to rely upon friends or relatives in order to survive, until he died in Ravenna in 1321.

And so, it would be these two strangely disconnected events, one founded upon a pure and ideal love and the other stemming from the failed personal ambitions of political office, which would later

provide the main substance, heart and power for one of the world's greatest creative inspirations: La Divinia Commedia.

Accordingly, the sense of loss and the need for redemption are tangible throughout La Divinia Commedia, for this was truly a man who had lost everything: his greatest love, Beatrice, as well as his entire cultural inheritance, Florence. The very first canto sets the tone of a man at odds with himself and with the misfortunes that life has wrought upon him: its obstacles, dangers and unpredictability. He is a man at the end of his rope and at the point of a total breakdown: emotionally, physically and spiritually. It seems, and it is asserted throughout Dante's poem, that only a man in such a pitiful condition can be open to complete change and to such self-transformation. Only a man who has nothing more to lose has so much more to gain.

Beatrice was the original, idealistic standard that Dante set up for himself as early as the age of nine and the measure of how far he had wandered off *la diritta via*, the "true" way, in life. Beatrice represented all that was "love" for him and all that was good, and in losing her, not just physically but also in losing touch with the goodness which she had once inspired within him, he abandoned himself to a darker path filled with ambition, financial gain and political intrigue. This is clearly Dante's own assessment of how he had lived his life up to 1300, as he relates in two of his lesser known works: *La Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio*, and must reflect in some significant way a true reflection of some deep, moral failing in his character.

Yet, as incredible as it might seem, it is not certain that Dante

ever spoke more than a few words to Beatrice much less had a romantic relationship with her. And, perhaps, this is why she attains such a lofty, virginal quality—representing not only the highest ideal of femininity, but of religious virtue. She became an untouchable, ethereal vision of goodness in Dante's mind, for she had appeared as such in life during the few times he had actually gazed upon her. Death could not alter the pristine image that he had already constructed in his mind, but could only enhance it further.

For example, in *The Inferno*, Canto II, in order to bolster Dante's faltering courage in the face of the descent into Hell, Virgil recounts for him how he was called upon to assist on his journey. A lady, *beata e bella*, asked him to set forth on Dante's behalf:

Lucevan li occhi suoi piu che la stella;
e comminciommi a dir soave e piana,
con angelica voce, in sua favella:

(*The Inferno*, Canto II, 55-57)

With eyes shining brighter than the stars, the lady spoke to him with the voice of an angel.

...l'amico mio, e non de la ventura,
ne la diserta piaggia e impedito
si nel cammin, che volt' e per paura;

She had seen *l'amico mio*, her friend, Dante, held back on the desert slope and realized that, in his fear, he had turned back.

E temo che non sia già sì smarrito,
ch' io mi sia tardi al soccorso levata,
per quel ch' i' ho di lui nel cielo udito.

She had heard nel cielo, in heaven, that Dante might be beyond
help and that he might have gone too far astray.

Or movi, e con la tua parola ornata,
e con ciò c' ha mestieri al suo campare,
l' aiuta sì ch' 'i' ne sia consolata.

She then asked Virgil to help Dante with his ornate words so that
she might be assuaged.

I' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare;
vegno del loco ove tornar disio;
amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.

(The Inferno, Canto II, 61-72)

She, then, revealed that she was Beatrice, and that love had made
her speak this way.

Non odi tu la pieta del suo pianto,
non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte
su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto?

(The Inferno, Canto II, 106-108)

And then Beatrice related to Virgil how another angelic lady in

Heaven, Lucia, had asked her why she would not come to Dante's aid, since he had left la volgare schiera for her sake.

Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo
chinati e chiusi, poi ch' sol li 'mbianca,
si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo,

Tal mi fec' io di mia virtude stanca,
e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse,
ch' i' cominciai come persona franca:

(The Inferno, Canto II, 127-132)

And upon hearing Virgil's account of Beatrice speaking on his behalf in Heaven, Dante's virtude stanca, failing strength, is revived and his courage to embark on the journey renewed. Thus was Beatrice Dante's true savior, if not in reality, then in his heart. She, now an ideal recreated from the old memories of a long lost love, had become divine.

The fact that Dante and Beatrice might not have spoken more than a few words to each other during their entire distant "courtship" may explain the lack of any earthy or passionate quality in any of his descriptions of Beatrice in life. Nevertheless, her death completely overwhelmed him and was the pre-eminent event of his entire life, altering its course inexorably. Her life, thus, became the paragon of true virtue and spiritual goodness which Dante would later use as a focal point for his own religious journey. For a love never consummated is often much more potent and lasting in the mind than a real, day to day, working, loving relationship. It never decays and

can never be tarnished through all the long years of disappointment, for it is not based on direct experience, but on a pristine image maintained by thought.

In *The Inferno*, Canto I, Dante metaphorically places himself in moral jeopardy, illustrating the depths to which he felt he had fallen after Beatrice's death. Very soon after taking a brief respite from his initial fears and weariness at the very start of the Canto, Dante regroups in order to climb the hill lying before him, but he is confronted, one after another, by three beasts: a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf.

Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar de l'erta,
una lonza leggiera e presta molto,
che di pel macolato era coverta;

At the slant of the hill a spotted leopard refused to back off and kept barring his way.

E non mi si partia dinanzi al volto,
anzi 'mpediva tanto il mio cammino,
ch' i' fui per ritornar piu volte volto.

(*The Inferno*, Canto I, 31-36)

And then Dante sees a lion in his path, which was about to pounce, holding his head high and with ravenous hunger:

L'ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;

ma non s'è che paura non mi desse
la vista che m' apparve d'un leone.

Questa pareva che contra me venisse
con la test' alta e con rabbiosa fame,
s'è che pareva che l' aere ne tremesse.

(The Inferno, Canto I, 43-48)

Finally, a she-wolf, all bones and starving, terrorized him
with her hunger, and he lost hope of ever ascending the hill:

Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame
sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza,
e molte genti ~~fe~~ già viver grame,

questa mi porse tanto di gravezza
con la paura ch' uscia di sua vista,
chi' io perdei la speranza de l' altezza.

(The Inferno, Canto I, 49-54)

Their metaphorical significance has embroiled commentators on the poem for centuries, for, clearly, they were meant to represent, in some manner, Dante's moral dilemma at the moment he finds himself lost in the selva oscura. The similarity to the passage in the Bible (Jeremiah 5:6), where three wild animals (a leopard, lion and wolf) attack the Jerusalemites because of their moral weaknesses and sins, is clear. To the earliest commentators on La Divinia Commedia, these animals represent three of the seven mortal sins: lust, pride and

avarice. But Dante leaves some clues as to the significance of the leopard and it seems, though no one can know for certain, that is meant to represent fraud, while the lion represents violence and the she-wolf represents incontinence (Alighieri, *The Inferno*, pp. 16-17). Thus, while Dante appears more resolute against the leopard's assault (fraud), he is weaker against the lion's (violence), as well as the she-wolf's (incontinence). These, then, signify the moral sins which Dante is susceptible to and is in danger of being pulled into eternal damnation for.

The dangers to Dante's mortal soul were so real to the poet himself that he set three wild beasts upon his own alter-ego, just like the Israelites of old in the Bible. Dante replays biblical allusions and intertwines them with classical references in order to create a new amalgamation of what was a very old tale. Clearly, there are strong influences from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and through that, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, since it was from those great poems that Virgil, himself, drew inspiration: transformation through loss, suffering and experience. Yet, unlike these classical works, *La Divinia Commedia* is a distinctly modern poem, wearing the new guise of faith and salvation, and it drives home the greater importance of spiritual rejuvenation and transcendence for the individual.

In sum, Dante's actual *selva oscura* was the very source for his creative genius. The true events in his life, the death of a true love, the humiliation and disgrace of permanent exile (i.e. the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to) set him on a lonely journey as a lifelong wanderer, someone without roots and without a guide to help keep him on *la diritta via*: the right path. The reason *La Divinia*

Commedia is still so relevant today is because most of us have experienced, to some extent or another, losses such as his and seek a way out of the dark wood just as he did. It is a testament to Dante's genius that he was able to creatively channel and, thereby, transform, his darkest moments into a beacon of light for others over the centuries to draw inspiration from.

References

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- Toynbee, Paget. *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works*. Dover Publications, Inc. 2005.