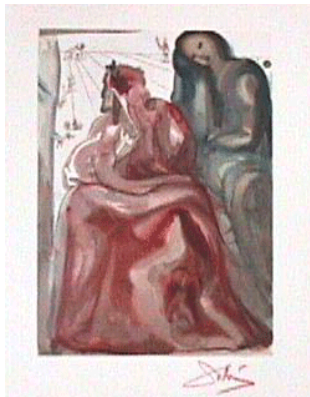


Approaching the Divine Comedy



The Divine Comedy is an architectural masterpiece—the representative work of the middle ages, the masterpiece of medieval aesthetics, cosmology, politics, theology, psychology, philosophy, and even science, with a little bit of the world’s first “science fiction” tossed in (at the end of the *Inferno*).

AESTHETICS: *The Divine Comedy* right up there at the top for its allegorical magnificence; it is meaningful in more than one dimension. Dante explained it in a letter to Can Grande della Scalla: “the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses. The first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter. The first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical.” In other words, if we can take Dante at his word, the work is rich in its layer upon layer of meaning. There is the literal level—Dante’s travels through the difficult, harrowing, graphically concrete landscape of Hell; the allegorical level—the soul’s journey to salvation; etc. It’s a rich work with layers of meaning.

COSMOLOGY: *The Divine Comedy* reflects the medieval view of the Ptolemaic universe, a cosmology that originated with Aristotle and was refined by the 2nd century astronomer, Ptolemy. Aquinas added an overlay of Christian theology, and Dante refines it even further. The Ptolemaic universe is a geocentric universe with Earth at the center, surrounded by nine concentric spheres (inverted downwards in the circle layout of the *Inferno*). In this worldview, the Earth is central and static, while the universe spins all around it. Although it never really worked scientifically, it was extremely compelling philosophically and artistically. It was believed that

everything below the moon was corrupted by the fall of man (Genesis) but that the heavens were perfect and unchanging, immutable, incorruptible. That perfection of the heavens was idealized as a kind of music, the “music of the spheres”—the sound of the heavens in motion—the harmony that’s the essence of all creation. Unfortunately, we lost our ability to hear this music when we were tossed out of the Garden. Oh, well. We can at least try to imagine it, though.

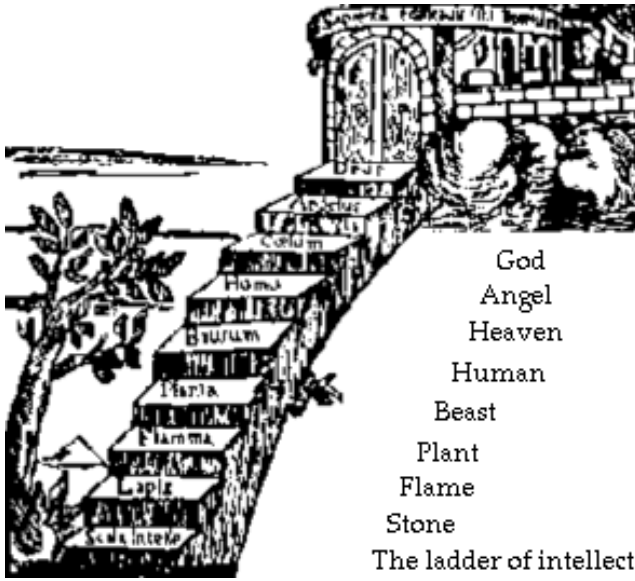
The Divine Comedy is a full-scale, technicolor production of this only slightly outdated vision of the universe, with its orderly circles reaching not only out into the heavens, but funneling down into the very center of the earth, which is the very bottom of Hell, the point at which Dante gives the world its image of Lucifer halfway submerged in the icy lake beating his big, grotesque wings, causing the frozen wind that seals this last region of Hell in a blanket of ice.

POLITICS: This is perhaps the most striking, and maybe the most confusing thing about *The Divine Comedy*. The vicious personal attacks. The local names and faces that Dante uses to populate the whole work. He’s “keeping it real.” We get the low down dirty picture of the all the dirty politics of the day. The power struggles, the egos, the bitter battles. The feuds. The winners and the losers. The corruption. For such a timeless, “eternal” work about the universal journey of the soul from sin to salvation, it’s a very specific poem that insists on naming names. It is the thing that sets this work apart in its day, the *individuality* of its vivid characters. Their so, so vivid human weaknesses.

THEOLOGY: Christian salvation, front and center. Grace, love, sin, punishment. Reward. And most of all, as we’ll see, the belief in FREE WILL. But, lo and behold, interestingly enough, there is no God present in the work at all. They are alluded to, of course, but they are never named outright, nor are they active participants in the action. The trinity is present everywhere in the symbolism of the number three, but it is Beatrice who takes action and saves Dante from the dark wood, Beatrice who sends Virgil to persuade Dante to follow. The central characters in the work are Dante, Virgil, Beatrice, and the many sinners and saints. The human actor on the stage is front and center.

PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, PSYCHOLOGY: But since the first two are so very complicated, let’s save them for another time and focus on psychology: specifically, the medieval notions of the self that have emerged from the earlier classical notions of the self. As a kind of herald of the Renaissance to come, with its insistent focus on the individuality of its characters, its very life-sized human hero, *The Divine Comedy* is a kind of fulcrum in the literary history of the West, in which the medieval is slowly but surely inching its way towards the modern. One of the more modern things about this work is its psychology.

Let’s think back to that Ptolemaic model of the universe. Another aspect of that worldview was the idea of the **Great Chain of Being**, introduced by Aquinas.



In this great chain, which extended from stones all the way up to God, humanity finds itself sandwiched between beasts and angels. It was widely believed that we shared characteristics with both, which makes us a kind of mongrel beast-angel. Why exactly this is preferable to Darwin's theory of evolution, I'm not entirely sure, but we'll leave that for now!

Here's humanity: part beast, part angel. How did this affect our notion of the self?

In this worldview, humans find themselves in a constant struggle to overcome the animal part of their nature—it's the animal in us that's responsible for all of our messy, troublesome drives, appetites, emotional extravagances. The angelic side is our intellect, our reason, our rationality, which puts everything in order, assigns everything its proper place. Let's put it this way: in this worldview, it's not our inner animal that's getting to heaven. Only reason gets us there. The *Inferno*, Virgil tells us in Canto III, is littered with "the wretched souls who have lost the good of the intellect." Those, in other words, who have circumvented, tuned out, or completely corrupted their inner angel, their inner voice of reason.

Why is reason so important? In the *Inferno* (and in *Purgatorio*) reason is everything.

Reason is at the heart of our ability to be independent moral agents, capable of making choices, acting on our own free will. In Dante's world, and maybe ours too, it is the power we have to save ourselves from ourselves.

Dr. Gary Gutchess explains it so well in his online essay, "The Medieval Invention of the Self." The classical notion of the self (it's not even a word in the classical era, but we'll use it anyway) is passive. In important divine matters, the self is acted upon, not an agent of action. "The lightning bolt hit me, and I was possessed." Think of those colorful stories in Ovid that we read. "I was changed into a deer!" "I was changed into a bird!" "I was changed into a flower!" The self is an object acted upon, a vessel to be possessed, a puppet (in some cases) of the Divine Will. This is Oedipus, who suffers his fate because it is his fate, and he cannot change it. (Though Sophocles is such a great artist that and such a keen observer of human nature that he can problematize this view without seeming heretical.) The Renaissance, or modern view is that the self is active, a subject rather than an object. The Gods are removed, far away in the farthest heavenly sphere; people are front and center on the stage, taking action. They are agents of their own Free Will. "I see the light!" "I'm

going towards the light!” (Or, Descartes, “I think therefore I am!”) If the self is an actor on the stage and not just an object to be acted upon, then that implies the need for notions of “responsibility”—you make good choices or live with the consequences—“morality”—you have to recognize the difference between right and wrong choices—and “individuality”—your choices reveal your particular individual character. You have a unique personality that’s all yours based on your own choices. And this is the aspect that Dante most insists on throughout the *Inferno*. You have free will, you have choices, you are an independent moral agent. You can neglect your responsibilities to yourself, to society, but you do it at a great risk of suffering the punishment for doing so.

So although *The Divine Comedy* is visionary, a long strange trip in the burgeoning tradition of religious mysticism that was characteristic of the late medieval period, it’s also paradoxically, ultimately, a very down-to-earth human work. Most people who read it remember it vividly for the human portraits it presents more so than its theology. The humanity overwhelms the theology. Not God, but Dante the individual is the real focus of the work; no poem better illustrates the “self-centeredness” of this amazing period.