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**“LA GUERRA DE LA PIETATE:” DANTE’S DEFINITION OF  
MORAL SUBJECT IN THE ‘INFERNO’**

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Although a pun on the word *pietà* has been widely recognized in Virgil’s rebuke to Dante for pitying the diviners and sorcerers in *Inferno* 20, the possibility of a double meaning for the word in the poem’s statement of subject in Canto 2 has generally been ignored. That a pun is present, however, is supported by the source for this passage in the meeting between the hero and his father in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*—a context in which the word’s Latin root meaning “filial piety” is clearly implied. By the Early Middle Ages “duty to the father” had come to mean “duty to the Father,” and the pity/piety opposition expressed by the pun in Canto 2 is Dante’s definition of the moral subject of the *Inferno*. A trying struggle for both pilgrim and reader, the “guerra de la pietate” extends from varying degrees of theologically impermissible compassion for the souls in hell all the way to questioning of the justice of God’s damnation of the virtuous pagans in the heights of heaven.

Keywords: Dante, *Inferno*, Pity, Piety, *Pietà*, *Pietas*, Dante-pilgrim

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The *Inferno* makes its hero struggle in attempting to reconcile natural human feeling with God’s dispositions of the souls in the afterworld. Insofar as Dante is successful in making us share the narrator’s experiences, reading the *Inferno* becomes a struggle for the reader as well. As we travel deeper into evil with the pilgrim, we recognize more and more clearly the mistake of pitying the damned, but we also find it difficult to give up our human perspective. This is one of the main reasons that the poem provokes such strong reactions.

Canto 20 is the *Inferno*’s most explicit statement of theological doctrine concerning the proper occasions for pity, and, significantly, that statement hinges on a pun. When Dante the pilgrim observes the distorted bodies of the diviners and sorcerers (who have their heads turned backwards on their torsos), he weeps and directly challenges the reader to have done otherwise:

Se Dio ti lasci, lettor, prender frutto  
di tua lezione, or pensa per te stesso

com' io potea tener lo viso asciutto,  
quando la nostra imagine di presso  
vidi sì torta.

...

Certo io piangea, poggiato a un de' rocchi  
del duro scoglio. (*Inf.* 20.19-23, 25-26)

Whereupon Virgil rebukes him as a fool:

Ancor se' tu de li altri sciocchi?  
Qui vive la pietà quand' è ben morta:  
chi è più scellerato che colui  
che al giudicio divin passion comporta? (*Inf.* 20.27-30)

Scholars recognize *pietà* in this passage as a play on words, which is difficult to render into another language, although some translators try with English phrasings such as "Here pity, or here piety, must die" (Sayers) or "In this place piety lives when pity is dead" (Musa).<sup>1</sup> Unaccountably, Mandelbaum omits translation of *ancor* ("still," "yet"). But this word is important: Virgil's frustration is that Dante, after all he has seen and learned, is *still* showing pity for the damned. The pilgrim has by this stage of his journey through hell passed the half-way point; he is in the fourth pit of *malebolge* and should, Virgil obviously feels, know better. As well, Mandelbaum adopts a complex interpretation of the final line of the passage which he explains in a note—that the diviners by foreseeing the future make God's providence "passive." This interpretation is a modern one, which unfortunately makes for an incomprehensible translation. A more obvious meaning adopted by other scholars is "who can be more wicked than he who sorrows at God's judgment." Robert M. Durling comes down the middle with the ingenious "he who brings passion to God's judgments [does not

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<sup>1</sup> *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, trans. Dorothy Sayers (London: Penguin, 1949). *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, rev. edtn. (New York: Penguin, 2002). Musa comments, "In the original there is a play on words: the word *pietà* means both 'piety' and 'pity'" (255), and Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi agrees: "Qui vive la pietà. . . : 'quasi dica: in questo luogo è pietà il non aver pietà' (Landino). La massima, espressa in forma concettosa, vuol dire che il vero sentimento di pietà (verso Dio) in questo luogo è il non averla (verso i dannati)," (comment on *Inf.* 20.28). Leonardi goes on to point out a similar pun in *Paradiso* 4, where it is said of Alcmaeon, a figure from Greek mythology, that "per non perder pietà si fè spietato" (105). Commanded by his father to put his mother to death, Alcmaeon was torn between the poles of piety (duty to his father) and pity (compassion for his mother). The root word in *spietato* is *pietà*; in Italian the prefix *s-* reverses the meaning of the adjective. (Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from commentaries are from The Dartmouth Dante Project: <https://dante.dartmouth.edu>; bibliographical details for each commentary are available by pressing the "List of Commentaries" button).

accept them calmly],” an interpretation that also makes clear that what is at issue in the scene is a conflict between pity and piety. And Durling understands the importance of the pun: “This connects the pilgrim’s weeping here with a major theme of the *Inferno*, his grief at the spectacle of damnation: of the virtuous pagans, Francesca, Ciaccio, Pier delle Vigne, the counselors of violence, and so forth.”<sup>2</sup>

Other aspects of the episode’s presentation are also worth noting. Dante’s specific challenge to the reader to have done otherwise than to have wept at the spectacle of the diviners is one of only seven direct addresses to the reader in the *Inferno*. These addresses tend to occur on occasions of high emotional tension (such as the poet’s descent on the back of Geryon, *Inf.* 16.127-28) or in passages of importance for the meaning of the poem (for example, in the confrontation at the gates of Dis, *Inf.* 8.94-96), or, as here, of significance for both. It is also interesting that the subject of the adjuration by which the reader is entreated to agree with Dante’s reaction (conventionally something like “so may you live long and happily”) is “so may you gather fruit from what you’re reading.” This “pedagogical urgency,” as Erich Auerbach calls it,<sup>3</sup> is an important implication that a key theme of the work is contained in both Dante-pilgrim’s reaction to the diviners and Virgil’s condemnation of that reaction. The strength of Dante’s response is shown by the fact that he has to lean against a rock to remain standing, a degree of involvement that he has not demonstrated since passing out from pity at the end of Francesca’s story in Canto 5. Virgil’s rebuke—“Ancor se’ tu de li altri sciocchi?”—also underscores the gravity of the situation. Virgil scolds Dante elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> but for someone of Dante’s intelligence and education, no reprimand could be so biting as to be called a fool, especially coming from a person to whom he says upon their first meeting, “Tu se’ lo mio maestro e ’l mio autore” (*Inf.* 1.85). It is also important that it is Virgil who rebukes Dante for his lack of piety, since the main

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<sup>2</sup> *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling, with notes by Durling and Ronald L. Martinez (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 565-66. See Natalino Sapegno’s comment on *Inf.* 20.28-30 for a summary of the various interpretations and the arguments for each.

<sup>3</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Dante’s Addresses to the Reader,” in *American Critical Essays on the Divine Comedy*, ed. Robert J. Clements (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 43.

<sup>4</sup> For cowardice at the beginning of the journey (*Inf.* 2.43-45), for delay in the *bolgia* of Dante’s kinsman, Geri del Bello (*Inf.* 29.4-6), for morbid curiosity in the *bolgia* of the falsifiers (*Inf.* 30.31-32).

theme of the *Aeneid*, which Dante says he knew "tutta quanta" (*Inf.* 20.114), is the virtue of *pietas*.<sup>5</sup>

Virgil's rebuke is likely based on a passage in the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, a first-person narrative supposedly by St. Paul, but actually written by an anonymous author in the third century, which purports to give an account of the saint's vision of the afterworld when he was, according to 2 Corinthians, "snatched up into Paradise and heard secret words which it is not lawful to speak" (12:2-4). This journey is referred to by Dante in Canto 2 (32). The *Visio* contains not only an account of paradise but also of hell, in fact, one very reminiscent in some respects of Dante's. Relevant for an understanding of the conflict between Dante and Virgil in the diviners episode, when the saint views the suffering of the damned and weeps from pity, his guiding angel says, "Wherefore weepst thou? Art thou more merciful than the Lord God who is blessed forever, who hath established judgment and left every man of his own will to choose good or evil?" But just as Virgil's objection in Canto 20 does not keep Dante from pitying the sinners again later in his journey, so also Paul immediately ignores the angel's rebuke, "Then I lamented again very greatly." In the remainder of the passage Paul's

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<sup>5</sup> Why does Virgil rebuke Dante for pitying the sinners here and not earlier? Some scholars limit the *qui* "here" in "here pity lives when it is truly dead" to this particular section of hell, the *bolgia* of the diviners and sorcerers (for example, Mazzoni, commentary note on *Inf.* 20.28). This argument for *qui* as localized in meaning derives from Virgil's reputation during the middle ages as a magician and the fact that apparently Dante himself was thought by some to be suspect because of his knowledge of the other world. Therefore, the force of Virgil's rebuke and Dante's dealing with the episode in the way he does may be a personal repudiation of magic and the practice of divining on the part of both. Another scholar explains the rebuke of Virgil here and not elsewhere as due to the fact that since Dante weeps before he knows any of the sinners, he is sorry for the punishment itself, and thus rebels against the decree of God in a more general way than he has in showing pity before (*La Divina Commedia Di Dante Aligheri*, ed. C. H. Grandgent [Boston: Heath, 1933], 176). Probably the best explanation for the location of Virgil's rebuke in this section of the poem is that he has not reproved Dante for showing pity earlier, in the part of hell punishing sins of incontinence, because as he explains in Canto 11, these sinners "men Dio offende" (84). Here, however, Dante and the reader are in the presence of fraudulent, premeditated, malevolent evil—in this case those who dupe their fellows into believing that they have the power of God himself to see the future. Here, pity is particularly inappropriate. Robin Kirkpatrick in *Dante's 'Inferno': Difficulty and Dead Poetry*, which is concerned, like the present study, to discuss the tensions of the poem, argues that it is Virgil, not Dante who is in the wrong in Canto 20. Dante does not weep for the sinners themselves but because he sees "the image of humanity in its bodily nature so tormented and turned awry" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 260). Virgil, as a pagan, Kirkpatrick argues, cannot appreciate Dante's regard for the body, since the resurrection and glorification of the physical body is a distinctively Christian idea. This interesting point may be undercut somewhat by the fact that Dante-pilgrim feels no pity concerning the dreadful transformations of the thieves in Canto 24, but rather only awe at the power of God's justice (119-20).

unorthodox pity for the souls is shown to be not only permissible but even laudable.<sup>6</sup>

Although, as has been explained, scholars have generally agreed that the word *pietà* in Canto 20 is a pun, the same word (in a slightly different form) in Canto 2 has not been often recognized as such. However, as will now be shown, understanding that the word has more than a single meaning in the description of Dante-pilgrim's preparing himself for "the battle both of the journey and of the *pietate*" provides an important key to the meaning of the *Inferno*.

Canto 1 of the *Inferno* is usually considered as the prologue to the poem as a whole, and Canto 2 is thus the beginning of the *Inferno* proper.<sup>7</sup> The first lines of Canto 2 constitute an epic exordium, in which the poet states the subject of his work, invokes the muses, and asks a question which by revealing the story's antecedents leads into the action. Dante carefully follows this classical tradition. He invokes the muses, including, probably, that of his own genius.<sup>8</sup> He also asks a question or has his namesake in the poem ask it for him.<sup>9</sup> The invocation, the question, clearly the opening lines of Canto 2, after describing the waning of the day, must give the only missing element of the traditional exordium, the subject of the poem.

Lo giorno se n'andava, e l'aere bruno  
toglieva li animai che sono in terra  
da le fatiche loro; e io sol uno

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<sup>6</sup> *Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. and ed. M. R. James (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 546. Considering the following episode, it is not surprising that the *Visio* was denounced by Augustine as a fabrication. The damned, seeing Paul weeping, call upon the archangel Michael for mercy. He descends from heaven and makes them a suitably orthodox speech (the time for repentance has past, they had their chance). But thereupon the Son of God descends, makes a similar speech and says, for the sake of Michael and his well-beloved Paul, he will give the sinners one day of respite from their torments every week for eternity!

<sup>7</sup> Thus the scheme: 1 canto (general prologue) + 33 cantos (*Inferno*) + 33 cantos (*Purgatorio*) + 33 cantos (*Paradiso*) = 100. Although some scholars argue that Canto 1 is the introduction to the *Inferno*, they are in a minority.

<sup>8</sup> "O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate; / o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi, / qui si parrà la tua nobilitate" (*Inf.* 2.7-9).

<sup>9</sup> The pilgrim has second thoughts about the journey he has been invited to take. Aeneas journeyed to the afterworld while still alive, he says, so did Paul, "Ma io perché venirvi? o chi 'l concede?" (*Inf.* 2.31). Virgil answers this question by recounting the descent of Beatrice to limbo at the request of Mary and Santa Lucia—a divine intervention that parallels in a Christian context the involvements by the gods in the affairs of men that open Virgil's *Aeneid* as well being present in the exordia of the epics of Lucan and Statius. The relevant passages are *Aeneid* 1.34-75, *Pharsalis* 1.8, *Thebiad* 3.4.

m'apparecchiava a sostenere la guerra  
 sì del cammino e sì de la pietate. (*Inf.* 2.1-5)

The “battle both of the journeying and of the *pietà*” is the definition of the subject of the *Inferno*—like Virgil’s “arma virumque”—but what does Dante mean? The “battle of the journeying” seems clearly to refer to the literal level of the story, to the challenges of overcoming the physical obstacles of the *cammino* which Dante the pilgrim must face, the “spelunking” aspect of his descent into hell—such things as the darkness, the noise and stench, the rock-climbing, the crossing of the river Styx, the flight on the back of Geryon, and so forth. The remaining element of the *proposito*, the battle of the *pietate*, must therefore refer to the moral focus of the *Inferno*. And, since this is the statement of the poem’s subject, we should look more carefully at these lines than is usually done.<sup>10</sup>

Translators and most commentators limit the meaning of the word *pietà* in the opening lines of *Inferno* 2 to “pity” (*pietate* and *pietade* are archaic variants of the same word).<sup>11</sup> Boccaccio set the standard interpretation for the next 650 years when he identified *pietà* as simply “the compassion” which arises in the pilgrim from “seeing the affliction and the punishments of the damned and of those who purify themselves in fire.”<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Padoan, for example, although recognizing that the word *pietà* is given wide meaning in the *Convivio*—being used “nel senso di pietas latino”—nevertheless limits its meaning in *Inferno* 2 to “pity”: “ma qui il vocabolo è usato nell’accezione più comune”.<sup>13</sup> More recently, Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi has recognized the importance of “la guerra dela pietate”—“questa espressione sintetizza nella sua densità tutta la cantica, ed è come una proposizione del tema”. But she has difficulty explaining “guerra” since her understanding of *pietà* is limited to “la compassione” evoked in Dante-pilgrim’s heart by the pains of the damned.<sup>14</sup> No English version of the work

<sup>10</sup> The exordia of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* both state their subjects explicitly and unproblematically—“second kingdom” and “holy kingdom.” Why is the exordium of the *Inferno* less direct? Perhaps because Dante-pilgrim has just given a summary of the itinerary of the journey at the end of Canto 1, including the first stage as being the realm of “those who are sorrowful.” To open Canto 2 by saying “now I will sing the first kingdom, of those who are lost” would be gracelessly repetitive.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the variant forms and meanings of the descendants of Latin *pietas* in the Romance languages, see Robert Ball, “Theological Semantics: Virgil’s *Pietas* and Dante’s *Pietà*” in *The Poetry of Illusion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991), 249–50, n. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Comment on *Inf.* 2.4–5.

<sup>13</sup> Comment on *Inf.* 2.4.

<sup>14</sup> “Guerra inteso come travaglio o pena sembra non corrispondere alla densità dell’espressione, che implica un combattimento reale (m’apparecchiava a sostenere la

recognizes or attempts to translate “pietate” as a pun in *Inferno* 2, even though, as we have seen, some do attempt translation of the pun on the same word in Canto 20. Robert Hollander’s treatment is typical: he translates the phrase in Canto 2 as “the struggle—of the way and of the pity of it,” and then goes on to comment: “This formulation perhaps refers to the struggle of the protagonist with the difficulties of proceeding. . . and with his own interior weakness, demonstrated in his occasional surrender to the emotion of pity.”<sup>15</sup> One problem with the interpretation of *pietate* as meaning only “pity” is that it makes the *Inferno*’s moral subject seem trivial. A second problem with the interpretation is that it does not very well explain why the pilgrim’s pity should be described as a “conflict” or “war” (*guerra*). A conflict requires two elements.

Most scholars see a pun in Canto 20 because of the teasingly paradoxical nature of the statement “Qui vive la pietà quand’è ben morta,” but what reason is there to believe that a pun is involved in the word *pietate* in the opening lines of Canto 2? There is good reason, it turns out, because persuasive evidence is found in *Aeneid* 6, 687–88, a source for Dante’s line discovered by Hermann Gmelin a half century ago and more recently re-examined by Robert Ball.<sup>16</sup> In this scene of Virgil’s poem, the hero is welcomed by his father with words explicitly praising a journey described as a conflict that is overcome by filial piety: “Have you finally come and has the piety / your father looked for conquered the arduous journey?”<sup>17</sup> There are obvious similarities here to Dante’s phrase “guerra de la pietate.” Both passages occur in descriptions of journeys to the underworld; both passages refer to a journey in terms of warfare

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guerra...). Oltretutto, a un senso generico, si sostituisce così un senso pregnante, di qualcosa che sconvolge alle radici l’animo dell’uomo, come appunto richiede la storia” (comment on *Inf.* 2.4-5).

<sup>15</sup> Translation and comment (on *Inf.* 2.4-5) from the Princeton Dante Project. Hollander’s most extensive discussion of the temptation of the reader to share Dante-pilgrim’s pity for the damned is the chapter “The Moral Situation of the Reader” in *Dante: A Life in Works* (104-109). Although not recognizing the pity/piety conflict in such terms, Hollander focuses on the poem’s nearly identical theme of divine justice: “If one were asked to epitomize the central concern of the poem in a single word, *justice* might embody the best choice. . . when we observe that the protagonist feels pity for some of the damned, we are meant to realize that he is at fault for doing so” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 106,107. For a similar view see Stefano Prandi, “Letteratura e pietà (secc. XIII-XVI),” *Lettere italiane* 55.4 (2003): 494-518.

<sup>16</sup> Hermann Gmelin, *Die göttliche Komödie: Kommentar*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1955), comment on *Inf.* 2.4.; Ball, “Theological Semantics,” 19-36.

<sup>17</sup> *Venisti tandem, tuaque exspectata parenti / vicit iter durum pietas?*” Quotations from the *Aeneid* are from *Virgil. Opera*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). Translations are from Robert Fitzgerald, *The Aeneid of Virgil* (New York: Random House, 1981).



(Virgil: *vicit*, "conquer"; Dante: *guerra*, "battle"); both passages describe the struggle using words that are cognates—Latin *pietas*, Italian *pietate*.<sup>18</sup> In Anchises' words to Aeneas, however, *pietas* unambiguously means "filial piety," the duty owing to one's parents or father. And with the development of Christianity, "duty to one's father" came to be associated with "duty to *the* Father, religious duty, piety." As early as the fourth century, Augustine could write, "pietas [...] proprie Dei cultus intellegi solet," ("the word *pietas* is generally understood as referring particularly to the worship of God").<sup>19</sup>

Building on Gmelin's discovery of the Virgil passage in the background of *Inferno* 2, Ball convincingly refutes the widely accepted view of the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* that a religious meaning of *pietà* is not found in the early Italian language,<sup>20</sup> arguing that "Dante's journey both as pilgrim and as poet may be described in terms of the double light cast by the *pietas* in Virgil and the *pietà* of Italian love poetry."<sup>21</sup> However, he limits the application of the evidence for a play on words provided by the *Aeneid* to an exploration of Dante's transcendence of "the repetitive cycle of fathers and sons, not only by passing through the series of father-*imagos* that have ruled his past by means of their potentially unlimited authority, but also by adhering to a principle of female

<sup>18</sup> Further evidence that Dante thought of the entrance of his pilgrim to hell in the *Inferno* as parallel to that of Virgil's hero might be provided by the description of Aeneas' entry into the underworld in *Convivio*. In both cases the verb used to describe the situation is *sostenere*: "quando esso Enea sostenette solo con Sibilla a intrare ne lo Inferno." Edizione Nazionale, ed. Franca Brambilla Ageno (Florence: Le Lettere, 1995). Trans. Richard Lansing. Princeton Dante Project, 4.26.9.

<sup>19</sup> *The City of God*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. David Wiesen. Loeb Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 10.1. See also Aquinas: "religion is called pietas by way of pre-eminence, insofar as God is pre-eminently Father" ("religio per excellentiam dicitur pietas, in quantum Deus est per excellentiam Pater"). *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2<sup>nd</sup> edtn., 1920. Online Edition, 2008, 2a 2ae, 103, 3 ad 1. (Both references are given in Ball, "Theological Semantics," 27.) Jeffrey T. Schnapp sees a Christianized use of the related word *pia* in a later scene of the *Commedia* alluding to *Aeneid* 6. Cacciaguیدا's greeting of his descendent in *Paradiso* 15 is compared to Anchises' greeting of Aeneas in the underworld: "Sì pia l'ombra d'Anchise si porse ... quando in Eliso del figlio s'accorse" (25, 27). The reference is to the gesture of greeting immediately preceding Anchises' exclamation "vicit iter durum pietas"—"alacris palmas utrasque tetendit" (6.684). Schnapp interprets the word *pia* in the Dante passage as going beyond the meaning of "with affection" by indicating an insistence upon "sonship in God over and above all socially conditioned relations" ("*Si pia l'ombre d'Anchise se porse*: *Paradiso* 15.25," in *The Poetry of Allusion* 149).

<sup>20</sup> *Enciclopedia Dantesca*: Antonio Lanci's article on "Pietà" (Rome: Treccani, 1967-1983); Ball, "Theological Semantics," 250. fnnt. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

mediation.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps because of the specialized psychoanalytic focus of this argument on the “oedipal dynamics of the poem,”<sup>23</sup> the importance of the pity/piety pun as a statement of the *Inferno*’s subject has not been sufficiently recognized. As the present study will show, the resonance of the pity/piety conflict has implications more wide-ranging than those examined by Ball: it is a definition of the overriding moral theme of the poem, and, moreover, it is Dante’s own definition.<sup>24</sup>

In the light of a pun on “pity/piety,” the subject of the *Inferno* begins to make sense. The “guerra de la pietate” is the struggle between natural human pity and religious piety. Thus defined, the subject becomes interesting, significant. How can the suffering of the souls in hell, which naturally causes readers to pity them, be reconciled with the judgment of God, which Christians are required to accept by religious faith? The moral action of the poem becomes an exhausting intellectual and emotional “battle,” a *guerra*, for both narrator and readers. Moreover, the *Inferno* can be seen to express a questioning similar to that in the opening lines of Dante’s most important literary source for the *Commedia*. Regarding Juno’s unending hatred of the Trojans which causes so much suffering for Aeneas and his followers, Virgil asks: “can anger black as this prey on the minds of heaven?”<sup>25</sup> (1.11). That is, how can the gods treat human beings so unfairly? The reader pities Aeneas and his people, but the gods do not, or at least Juno does not. Dante’s treatment of the pity/piety conflict in the *Inferno* can also be seen as equivalent to Milton’s need to defend God’s treatment of suffering humanity: “To assert eternal Providence / And justify the ways of God to men” (I, 25-26). Finally, the conflict between pity and piety that is the focus of the *Inferno* is, as will be shown below, part of a wider concern of the *Commedia* that extends to the final lines of *Paradiso*—the struggle to bridge the gap between human and divine.

In roughly half of the cantos of the *Inferno* Dante shows strong emotional involvement with the sufferings of the damned. Eleven of these can be classified as various types of pity; in one, the Ulysses canto, the involvement is not clearly defined; and four are examples of indignation (whether righteous or not is a subject of

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> From the editors’ description of Ball’s article in *The Poetry of Allusion*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Despite its title, Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi’s *La guerra de la pietate: Saggio per una interpretazione dell’Inferno di Dante* (Naples: Liguori, 1979) does not address the issues raised in this paper: she fails to recognize the source of Dante’s phrase in *Aeneid* 6 as well as the pun on pity/piety.

<sup>25</sup> “Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?”

debate). The following pages will explore the consequences of an expanded understanding of the theme of "pietate" in these scenes of the *Inferno*. In conclusion I will also comment briefly on how the pity/piety conflict extends to the work's second and third canticles.

The announcement of theme in the opening lines of Canto 2 is immediately followed by three examples of the proper uses of pity. First, Dante's fear in undertaking the journey causes Virgil to tell him how he was first directed to Dante's rescue, "nel primo punto che di te mi dolse" (*Inf.* 2.51). Next, we learn that the ultimate origin of Virgil's mission was not Beatrice, but the fountain of all pity for sinful humanity, the Virgin Mary. According to Beatrice, Mary is concerned for Dante, and "si compiangi / di questo 'mpedimento" (*Inf.* 2.95-96). Finally Beatrice, having entrusted the rescue mission to Virgil, demonstrates her own compassion for Dante's situation when: "li occhi lucenti lagrimando volsi" (*Inf.* 2.116).

Beatrice tells Virgil that she has come to hell because "amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare" (*Inf.* 2.72), and Virgil's report of Mary's and Beatrice's pity has the desired effect. Like a flower that opens up to the sun after a cold night, Dante's courage is renewed, and he is ready for the journey that will lead to a vision of God, saying of Beatrice as he sets out: "Oh pietosa colei che mi soccorse!" (*Inf.* 2.133). Suffice it to say that all of these passages describe a compassion occasioned by love, and crucially, the pity demonstrated here is for a sinner who can regain "la diritta via" (*Inf.* 1.3) that leads to God; it has as its object a person who is still in the world of the living, who still has hope of amendment.<sup>26</sup>

An early and emphatic presentation of the pity/piety conflict is also embodied in the coupling of these instances of theologically legitimate pity with what seems, at least to modern readers, a jarringly cold attitude towards the suffering of the souls in hell. When Virgil asks Beatrice how she has dared descend to hell, she replies that the physical punishments of hell cannot harm her: "fiamma d'esto 'ncendio non m'assale" (*Inf.* 2.93) but also that she is not troubled by any mental anguish for those in hell ("la vostra miseria non mi tange," *Inf.* 2.92).

Aquinas's treatment of the question of "Whether the blessed pity the unhappiness of the damned" is a good commentary on the occasions of pity and piety seen in Canto 2. He distinguishes two

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<sup>26</sup> For a brief explanation of this doctrine and its importance in medieval religion, see Thomas Rendall, "The Times of Mercy and Judgment in the English Morality Plays." *English Studies in Canada* 7 (1981): 255-56.

types of pity, pity “by way of passion” (“per modum passionis”) and pity “according to choice of reason” (“secundum electionem rationis”). “So long as sinners are in this world,” they can “without prejudice to the Divine justice” be taken to a state of happiness, and therefore it is possible to pity them, as do those in heaven and good people on earth, both by reason and by passion. “But in the future state it will be impossible for them to be taken away from their unhappiness: and consequently it will not be possible to pity their sufferings according to right reason. Therefore the blessed in glory will have no pity on the damned.”<sup>27</sup> The distinction made here between the “choice of reason,” which governs the compassion of the saints, and the “way of passion” which governs that of mortals, is exactly the tension that exists in the passages of the *Inferno* which portray the conflict between piety and pity in the pilgrim’s responses to the inhabitants of hell. Of course, the narrator of the poem has never, before his extraordinary journey, encountered persons who are “in the future state” and whose destinies have been irrevocably fixed by unerring, divine justice. The reader, as well, has never encountered such people. Therefore he and we have a natural tendency to treat these souls with pity, just as we would those we meet who are suffering in everyday life. As an early commentator puts it, (“it is human nature to sympathize with the failings of other people”).<sup>28</sup> Pity for sinners in this life is theologically correct, even required of Christians. Pity for those who have been judged by God, however, according to the teaching of the medieval church, is an impious objection against his decisions.

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<sup>27</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl., 94. 2; *Super Sent.*, lib. 4 d. 50 q. 2 a. 4 qc. 2 co. “Ad secundam quaestionem dicendum, quod misericordia vel compassio potest inveniri in aliquo dupliciter: uno modo per modum passionis; alio modo per modum electionis. In beatis autem non erit aliqua passio in parte inferiori, nisi consequens electionem rationis; unde non erit in eis compassio vel misericordia, nisi secundum rationis electionem. Hoc autem modo ex electione misericordia vel compassio nascitur, prout scilicet aliquis vult malum alterius repellere; unde in illis quae non volumus secundum iudicium rationis repellere, compassionem talem non habemus. Peccatores autem, quamdiu sunt in hoc mundo, in tali statu sunt quod sine praepudicio divinae iustitiae possunt in beatitudinem transferri a statu miseriae et peccati; et ideo beatorum compassio ad eos locum habet et secundum electionem voluntatis, prout Deus, Angeli et beati eis compati dicuntur, eorum salutem volendo; et secundum compassionem, sicut compatiuntur eis homines boni in statu viae existentes. Sed in futuro non poterunt transferri a sua miseria; unde ad eorum miserias non poterit esse compassio secundum electionem rectam; et ideo beati qui erunt in gloria, nullam compassionem ad damnatos habebunt.” The ideas expressed here were commonplaces of medieval theology. See Charles H. Grandgent, “Quid Ploras?” *Dante Studies* 118 (2000): 85-94.

<sup>28</sup> “humanum est compati erroribus hominum”. Benevento da Imola, 14th century, cited in Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, comment on *Inf.* 2.4-5.

If the reader and narrator make the theological mistake of pitying the damned, it is not made without a warning in Beatrice's remark, and Canto 2 having defined the problem of the proper and improper uses of compassion, the opening of Canto 3 could also not be clearer on this point. Hell describes itself through the prosopopoeia of its gate: it is a place of justice created by the participation of all three persons of the Christian God—"la divina podestate" (the Father), "la somma sapienza" (the Son), and "il primo amore" (the Holy Spirit, 1-6). The fact that all the characters the pilgrim will encounter on his journey through hell find themselves in a place so categorically defined as the work of the Christian Trinity should not be forgotten—but it is easy to do so.<sup>29</sup> It should also be remembered, but again is easy to forget, that from the point of view of the *Commedia* as a work of fiction it is Dante, not God, who has assigned the lost souls to hell. Therefore our temptation to share Dante the character's sympathy with the denizens of the inferno has to be offset by the awareness that Dante the author has deliberately put them in the predicaments for which his fictional pilgrim pities them. If we as readers follow Dante the pilgrim's mistake of falling for the stories of the damned, of treating these souls as we do the people we meet in ordinary life whose sufferings we naturally pity, of pitying the damned as unjustly punished, we cannot claim we have not been warned by the inscription over hell's gate.<sup>30</sup>

In Canto 3 Dante is moved upon hearing the laments of the neutrals, "per ch'io al cominciar ne lagrimai" (23). Since this is the pilgrim's and reader's first impression of hell, we should probably assume the scene that prompts Dante's horror is meant to reflect the tumult of the inferno as a whole as well as that of the immediately adjacent region. It is significant that Dante's first reaction upon entering hell's gate, "al cominciar," even before he speaks a word, is to join the souls in their lamentation. Also worth noting is the

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<sup>29</sup> Because of the gate's description of the souls in hell and of why they are there, it is not necessary for the poet to provide balance or perspective in their speeches—their deceptions and self-deceptions inviting Dante-pilgrim's and the reader's pity can be given free reign.

<sup>30</sup> This is common as well in other works in which the reader is led to participate in the error of a main character. In Chaucer's *Troilus* the hero and narrator have moments of lucidity in which they anticipate the conclusion of the poem by bewailing the insubstantiality of all earthly happiness, and in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine's gothic fantasies are exploded a couple of times before she and the reader begin mistakenly to suspect that the General has killed or imprisoned his wife (by finding that a mysterious trunk in her room actually contains extra bed covers and by finding that an ancient manuscript she discovers in a wardrobe is in reality a wad of old cleaning bills.)

way in which the degree of involvement in the sufferings of hell shown by the narrator and encouraged in the readers as their first impression of the damned contrasts with Dante's source. Although Aeneas pities the fate of the dead waiting on the river Acheron (*Aen.* 6.332), and although he weeps copiously in his encounter with Dido, Virgil's presentation of Tartarus—the pagan equivalent of Dante's hell—is flatly descriptive: "From the interior, groans / Are heard, and thud of lashes, clanking iron, / Dragging chains," 6.557-58.<sup>31</sup> The tone of Virgil's lines is detached, while that of Dante's passage, characteristically, builds to a strong personal reaction.

This sympathetic response continues in the immediately following cantos. I will discuss Dante's pity for the state of the souls in limbo later in the context of the *Commedia's* continuing debate concerning the justice of the damnation of the virtuous pagans. In the ensuing visit to the circle of the lustful, pity again seizes Dante when he hears the "ladies and knights" named: "pietà mi giunse, e fui quasi smarrito" (*Inf.* 5.71).

The term *smarrito* underscores the scene's impact on the pilgrim, since it echoes the nearly fatal situation of the "right way" being *smarrita* in the opening lines of the poem (*Inf.* 1.3). In calling the lovers Paolo and Francesca to him, Dante-pilgrim commiserates with their sufferings and even seems to place God in a negative, authoritarian light: "O anime affannate, / venite a noi parlar, s'altri nol niega" (*Inf.* 5.80-81). Francesca then thanks the pilgrim for his concern, "poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso" (*Inf.* 5.91-93) and goes on to make her first speech. And when Dante asks her to continue by describing the origin of the love affair, he says, "Francesca, i tuoi martiri / a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio" (*Inf.* 5.116-17).

Upon the tragic conclusion of Francesca's narrative, the pilgrim faints because of pity ("di pietade," *Inf.* 5.140), falling "come corpo morto cade" (*Inf.* 5.142). The only other instance of Dante-pilgrim's losing consciousness in the *Inferno* is on the bank of Acheron. Commentators have attributed the character's extreme reaction at the end of Canto 5 to the author's recognition that lust was one of the sins to which he himself was prone: in the *Vita Nuova* he tells of falling in love, after Beatrice's death, with a "donna della finestra,"<sup>32</sup> and is reprimanded by Beatrice in *Purgatorio* for giving

<sup>31</sup> "hinc exaudiri gemitus, et saeva sonare / verbera, tum stridor ferri tractaeque catenae".

<sup>32</sup> Chapters 35-39 in the text of the Società Dantesca Italiana edition, as presented on the Princeton Dante Project site.

his love to a "pargoletta" (*Purg.* 31.59). Equally importantly, Dante-pilgrim's extreme response to Francesca's story has also been attributed to the poet's feelings of guilt for having written poetry which resembled the book which Francesca says brought her and Paolo to ruin. Dante's early lyrics are in the tradition of the idealization of sensual love that found its central expression in chivalric romances such as the one Paolo and Francesca were reading. A Christian, the medieval church taught, was required to use his or her talents in the service of God, and Dante's use of his poetic powers in the writing of courtly love poetry was not in accord with religious duty. The second-last line of Francesca's story is her bitter "Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse," (*Inf.* 5.137). Clearly, Dante felt not only pity but also personal compunction in writing of Francesca and Paolo's love affair, and both these emotions contributed to his portrayal of the pilgrim's strong reaction. Dante faints at the end of Francesca's story "di pietade" (*Inf.* 5.140), and the obvious meaning of the word in this context is "pity." On the other hand, it is also an interesting possibility, considering the personal involvement the poet seems to feel, to see something of the sense of "piety" in *pietade*. Perhaps, as often, both meanings are operating. Dante feels great pity for the tragic conclusion of the love between Francesca and Paolo and for its *modo*—the sudden murder by the irate husband that ruled out any chance of making peace with God before death—but he may also be expressing remorse for his own violation of religious piety by leading readers of his early poetry into similar erotic temptation.

In any case, the circle of the lustful evokes particular compassion from the pilgrim because unlike the sins of the neutrals and the souls in limbo, the failing of this circle is the first which has for Dante personal relevance. The word *morto*, "dead," coming so close on the heels of a story beginning with the word *amore* and following the fatal sequence of love—sin—death—damnation reminds us of the pilgrim's situation in the dark wood, which was so desperate that "poco è più morte" (*Inf.* 1.7).

The opening of Canto 6 looks back to the effect of Francesca's story: "Al tornar de la mente, che si chiuse / dinanzi a la pietà d'i due congnati / che di trestizia tutto mi confuse". Here *pietà* has its derived sense of "that which causes pity"—"suffering, anguish." By re-emphasizing the effect which Francesca's pitiful fate had upon the pilgrim, this opening throws into relief the coolness of his reaction to the glutton Ciaccio: "Ciaccio, il tuo affanno / mi pesa sì, ch'a lagrimar mi 'nvita" (*Inf.* 6.57-58). It is clear that for Ciaccio, even though he is an acquaintance of Dante, a fellow Florentine,

and although the poet is invited, even prompted to weep—the pilgrim sheds no tears of pity. This relative indifference to the sufferings of the gluttons continues in Canto 7 as Dante says concerning the endless “jousting” of the hoarders and wasters, “io ... avea lo cor quasi compunto (*Inf.* 7.36).

The focus of Canto 10, which presents the burning sepulchers of the heretics, is Dante’s meeting with Farinata. During the ensuing conversation, however, another soul rises from the same tomb, and in his brief remarks to this soul, Cavalcante Calvalcanti, Dante inadvertently implies that Cavalcanti’s son (and Dante’s friend) Guido is dead. Thereupon, Cavalcanti falls back, overcome by grief. After finishing his exchange with Farinata, Dante asks him to correct the false impression he has given Cavalcanti: “come di mia colpa compunto” (*Inf.* 10.9).

It is important to note that this is the first time in the *Commedia* that Dante’s sorrow is well-founded from a theological point of view, because here he sorrows for a failing that can be corrected, and he sorrows for an action for which he himself (and not God) is responsible. It is precisely this kind of contrition that Beatrice will require of her lover when he reaches the summit of the Mountain of Purgatory.

Dante-pilgrim’s sympathy for the souls of the damned continues in the circle of the violent. In Canto 13, the pilgrim meets Pier della Vigne, who as a suicide has been transformed into a bush. Following his story of false accusation and despair, Dante is so moved that he cannot speak, “tanta pietà m’accora” (*Inf.* 13.82). The injustice of Pier’s imprisonment and punishment, and perhaps their personal relevance to Dante’s own fate of unjust exile, seem to be the principal causes of the pilgrim’s strong reaction. Continuing his way through the circle of the violent, the pilgrim encounters some fellow Florentines on the plain of the sodomites (Canto 16). Seeing the wounds caused by the rain of fire, he says, “Ancor men duol pur ch’i’ me ne rimembri” (*Inf.* 16.12). Because these souls were honest statesmen and patriots, Dante says he was tempted to join them on the plain: “S’i’ fossi stato dal foco coperto, / gittato mi sarei tra lor di sotto” (*Inf.* 16.46-47). The pity/piety theme seems to be here obliquely expressed: Dante-pilgrim not only pities these souls’ sufferings, he even wishes to share them, but fears the violation of divine law that such sympathy would entail and the punishment that would follow. Dante goes on to assure the souls that their miserable situation does not make them contemptible and that their punishment has fixed such sorrow in him that it will only disappear slowly (“tanta che tardi tutta si dispoglia,” *Inf.* 16.52-54).



Although the earlier passage indicates that at the time of the writing of his poem, he still remembered his sorrow for these sinners ("An-cor men duol pur ch'i' me ne rimembri"), here he states that he expects, eventually, to be free of it. Since Dante implies his future salvation in several passages of the *Commedia*, he must be thinking of the lack of pity shown for the damned by those who have entered heaven.

While Dante-pilgrim's response to the sinners of the eighth *bolgia* in Canto 26 is not specified as pity, his sense of personal involvement is extreme: he leans out so dangerously to peer into the pit that he has to hold onto a rock to keep from falling in "sì che s'io non avessi un ronchion preso / caduto sarei giù sanz'esser urto" (*Inf.* 26.44-45). This near collapse reminds the reader of the pilgrim's response to the sufferings of the diviners and sorcerers (*Inf.* 22.25-26).<sup>33</sup> There have been differing views concerning the nature of Ulysses' sin; however, it seems clear from the episode's source in the Epistle of James. Ulysses is punished in a tongue of flame, which wags and splutters as he speaks, because he sinned with his tongue by misuse of language.<sup>34</sup> That this is the failing punished in the eighth *bolgia* is also confirmed by Guido da Montefeltro's sin being explicitly defined in the next canto as "consiglio frodolente," (*Inf.* 27.116).

Therefore, as in the case of the Francesca episode, the strength of the pilgrim's reaction in Canto 26 is probably due to recognition that he is himself liable to the sin punished in this *bolgia*. The power of persuasive speech could be used both for great good, as Dante no doubt was convinced he was using it in the *Commedia*, or for great evil, as Ulysses uses it in the speech by which he lures his companions to undertake a voyage to certain destruction. Dante-pilgrim's emotional response to Francesca's story, as we have seen, was probably in some part due to the conviction that he himself had been guilty of producing the kind of

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<sup>33</sup> Some of the admiration readers have for the character of Dante's Ulysses may stem from modern familiarity with the character in Homer's poem, but Dante had no first-hand knowledge of the *Odyssey*. The image of the Greek hero most important for Dante was that presented in the *Aeneid*. For Virgil, Ulysses is anything but admirable; he is a master of deception – "deviser of crimes," ("inventor scelerum", 2.164) and "deceitful" ("pellax", 2.90)—and a master of evil speech— "inciter of crimes", ("hortator scelerum", 6.529) and a "maker of artful speeches," ("fandi factor, 9.602). Dante's attitude towards the Trojan war was also, of course, anything but impartial. As an Italian he considered himself a direct descendent of the Trojans and took the destruction of their city by Ulysses' stratagem of the horse more personally than modern readers might imagine.

<sup>34</sup> See Richard Bates and Thomas Rendall, "Dante's Ulysses and the Epistle of James," *Dante Studies* 107 (1989): 35-47.

literature that the lovers were reading on the day their infatuation was consummated. In the Ulysses episode as well, the poet may be sorrowing for the use of his God-given *ingegno* for the production of writing that had no explicitly Christian reference. We know that this application of his powers bothered him sufficiently in later years that he attempted in the *Convivio* to allegorize some of his earlier love poems.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that in Ulysses' explanation of his last voyage the word *pieta* is clearly used in its Latin sense. Neither tenderness for his son, nor the love he owed Penelope, "né la pieta / del vecchio padre" (*Inf.* 26.94) could block his desire to gain experience of the world. Although some English translators see only "pity" in the *pieta* of this passage (Mandelbaum) or "compassion" (Durling), others recognize the root meaning (Ciardi, Musa: "reverence"; Kirkpatrick: "duty"). Hollander's translation is the most explicit: "filial duty."<sup>36</sup>

In Canto 29, Dante-pilgrim feels pity for the souls in hell two last times. Virgil reprimands him for staring so insistently at the souls of the sowers of discord, and Dante explains that one of his kinsmen, Geri del Bello, is there below. Since his murder has remained unavenged, he has turned away from Dante without a word, and this has made the pilgrim pity him the more ("e in ciò m'ha el fatto a sé più pio," *Inf.* 29.35). Ball argues that the word *pio* in this passage "reinforces the vernacular sense of "pity" with the Latin sense of "devotion to family obligations."<sup>37</sup> In the same canto, moving to the *bolgia* of the falsifiers who are plagued by skin

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<sup>35</sup> Such later-life regrets for the secular works of one's youth are by no means unusual in medieval literature. In this regard, Dante's concerns in the Ulysses passage resemble the situation of Boccaccio, who claimed towards the end of his life that he wished to destroy his secular works (he was dissuaded by Petrarch). Dante's attitude even more closely resembles that of the "Retraction" of the *Canterbury Tales*, in which Chaucer asks forgiveness for his "enditnyges of worldly vanitees" ("compositions of worldly frivolities") while giving thanks for his translation of Boethius' *Consolatio*, and for other books of saints' legends, homilies, morality, and devotion. The English poet's comment on the work to which the "Retraction" is attached is particularly relevant to the interpretation of the Francesca episode proposed earlier, because the morality of the tales of the Canterbury collection are judged by a criterion that is specifically pertinent to the situation of Francesca and Paolo's reading of the romance of Lancelot. Francesca blames the romance and its author as a Galeotto, a go-between, which led them into adultery, and Chaucer repents having written and revokes, he says, those Canterbury tales that "sownen into synne" ("induce to sin"). *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 328.

<sup>36</sup> The Mandelbaum, Musa and Hollander translations are cited above. *Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1959); *The Divine Comedy I: Inferno*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Ball, "Theological Semantics," 21.

diseases, Dante states that "lamenti saettaron me diversi, / che di pietà ferrati avean li strali" (*Inf.* 29.43-44).

Juxtaposed to Dante-pilgrim's expressions of pity for the souls in hell are a number of occasions on which the piety side of the pity/piety conflict is embodied in his approval of the damned's sufferings or through his becoming an active participant in their punishments.

Up to Canto 8, the pilgrim's reaction is never negative, from the deep compassion felt for the inhabitants of limbo and Francesca to the cooler but still not entirely indifferent attitude expressed towards Ciaccio and the hoarders and wasters. In Canto 8, however, Dante shows that the sinners can also provoke him to anger. This hardening of heart begins at the conclusion of the first section of the inferno, upper hell, which punishes the sins of incontinence, in his meeting with Filippo Argenti, a soul wallowing in the mud of the Styx along with the other wrathful. Filippo gets the encounter off on the wrong foot by insulting Dante. He asks him who he is, coming (as a living man) before his time ("anzi ora," *Inf.* 8.32), implying that like Fra Albergo and Branca Doria whom Dante meets in the deepest pit of hell (*Inf.* 33.124-47) the pilgrim's sins have been so grievous that his soul will be damned while his body is still alive on earth. Dante replies that although he has come to hell, he is not staying, and then asks Filippo to identify himself. At this point, the latter seems to ask for pity, "Vedi che son un che piango" (*Inf.* 8.36).<sup>38</sup> Dante, however, now recognizing the soul as an arrogant Florentine and perhaps a personal enemy, replies with anything but pity:

Con piangere e con lutto  
spirito maladetto, ti remani;  
ch'i' ti conosco, ancor sie lordo tutto. (*Inf.* 8.37-39)

In response, Filippo grabs the boat transporting the poets, whereupon Virgil pushes him away with an insult (*Inf.* 8.42) and then praises Dante: "Alma sdegnosa, / benedetta colei che 'n te s'incinse!" (*Inf.* 8.44-45). Critics have debated the nature of Dante's anger and Virgil's praise. Does Virgil praise Dante because he shows what Aquinas calls "good anger" ("bona ira"), the correct response of righteous indignation in the face of hardened sin, or is his response an instance of "ira mala," the sin of wrath that is punished in this very circle of hell? The problem is compounded by Dante's

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<sup>38</sup> Some scholars interpret *piango* to mean "pay the punishment for my sin," see C. Kleinhenz, "Inferno 8, the Passage Across the Styx," Lecture at the University of Virginia, 6. [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/LD](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/LD).

request that Filippo's pain be increased, "Maestro, molto sarei vago / di vederlo attuffare in questa broda, prima che noi uscissimo del lago" (*Inf.* 8.52-54). Virgil says that such a desire deserves to be satisfied, and Filippo is accordingly attacked by the other souls, at sight of which the pilgrim says "Dio ancor ne lodo e ne ringrazio" (*Inf.* 8.60).

Does this rejection of pity and outburst of anger mark a turning point in the narrator's attitude towards the souls of hell? It might seem that way, but, as has been examined above, the pilgrim still has a long way to go before he can regard the sufferings of the souls in hell without compassion. It is interesting to note, however, that when the pilgrim is personally acquainted with the sinner and knows his crimes by first-hand experience, he approves of the divine judgment. God, of course, who is omniscient, was thought to know all people in this way.

As has been discussed, in the episode of the diviners and sorcerers Dante seems to protest against the distortion of the human body. In the *bolgia* of the thieves (Cantos 24-25) the punishment is even more of an insult to human dignity, involving the incineration of the bodies of the sinners or their transformation into reptiles. (Goethe found this episode a repellent expression of religious fanaticism.) Yet here Dante approves of the punishment. When Vanni Fucci curses God by making the figs (an obscene gesture) and is immediately silenced and bound by two serpents, Dante says, "Da indi in qua mi fuor le serpi amiche" (*Inf.* 25.4)

Canto 32 gives another example of pity's counterpart. In what seems to be the expression of a higher level of indignation at sin than shown in the Filippo Argenti episode, here Dante not only desires punishment for the souls, he helps inflict it. In the region of hell called Caina, where the souls are frozen up to their necks in ice, Dante kicks the head of Bocca degli Abati. The number of alternative explanations given for the act "se voler fu o destino o fortuna, / non so" (*Inf.* 76-77)— may indicate irony. With dark humor the narrator may be saying that he kicked the head intentionally.<sup>39</sup> When the soul, weeping, mentions the name of Montaperti, Dante's suspicions are aroused that he is an infamous traitor who took part in that battle. Attempting to force the soul to acknowledge his identity, Dante grabs his hair, "e tratti glien'avea più d'una ciocca, / latrando lui con li occhi in giù raccolti" (*Inf.* 8.104-05). If Dante's point is to make clear that his character's attitude

<sup>39</sup> This kind of bitter sarcasm is found in other passages of the poem, for example, in the mock encomium on the city of Florence which opens the Ulysses canto (*Inf.* 26.1-3).

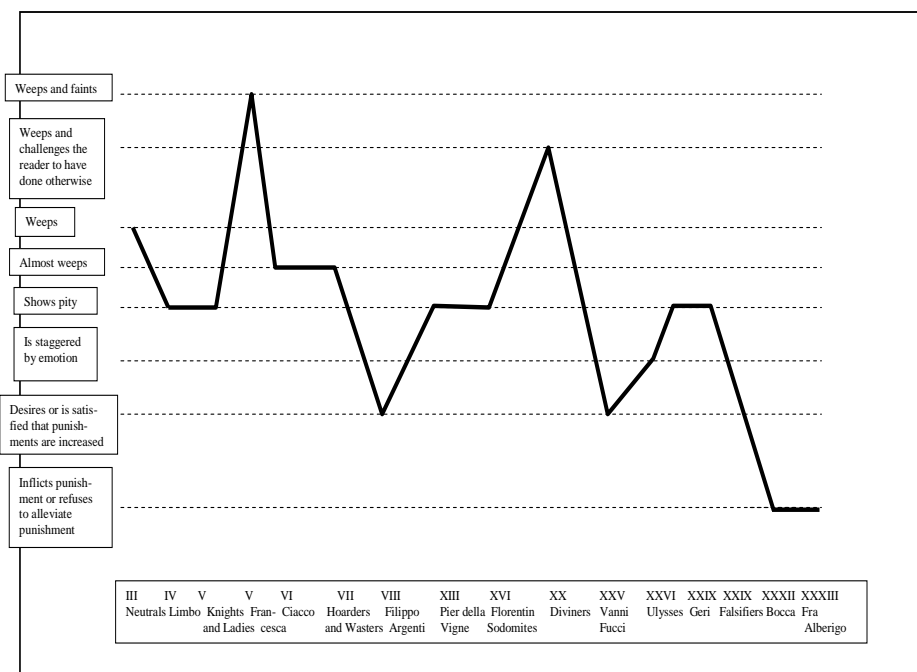
towards the damned is hardening, he could hardly have been more emphatic. Yet, as we shall see, he is able to turn it up still another notch.

In the case of the meeting with Ugolino (Canto 33), there are both indirect and direct requests of Dante to show pity. As Ugolino responds to the pilgrim's request that he tell his story, he says, "parlare e lagrimar vedrai insieme" (9), words reminiscent of Francesca's preface to her narrative, "dirò come colui che piange e dice" (*Inf.* 5.126). Also similar to Francesca, it is clear that Ugolino is inviting the pilgrim to feel compassion for his situation. As well, midway through his account of being walled up in a tower with his sons to starve, Ugolino challenges Dante not to weep in the same way Dante had himself challenged the reader in the *bolgia* of the diviners. Concerning his prophetic dream, which had foreshadowed his and his sons' deaths, Ugolino says Dante would be cruel indeed if he did not grieve, and "se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?" (*Inf.* 33.42). Despite the fact that Ugolino uses the same pathetic appeal as Francesca, however, despite the fact that he explicitly challenges Dante not to weep, there is no evidence that the pilgrim does weep. While the Francesca episode ends with Dante fainting from pity, in the Ugolino episode Dante explicitly directs the reader's sympathy away from its main character by his concluding comment. He attacks the city of Pisa not for its execution of the traitor Ugolino but only for its punishment of his innocent sons (*Inf.* 33.85-87). It seems clear that by the time Dante reaches the frozen pit of hell, he has finally passed beyond the possibility of any sympathy.

Having experienced the sin of betrayal and the price it exacts upon the innocent in Ugolino's story, Dante-pilgrim himself now deceives a sinner when he encounters the traitor Fra Alberigo in Canto 33. Alberigo invited his brother and other family members to a banquet and then ordered them murdered. His sin was so grievous that Dante audaciously violates established Church doctrine by imagining that Alberigo's soul has been sent before death to Cocytus for early punishment (a semblance of continued life is given by a demon animating his body). Since those in lower hell do not want to be remembered in the world above, Dante has to bribe the soul to reveal his identity. He swears equivocally that if he does not alleviate Alberigo's suffering by freeing his face from its veil of frozen tears, "al fondo de la ghiaccia ir mi convegna" (*Inf.* 33.117). Of course, this asseveration is deliberately misleading: Dante knows that he is destined to travel to the bottom of hell; Virgil has told him as much. The soul, however, trusts Dante and gives him the

desired information. Yet at the end of Alberigo's story Dante reneges on his seeming promise to free the sinner's eyes: "io non gliel'apersi; / e cortesia fu lui esser villano" (*Inf.* 33.149-50). Some commentators explain this "courtesy" by arguing that to have freed Alberigo's eyes would have caused him greater pain because he would then have recognized Dante as a living person, likely to do what the souls in the lower regions of hell dread, to report Alberigo's fate to the world above. Others justify the *cortesia* as the courtesy due to God in not interfering with the punishment he has decreed. Most readers, myself included, however, see bitter sarcasm in Dante's comment: for such a traitor as Alberigo, no pity is due or even possible. Some critics go so far as to say that the point of the episode is to show that Dante, just as he became angry at Filippo in the circle of the wrathful, has now become treacherous in the region of the traitors. One commentator, despairing of defending the pilgrim's behavior, concludes: "QUI DANTE NON MI PIACE".<sup>40</sup> Whatever the interpretation of Dante's act, it is clear that tears, which had originally been shed in pity by the pilgrim, are no longer permitted, at this depth of evil, to be shed even by the sinners.

DANTE'S COMPASSION AND LACK OF COMPASSION FOR THE SOULS OF THE *INFERNO*



Most early commentators and even a few recent ones assume that at some point Dante-pilgrim learns "to deal with the reality of

<sup>40</sup> Vincenzo Gioberti, cited in Gregorio di Siena, comment on *Inf.* 33.150.

sin in a detached, impersonal way."<sup>41</sup> Later passages of the *Commedia*, however, indicate that this development may never fully occur. And, as the accompanying graph shows, although the general tendency during the course of the journey is for the pilgrim to show less pity, even in the *Infèrno* the curve has many ups and downs.

Leaving the inferno behind by passing through the center of the earth, Dante reaches the pivot point of his journey. He physically and morally turns his back on hell and all of its inhabitants. When the pilgrim and Virgil reach the surface, they are confronted by Cato, a Roman statesman who because of his virtue and love of liberty has been made the guardian of purgatory's shore and who is therefore destined for eventual salvation. Virgil is as much a stranger in this new realm as Dante, and in the hope of gaining Cato's help, he invokes the memory of Marcia, Cato's wife who, as a non-Christian, has been assigned to limbo with Virgil. Once again, the pitiless perspective of the saved and those destined for salvation is presented as Cato's response mirrors the attitude of Beatrice at the beginning of the *Infèrno*:

Or che di là dal mal fiume dimora,  
più muover non mi può, per quella legge  
che fatta fu quando me n'uscì fora. (*Purg.* 1.88-90)

Thus, at the beginning of each of the first two stages of the journey where pity might conflict with piety, the poem gives clear examples of the proper attitude: piety must take precedence. As if to reinforce the idea that purgatory is a place where all traces of the attitudes of hell must be erased, Cato then orders that Dante's face be washed, so that no mist should cloud his eyes when he approaches the angels of paradise. Accordingly, Virgil leads Dante to the lowest level of the island, and "ivi mi fece tutto scoperto / quel color che l'infèrno mi nascose" (*Purg.* 1.121-29).

When Virgil washes off Dante's face what Cato calls the "sucidume" (*Purg.* 1.96) of hell, the pilgrim begins a process of purification that continues throughout the ascent of the mountain. Some readers have thought that part of the filth that must be washed away is metaphorically that of the prolonged contemplation of evil and its punishment that the journey through hell had entailed—a contamination that has been caused by the sins the pilgrim

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<sup>41</sup>Christopher Kleinhenz, "*Infèrno* 8," 9. See also Luca Marcozzi, "Canto XVI. Dante vince la guerra della pietà," in *Lectura Dantis Romana: Cento canti per cento anni*, eds. Enrico Malato and Andrea Mazzucchi (Rome: Salerno, 2013) 1, 484-52, especially 94.

witnessed and as is shown in his treatment of Filippo Argenti, Bocca degli Abati, and Fra Alberigo. Another meaning of washing away the stains also seems clear however: the tears Dante shed for those in hell must be forgotten. The remnants of the pilgrim's pity for the sufferings of those in hell can only hinder the process of personal penitence and amendment which is the business of purgatory.

Reaching the final stage of his journey through purgatory, Dante-pilgrim shows pity for a soul of the damned one last time. When he recognizes the veiled Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, he feels "i segni de l'antica fiamma" (*Purg.* 30.39) and turns to Virgil. But Virgil has disappeared, and even the beauty of Eden, he reports, did not "valse a le guance nette di rugiada / che, lagrimando, non tornasser atre" (*Purg.* 30.53-54). These are the last tears that Dante sheds for an inhabitant of hell, and, although no doubt part of his sorrow is simply for loss of a beloved companion, part must also be due to pity for the necessity of Virgil's return to hell and for what seems the injustice of his exile from God.

Dante is not allowed, however, the luxury of dwelling on his grief. The Beatrice whose name had been used by Virgil to lure Dante through the wall of fire on the terrace of the lustful (*Purg.* 27.36), the Beatrice of the "occhi belli" (*Purg.* 27.136), unexpectedly turns out to be an intimidating confessor, a motherly figure who speaks to her child with "pietade acerba" (*Purg.* 30.81). "Stern *pietade*" in this phrase may have an element of the meaning "pity," but its dominant significance is the reciprocal relationship of familial piety, the duty a parent has to correct a child's faults.<sup>42</sup> Calling Dante by his name (the first and only time it appears in the poem), Beatrice reminds him that the tears which he is shedding for Virgil are required, first and foremost, for himself, "non piangere ancora; / ché pianger ti conven per altra spada" (*Purg.* 30.56-57). As Dante catches sight of his reflection in Lethe, he shies away from self-recognition; when the angels sing "In te, Domine, speravi" ("In you, Lord, I have trusted"), it seems to him that they are saying, "Donna, perché sì lo stempere?", and he breaks into tears (*Purg.* 30.96-99). But, as the text makes clear, these tears are those of self-pity, and Dante-pilgrim needs to weep again after he has confessed the sin of mistaking his relationship to Beatrice for a merely physical one. The other sword that Beatrice speaks of is the sword of penance, and she is concerned that her words are understood by Dante so that he experiences true contrition, the essential first step of the

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<sup>42</sup> Leonardi: "la *pietade acerba* è espressione di forte densità: indica come gli aspri rimproveri sono, da parte della madre, solo una forma del suo amore. *Pietade* ha il senso latino di *pietas*, qui amor materno" (comment on *Purg.* 30.80-81).



sacrament: "perché sia colpa e duol d'una misura" (*Purg.* 30.108). She goes on to accuse him of giving himself to another (*Purg.* 30.126) and of turning his steps into an untrue path (*Purg.* 30.130). Dante had fallen so far, she says, that she had to offer prayers "piangendo" so that he could rediscover the true way and take the present journey (*Purg.* 30.139-45). Now Dante weeps again—the last time tears are shed in the *Commedia*—but this time he is weeping for his own shortcomings. This scene of theologically improper followed by proper sorrow is reminiscent of a well-known passage of Augustine's *Confessions* in which the older saint regrets his foolishness as a student in weeping for the sorrows of Virgil's Dido, when he should have been lamenting his own failings.<sup>43</sup>

One last recurrent element in the pity/piety theme of the *Commedia* that I would like to deal with by way of conclusion is the problem of Dante's and the reader's attitude towards the assignment of the virtuous pagans to hell. This problem is stated early and continues to be discussed until nearly the end of the poem.

Virgil turns pale upon beginning the descent "nel cieco mondo" (13) in Canto 4 of the *Infèrno*, and Dante thinks he is frightened. However, Virgil explains it is the suffering of the people below that "nel viso mi dipigne / quella pietà che tu per tema senti" (20-21). Although pitying the damned is an error for which, as we have seen, Virgil sternly rebukes Dante later in the poem, it should be noted that Virgil himself is not totally immune from such a natural failing. This must be seen as one of the humanizing elements in Dante's presentation of his pilgrim's guide, the fallible Virgil who has attracted proponents among modern *Dantisti*, notably Robert Hollander.<sup>44</sup> This is the only time Virgil shows compassion for the damned, however, and, of course, if *qua giù* is taken to refer solely to limbo and not to the entire inferno, it would be difficult for Virgil to be detached from the suffering of these souls, since "di questi cotai son io medesimo" (39). The implicit questioning of the justice of the damnation of the souls in limbo initiated by Virgil's pity is reinforced and made personal for the reader by the pilgrim's own reaction:

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<sup>43</sup> "I was forced to learn the wanderings of one Æneas, forgetful of my own, and to weep for dead Dido, because she killed herself for love; the while, with dry eyes, I endured my miserable self-dying among these things, far from Thee, O God my life. For what is more miserable than a miserable being who commiserates not himself; weeping the death of Dido for love to Æneas, but weeping not his own death for want of love to Thee, O God!" *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: Collier and Son, 1909), Book I, 33.

<sup>44</sup> See Robert Hollander, "Virgil, A Light that Failed," *Lectura Dantis* 4 (1989) [[https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/LD/numbers/04/hollander.html](https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/LD/numbers/04/hollander.html)].

Gran duol mi prese al cor quando lo 'ntesi,  
 però che gente di molto valore  
 conobbi ch 'n quel limbo eran sospesi. (*Inf.* 4.43-45)<sup>45</sup>

Although the problem of the damnation of the virtuous pagans is obliquely referenced in *Purgatorio* by the presence of Cato—a pagan and suicide—as guardian of the shore of the island, the topic is dealt with at length in a passage of *Paradiso*. In the sphere of Jupiter, where the souls of the just appear grouped in the form of an eagle, Dante asks to be resolved of a question that has long troubled him and for which he has found no answer on earth (“che lungamente m’ha tenuto in fame / non trovandoli in terra cibo alcuno,” *Par.* 19.26-27). The eagle, reading Dante’s mind, asks the question for him.

Un uom nasce a la riva  
 de l’Indo, e quivi non è chi ragioni  
 di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva;  
 e tutti suoi voleri e atti buoni  
 sono, quanto ragione umana vede,  
 senza peccato in vita o in sermoni.  
 Muore non battezzato e senza fede:  
 ov’è questa giustizia che ‘l condanna?  
 ov’è la colpa sua, se ei non crede? (*Par.* 19.70-78)

Since the question is an explicit objection to God’s decision regarding the souls in limbo, it is perhaps understandable that Dante finds a way of not having his narrator ask it directly himself. The eagle’s answer is conventional and not very satisfying—at least from the perspective of a living human being—divine justice exceeds human understanding. Like the ocean floor, we can see it near shore, but, although it is still present, not in the depths (*Par.* 19.58-63).

In *Paradiso* 20 the issue is taken up again with a surprising twist. In this canto Dante recounts his amazement at discovering two non-Christians in heaven. The first is Trajan, a Roman emperor famous for justice and concerning whom a medieval legend existed of his resurrection and conversion. The second is Ripheus, briefly mentioned in the *Aeneid* as falling in battle on the night

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<sup>45</sup> Orthodox medieval doctrine concerning limbo limited its inhabitants to unbaptized infants along with the patriarchs and prophets until their rescue by Christ in the Harrowing of Hell. See H. A. Kelly, "Hell with Purgatory and Two Limbos: The Geography and Theology of the Underworld," in *Hell and Its Afterlife: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Margaret Toscano and Isabel Moreira (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 121-36.

Troy was destroyed—"foremost in justice among the Trojans"<sup>46</sup>. There seems to be no precedent for Dante's placing this latter figure among the saved. At this point, the pilgrim, suddenly turned conservative theologian, has a new question as he exclaims, amazed at the inconsistency, "Che cose son questi?" (*Par.* 20.81). The answer has a relevance for the whole theme of the conflict between pity and piety in the poem. Despite our initial impressions, Dante's afterworld is not governed by pitiless, machine-like inadaptability. Divine regulations can be "conquered" by the "violence" of love and hope (Matt. 11:12):

Regnum celorum ["the kingdom of heaven"] violenza pate  
da caldo amore e da viva speranza,  
che vince la divina volontate. (*Par.* 20.94-96)

The eagle then concludes the long discussion of this problem by warning against making assumptions concerning God's justice:

E voi, mortali, tenetevi stretti  
a giudicar: ché noi, che Dio vedemo,  
non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti;  
ed ène dolce così fatto scemo  
perché il ben nostro in questo ben s'affina,  
che quel che vole Iddio, e noi volemo (*Par.* 20.133-138)

As the preceding discussion has shown, the *guerra* between pity and piety runs from the beginning of the *Commedia* to nearly its end and is a central part of its meaning. But it is also important to recognize that this conflict is part of a wider concern of the poem: how all aspects of the gap between human and the divine can be brought into harmony. In *Inferno* and the relevant passages of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, the problem is how human emotions can be reconciled with the demands of divine justice. And at the very end of the poem the problem is how human desire as a whole can conform to the will of God so that human beings can feel themselves in harmony with "the love that moves the sun and other stars." As Dante's journey reaches the Infinite Goodness and he peers into the light, he sees three circles, representing the Trinity. At this point, he confronts the ultimate contradiction of the poem, and one intimately related to the conflict between pity and piety: that of the dual nature of Christ.

Qual è 'l geometra che tutto s'affige

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<sup>46</sup> "iustissimus unus / qui fuit in Teucris et servantissimus aequi", 2.426-28.

per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,  
 pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige,  
 tal era io a quella vista nova:  
 veder voleva come si convenne  
 l' imago al cerchio e come vi s' indova;  
 ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:  
 se non che la mia mente fu percossa  
 da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.  
 A l' alta fantasia qui mancò possa;  
 ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*,  
 sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
 l' amor che move il sole e l' altre stelle. (*Par.* 33.133-145)

The Incarnation was regarded—of all the events of the Christian story—as the least comprehensible to discursive thought. Aquinas says “the mystery of the Incarnation most transcends reason. Nothing more astonishing could be imagined as done by God than that the true God and Son of God should become true man.”<sup>47</sup> The presence of a human effigy in the divine circle, as described in the *Commedia's* final lines, as well as the miraculous salvation of Trajan and Ripheus, show that God is more than a logician, and that “heaven suffers the violence of love.” It was, after all, the intercession of love in the form of Mary's pity for Dante's distress in the dark wood that caused “duro giudicio là sù” (*Inf.* 2.96) to be shattered, and the journey which is the literal subject of the poem to take place. What the geometer cannot solve is finally swept away for Dante-pilgrim in a moment of illumination. The disjunction between human and divine is resolved, and along with it, presumably, the problem of reconciling pity and piety.

For modern readers, a main obstacle of Dante's *Commedia* is its implacable relentlessness, the fierce theological logic of its presentation of the afterworld. A fourteenth century commentator sums up the problem nicely. It is natural and good, he says, to show pity for suffering, but it is also commanded that we should accept God's judgments. Therefore there is a logical contradiction in showing compassion for the damned. One can pity the suffering of the souls in hell or one can accept God's justice, but “l'una e l'altra insieme, no.”<sup>48</sup> The bipolarity of this statement has a long history in western culture, beginning with the ancient ideal of “harmony” or “coherence” that the Greeks called *sumphônia*. Socrates (in *Gorgias*) says that he would prefer almost anything than that “my single self should be out of harmony with myself and contradict

<sup>47</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. English Dominican Fathers, 1924. <http://www.saintwiki.com>, IV, 271.

<sup>48</sup> Francesco Buti, comment on *Inf.* 20, 19-30.

myself."<sup>49</sup> In everyday life, of course, all of us can and do simultaneously entertain contradictory ideas, attitudes, and values. *Sumphônia* may be a noble ideal, but it is one most often honored in the breach. In mulling over the problem of the contradiction of Dante's showing pity for the damned, we should remember that in the *Commedia* it is the devil who is a logician.<sup>50</sup> Dante's pilgrim is in fact never able to govern his perspective by the binary logic of the fourteenth century commentator. Although his attitude towards the sinners hardens as he descends into hell, the process is anything but linear, and in purgatory and heaven the conflict between pity and piety persists. As it turns out, then, Dante's poem seems refreshingly disordered in at least this respect.

A recognition of the inevitability of disorder in even the most perfect works of art is found in many cultures. The Navaho Indians make heavy blankets (today usually used as carpets) which my father sold in his Western outfitters store. The patterns are complex designs of geometrical shapes, rigorously symmetrical. But, if you look hard enough, you can always find a slight "imperfection," a place where the pattern does not mirror itself on the other side of the center, or where it is slightly broken. This is necessary, at least according to the lore my father had picked up, to make certain that evil is not trapped in the rug by a more-than-human perfection in its production. A similar kind of reasoning seems to be involved in Dante's making room for the human imperfection of pity for the damned in his wonderfully ordered poem.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jowett translation. Text at <https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Gorgias&oldid=3842099>.

<sup>50</sup> In *Inferno* 27, Guido da Montefeltro explains how a devil ("un d'i neri cherubini," 113) seized his soul because "ne pentere e volere insieme puossi / per la contradizion che nol consente" (118-19).

<sup>51</sup> The author would like to express his thanks to Dr. Chang Wuming for helping him access some secondary sources in Italian and to Barbara Rendall who helped, as usual, with the correction and improvement of the paper's writing.