INTRODUCTION

Why Dante?

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Dante is for everyone. That simple, bold statement should give one pause, for to many readers the medieval Italian poet's long and difficult epic poem, the *Divine Comedy*, represents major interpretive challenges because of its intricate design, its seemingly rigid moralistic tone, its myriad of obscure historical and mythological references, and other interpretive challenges, given its medieval world view. Just thinking about reading such a foreign and forbidding work makes even the boldest reader hesitant. But, I repeat, Dante is for everyone, and the initial reluctance to venture into these unknown waters is overcome, once one begins to read the first canto of the *Inferno*. For there, in the first tercet—"Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost"—we experience, with the protagonist (usually referred to as the Pilgrim), the fear of being lost, but we also share in his first steps toward resolution, the recognition of one's perilous state and the concomitant hope of overcoming the situation. These are the conflicting emotions of the Pilgrim, and they are also ours, for, as it is clearly stated, his journey is also *our* journey, and the first step toward resolving the problem is to acknowledge it, to realize that we need assistance, and to have faith that an answer will be found. That answer comes in the form of Virgil, the ancient Roman poet, who will guide the Pilgrim—and us—down through Hell and to the top of Mt. Purgatory, where Beatrice, Dante's youthful love and now a veritable Christ figure, will assume responsibility for his ascent through the heavenly spheres of Paradise and his arrival in the presence of God in the Empyrean.

Why did Dante write the *Comedy*? What impact did he hope it would have? What does he expect of his readers? Why do we still read the *Comedy* today? Dante firmly believed that literature, and poetry in particular, had the power to persuade individuals and society as a whole and to move them to action in the correction of their moral and ethical defects. He felt the double need to provide knowledge in a variety of areas to individuals and to present a picture of the perfect ordering of the universe for the benefit of all humanity. He wanted to make the daring case that a poet could engage great ideas and theological truths in new, important, and convincing ways.

The great Dante scholar Charles H. Grandgent once described the poem as follows:

> The *Divine Comedy* is not only an Encyclopedia, a Journey, a Vision—it is the Autobiography of a soul. The events of his external life Dante scrupulously excluded from his works: he never mentions his parents, his children, nor, in all probability, his wife…. In his opinion, it is not meet to speak of oneself: "is not fitting for anyone to speak of oneself," he declares in the *Convivio*. This maxim evidently does not apply, however, to the inner self, provided that self be generalized into a type of mankind, and provided the recounting of its experiences be helpful to other erring souls. . . Like St. Paul and Aeneas, Dante had a mission, a vital message for humanity. The *Divine Comedy* is the epic of

remorse, repentance, purification, and final uplifting. Incidentally it depicts the depravity of the world and points the way to social regeneration.

Dante hoped that his poem would have an immediate ameliorative effect on the erring world and that it would continue to speak to future ages. Indeed, he wanted his voice to be heard and to be heeded, and not only in his immediate lifetime but on into the future. And today the *Comedy* does still live among us "who [can] call [Dante's] time ancient" (*Paradiso* XVII, 120). Reading and re-reading the poem demands our full attention and offers us much: it asks that we look at the past as past, and yet it simultaneously offers the opportunity for direct and personal engagement with the values it embodies. It speaks both to our desire to see the past in itself, and to see the past as it connects with the present. Dante is a poet unmatched in his ability to mine the resources at his disposal—the literary, historical, and cultural traditions of which he was a part. He drew liberally from the biblical and classical traditions, because he believed they still spoke to his own age. Although drawing much from these traditions, he did not automatically accept all that they had to say. Indeed, he engaged in dialogue with them and probed those problems which remained central to his own time and concerns.

We can turn to the *Comedy* to engage in a conversation with Dante on issues that were of concern to him and that remain vital to us today. We must then read and discuss the poem as carefully and completely as possible, attempting to do justice to its complexity, depth, and artistic coherence. Dante's answers to questions of perennial human concerns are valid today: questions about the potential in humans for good and evil, about the possibilities for spiritual transformation, about the nature and purpose of our cultural, political and religious institutions, and about the reasons (good and bad) for reading and writing.

The *Comedy* is in many ways an easy poem to approach for the first time, for Dante is a superb storyteller who makes the general contours of his story immediately accessible and who provides the excitement and adventure necessary to sustain the reader's interest through the one hundred cantos: the journey of the pilgrim from ignorance to knowledge provides a frame (and a model) through which the poem may be read, experienced, and appreciated. His journey becomes, at least in part, our journey toward illumination, understanding, and happiness.

Dante was sent into exile in 1302, never to return to Florence. The *Comedy* is, in many ways, the product of his exile; indeed, had he not been exiled, Dante would probably never have written or even felt the necessity of writing the poem. Its great theme—Justice—is what Dante was constantly attempting to understand, since he believed that his exile was a grave injustice. From this unhappy circumstance was born what has been considered the greatest poem ever written, one that claims to show both the imperfections in earthly society and the way to salvation in a perfectly ordered universe.

Dan Christian's highly personalized reading of the *Comedy* draws on our common culture, our understanding of human emotions, and our desire for self-betterment, justice, love and moral and spiritual understanding. Dan's allusions to music, art and literature open up the poem to readers of all ages, for they support the "human/e-ness" of the poem and underline Dante's ultimate message to his readers that we share common goals and a common heritage. It is the universality of the poem that makes it both readable and meaningful for us today, as it has been for past and

will be for future generations. Indeed, Dante's message is that the *Divine Comedy* is, indeed, for everyone.