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From Literal Path to Transcendent Journey:
The Pilgrim's Movement
Throughout *Inferno*

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Introduction

He will show himself to be a desperate *homo viator*, who sails his way into a heavenly port at the end of his journey, but only after undergoing the crisis of conversion and an arduous passage across the landscapes of sin and purgation.

("Out Upon Circumference" 194)

In his "Letter to Can Grande," Dante attributes the concept of *polysemy*, which means "many levels," to his poem.¹ In the letter, Dante states: "For the clarification of what I am going to say, then, it should be understood that there is not just a single sense in this work: it might rather be called *polysemous*, that is having several senses" ("Letter" 99). This concept not only applies to the multi-layered construction of the *Divine Comedy* but also to its interpretation. Although most critics rely upon the "Letter," I find his defense of hierarchical interpretation in the "Four Levels of Interpretation" more useful. The combination of *polysemy* and hierarchical interpretation is key to this study of the poem.

As Robert Hollander suggests: "The second half of our century has seen the direction of Dante studies move away from aestheticism and toward theology" ("Dante's Virgil" 3). In accordance with the move towards more theological readings,

¹ *Polysemous* comes from the root *semus*, which is also the root for semiotics, and *poly*, which means *many*.

Peter S. Hawkins describes Dante's poem as an attempt to map the Pilgrim's journey toward heaven. Dante intended the poem to be an instructional device, a map, for Christian salvation. In the "Four Levels of Interpretation," Dante defends his belief that, in order for readers to interpret his map and arrive at the same moment of full intellection that the Pilgrim reaches in *Paradiso*, they must read the poem on various hierarchical levels.

Due to the poem's *polysemous* construction, it can be read at increasingly abstract levels. Teodolinda Barolini notes the relevance of this layered structure: "It is as though Dante wants us to recognize that there is a narrative voyage alongside the Pilgrim's voyage, that the text's thematics will always be mirrored by its poetics" (68). Although she attempts to "detheologize Dante," Barolini's statement supports the idea that there is a dynamic relationship between the Pilgrim's literal voyage and his soul's transcendent journey.

Dante's Aristotelian and Ptolemaic universe constructs the Pilgrim's arduous path, while his Pseudo-Dionysian theology helps direct the Pilgrim's uplifting journey. According to Aristotle's situation of the cosmos, Dante's Pilgrim must first travel downward in order to travel upward into heaven. Theologically speaking, the Pilgrim's entire journey, both spiritually and physically, moves him upward to heaven and the

understanding of salvation. This continual upward motion relates to Pseudo-Dionysius' concept of a spiritual uplifting into the immaterial heaven, or anagogy: "Yet it is possible that the iconography of the wheels of the mind be explained by another uplifting of the mind from perceptible images to intelligent meanings" ("The Celestial Hierarchy" 190). For Pseudo-Dionysius at least, *anagogy* is synonymous with *uplifting*. As the Pilgrim moves upward through hell's physical space, his spirit is uplifted to heaven and his mind to divine understanding.

While Aristotelian cosmology dictates the upward direction of his physical journey, gatekeepers mark the Pilgrim's uplifting intellectual and spiritual progressions. Dante's use of guards dates back to the ancient Apocalyptic literature where gatekeepers stop souls travelling through heaven to ask their names and test their wisdom. The gatekeepers in *Inferno* illustrate the Pilgrim's increasing knowledge of sin and mark his hierarchical progression through hell.

Many critics, from John Freccero to Peter Armour, have analyzed the significance, both religious and secular, of specific beasts and beings that the Pilgrim encounters in the *Divine Comedy*. The same critics, however, have neglected to analyze their roles as gatekeepers that the Pilgrim must pass in order to continue his journey. In this paper, I relate the

gatekeeper tradition to the whole group of beasts and beings. Looking at the roles of gatekeepers as a whole emphasizes the Pilgrim's upward spiritual and intellectual progression.

This study utilizes Aristotelian cosmology to map the Pilgrim's physical journey and employs the gatekeeper tradition to mark the Pilgrim's spiritual progression - using *Inferno* as a test case. By connecting Pseudo-Dionysius' definition of anagogy to Dante's "Four Levels of Interpretation," this paper illustrates the parallel images of the Pilgrim's spiritual and physical journeys through hell.

Cosmology and Theology

But my argument now rises from what is below up
to the transcendent, and the more it climbs,
the more language falters, and when it has
passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn
silent completely, since it will finally be at
one with him who is indescribable.

("Mystical Theology" 139)

At one time, hell was thought to be a physical and mappable place, a part of the earthly cosmology created with the universe. As Peter S. Hawkins writes:

In the early fourteenth century both hell and
purgatory could still be treated as matters of
geographical, or at least cosmological, science --
that is, treated as actual terrestrial sites.

("Circumference" 194)

What does Hawkins mean by "cosmological?" Cosmology refers to the study of the origins and the formation of the universe. By combining both Aristotelian and Ptolemaic understandings of the cosmos, Dante verbally maps these cosmological spaces, hell and purgatory, as the Pilgrim travels through them.

In canto 4 of *Inferno*, the Pilgrim sees Aristotle: "I raised my eyes a little higher / I saw the master sage of those who know, / sitting with his philosophic family" (4.130-132). Charles S. Singleton explains Aristotle's importance for Dante: "This is Aristotle, whose influence in Dante's time was so pervasive that he was called simply 'the Philosopher'" (Singleton 67, n.131). Aristotle, "the master sage of those who know," plays a key role in Dante's cosmological understanding and cannot be neglected in any study of the Pilgrim's universe.

Like Ptolemy and Aristotle, Dante places the earth at the center of the universe. According to Aristotle in *On the Heavens*, the sphere embodies the perfect shape; therefore, he attributes exactly that shape to the universe and the heavens: "The shape of Heaven must be spherical. That is most suitable to its substance, and is the primary shape in nature" (155). Aristotle depends upon this shape to form the concentric spheres upon which he bases his universe. These concentric spheres are also intimately related to the prime mover to which Aristotle attributes all natural movement.

For Aristotle, everything in the universe has a "natural" shape, which he explains must be spherical:

The same must be true of the body which is contiguous to it, for what is contiguous to the spherical is spherical, and also of those bodies which lie nearer the centre, for bodies which are surrounded by the spherical and touch it at all points must themselves be spherical. (*On the Heavens* 157)

The universe must also have a "natural" movement according to Aristotle (xvii). Aristotle's prime mover sets his universe in motion which "is caused by the primary agent" (351). This primary agent is, for Aristotle, the largest sphere. The farthest sphere from the center serves as the prime mover that spins all of the smaller spheres: "That the larger circle should have the higher speed is reasonable, seeing that the stars are dotted around one and the same centre" (187). For Dante, Aristotle's prime mover becomes the *primum mobile* -- the ninth and last of all concentric spheres. Past the prime mover sits the Empyrean where, for Dante, God resides.

Dante's spherical Aristotelian cosmology determines the Pilgrim's direction of travel - upward in a gyral motion, moving from concentric sphere to concentric sphere. Even though the Pilgrim seems to move down through hell, the nature of the Aristotelian universe designates all of his movement as upward.

Due to the concentric sphere pattern, the Pilgrim must move in a gyral motion in order to keep moving further into hell. Gyral movement, a combination of linear and circular motions, allows the Pilgrim to move from one level to the next and to experience the maximum of images in each level. Dante's Pilgrim starts in hell, at the center of this Ptolemaic and Aristotelian universe and moves ever upward through purgatory to reach heaven.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Aereopagite's "The Mystical Theology" and "The Celestial Hierarchy" strengthen the connection between the Aristotelian and Dantean universes. At first, Dionysius also attributes the movement of the universe to a "supreme Cause" which he views as the "perfect and unique cause of all things" ("Mystical Theology" 141). This "supreme Cause" resembles Aristotle's prime mover.

Dionysius' works focus on the movement from the material to the immaterial:

We see our human hierarchy, on the other hand, as our nature allows, pluralized in a great variety of perceptible symbols lifting us upward hierarchically until we are brought as far as we can be into the unity of divinization. ("Ecclesiastical Hierarchy" 197)

The Pilgrim's movement throughout the physical spaces from hell, to purgatory, to heaven structurally represents what Dionysius

explains as the movement toward anagogy. Dante uses the Dionysian concept of *uplifting*, anagogy, to illustrate the Pilgrim's upward movement into divine understanding. The Pilgrim must be purified in order to move as far as humanly possible into heaven, where he eventually lifts his eyes and looks into God's face. According to the quotation above, it takes understanding on the literal and figurative levels for the Pilgrim to gain the proper knowledge, which allows for his uplifting into heaven. By understanding his physical surroundings and their various levels of symbolic meaning, the Pilgrim is brought, if only for an instant, into unity with God.

Method of Interpretation

[T]he first sense is that which is contained in the letter, while there is another which is contained in what is signified by the letter.
(*"Letter to Can Grande"* 99)

A misreading of the *Divine Comedy*, in Dante's time, would have been a fatal error that could result in eternal damnation. If Teodolinda Barolini is correct in her assumption, Dante feared the implications of his text: "I do not think Dante was an unconscious visionary; on the contrary, I think he was fully aware, and afraid, of the implications that follow from believing what one writes is true" (Barolini 53). In creating an instructional guide to salvation, it would have been very important that Dante express the dangers of misreading. Since

the literal may in fact be figurative, it becomes imperative that the reader understands this and approaches the poem not with cynical apprehension but with an appropriate awareness of its didacticism. Dante tried to avoid this potential danger by explaining the different levels of interpretation and by making the distinction between literal and figurative meanings in the "Letter to Can Grande" the "Four Levels of Interpretation."

In the "Letter," Dante explains the approach readers should take in reading the *Divine Comedy* literally and figuratively and glosses the levels on which they should interpret his poem. In light of the "Letter to Can Grande," a critical analysis of the *Divine Comedy* may seem clearly laid out by the author, leaving little room for further interpretation:

For the first sense is that which is contained in the letter, while there is another which is contained in what is signified by the letter. The first is called literal, while the second is called allegorical, or moral or anagogical. ("Letter" 99)

Dante's letter, however, only begins to suggest the myriad meanings one may derive from the text, even following his own guidelines.

In his article "The Irreducible Vision," John Singleton describes the "Letter" as an image of the poet looking at his work from a distance: "Dante's journey to the Afterlife, viewed

from the outside, is a fiction -- as the poet himself could write of it, outside the poem, in his Letter to Can Grande" ("Irreducible Vision" 29). A consideration of the "Letter" as a solitary explanation of how to interpret the poem illustrates, as Singleton suggests, the poet's distance from the poem itself. When put into context with Dante's "Four Levels of Interpretation" and his emphasis on anagogy, however, the "Letter" stands as a monument to Dante's spiritual transcendence throughout the poem rather than his distance from it.

In the "Letter to Can Grande," Dante states that the poem's meaning works on two different levels and, thus, the poem should be read according to such a dichotomy. By stating that the poem works on both a literal level and an allegorical level, Dante clearly posits a need for interpretations on the same levels. In the "Letter," Dante grouped three levels of meaning into one category. In other words, he distinguishes between two particular groups: he calls one form of reading the literal and the other a mix of allegorical, moral and anagogical. More important than his shortened explanation in the "Letter to Can Grande" is his detailed theory in the "Four Levels of Interpretation," and which he wrote before the "Letter to Can

Grande."²

Dante's distinction between literal and figurative interpretations does not waver at any point in either of these treatises. Instead, his focus changes from the initial treatise to the "Letter to Can Grande." Dante wants his audience to understand the multiplicity of literary interpretation. Comparing the "Letter" and the "Levels of Interpretation" reveals a remarkable continuity. As the "Levels" can be employed to better understand the "Letter," so it can be utilized in interpreting the *Divine Comedy*. As Dante describes in both treatises, the reader must first comprehend the poem literally and then figuratively in order to be spiritually uplifted.

In Dante's "Four Levels of Interpretation," he establishes a four-tiered reading schema which proves even more useful than the "Letter to Can Grande." Prior to writing the "Letter," Dante defined the four levels of reading as literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical ("Levels" 112). Dante defines the literal as that which "does not extend beyond the letter of the fictive discourse" (112). At this moment, Dante describes the hierarchical structure of the poem:

²Robert S. Haller, editor and translator of *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri*, explains that Dante wrote the "Four Levels of Interpretation" approximately ten years before he wrote the famous "Letter to Can Grande" (112).

In bringing out this meaning [the anagogical], the literal should always come first, it being the meaning in which the others are contained and without which it would be impossible and irrational to come to an understanding of the others, particularly the allegorical. (113)

By emphasizing this interpretational schema, Dante describes the futility of attempting to approach an allegorical meaning or anagogical moment before one understands the literal sense. The first reading allows a reader to situate herself within the work itself. More intimate familiarity with a text allows a reader to approach what Dante states are more difficult, and more important, interpretations.

Next, Dante describes the allegorical: "The second is called allegorical, and is hidden under the cloak of these fables, a truth disguised under a beautiful lie" ("Levels" 112). As Domenico Pietropaolo understands:

The demand made on the reader by the text is, of course, that he relate hermeneutically to the words, that he see them as signs, and not apophantically, for to seek scientific knowledge of the words in the text would be to assume that the essence of discourse is self-contained and lies in its mere presence. (208)

This explanation by Pietropaolo describes the allegorical level of Dante's "Levels." Dante and Pietropaolo both emphasize the

importance of looking beyond the literal and understanding the Pilgrim's surroundings as signs and symbols of deeper meaning.

Dante explains that the third level is most beneficial for teachers. The poet states that moral interpretation plays its most important role in the lives of Christian educators: "It is this one which teachers should seek out with most diligence when going through texts, because of its usefulness" ("Levels" 113). Dante believed that religious teachers correctly relied upon this method because the moral interpretation would uncover applicable lessons in Biblical passages.

Finally, Dante explains anagogical interpretation:

The fourth sense is called the anagogical, or the "sense beyond." This sense occurs when a spiritual interpretation is to be given a text which, even though it is true on the literal level, represents the supreme things belonging to eternal glory by means of the things it represents. ("Four Levels of Interpretation 113)

This level refers to a spiritual interpretation that "even though it is true on the literal level, represents the supreme things belonging to eternal glory by means of the things it represents" (112). The concept of anagogy connects Dante's levels of reading to Dionysius' attribution of uplifting, from the material to the immaterial and to the concept of anagogy.

In this study, the *literal journey* refers to travel through physical space. Dante addresses this aspect of the journey in his "Letter to Can Grande": "The subject of the whole work, then, taken literally, is the state of souls after death, understood in a simple sense" (99). In order to learn about the state of souls after death, the Pilgrim must travel through hell's physical territory. The Pilgrim attains necessary knowledge by interacting with gatekeepers, guides, landscapes, and Virgil, his guide, in this physical place. Virgil, the symbol of Reason, guides the Pilgrim through hell from ignorance to knowledge. This anagogical, or transcendent, journey cannot be measured by levels, gates, rivers, or any other physical entities. Rather, it is , in itself, a measure of the moral state of the Pilgrim and the qualities necessary to "everyman" in order to gain enlightenment, grace, and eternal peace. In other words, "The subject is man, in the exercise of his free will, earning or becoming liable to the rewards or punishments of justice" ("Levels" 99). Therefore, the hierarchy of meanings parallels the Pilgrim's uplifting literal and transcendent journeys. It seems as if Dante creates the perfect metaphor for the state of souls after death. Everything, from the placement of souls and sins in hell to the movement of the Pilgrim from reason to wisdom, has literal, allegorical, and anagogical meaning.

Understanding the connections between Aristotle's cosmology, Dionysius' mystical theology, the "Letter to Can Grande," and the "Four Levels of Interpretation" helps the reader understand the poem's functioning on interpretational levels ranging from the literal to the multi-figurative. The poem seems to be based on perfect intellect, meaning that everything has a rational purpose or historical basis; therefore, an understanding of Dante's cosmological placement is imperative for an understanding of his theology. The Pilgrim understands the Christian theology as Dante would have, and the Pilgrim experiences the Aristotelian world as Dante did. From his awakening on the shore to his heavenly blindness and insight, the Pilgrim lives within Dante's Neo-Platonic / Aristotelian world.

Literal Place

How I entered there I cannot truly say,
 I had become so sleepy at the moment
 When I first strayed, leaving the path of truth...
Inf. 1.10-12

The places the Pilgrim visits, the borders he crosses, and the gatekeepers he encounters illustrate the literal meaning of his journey -- the state of souls after death. These factors act as the "material" in terms of his voyage from the material to the immaterial. In the literal landscape of *Inferno*, the Pilgrim learns about the nature of sin.

As noted above, this paper borrows the concept of the material and immaterial from Dionysius who describes God (the "Cause") and an immaterial heaven: "The Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. It is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight" ("Mystical Theology" 141). When the Pilgrim moves into this place of all things and nothing, he makes the transition into the immaterial that Pseudo-Dionysius describes. Before reaching this point, the Pilgrim, who describes himself as a lost soul at the beginning of *Inferno*, must find his way back to the path of righteousness. As the "Levels" shows, in order for the Pilgrim to transcend the material and move to the immaterial heaven, he must first experience the literal horrors of hell. From his initial steps into *Inferno's* gyre to his flight unto the heavens, Dante's Aristotelian worldview defines the Pilgrim's physical path. The gyral movement of the Pilgrim throughout hell marks the spherical figuration of the poem.

The intricate landscape not only confuses the reader, but also the Pilgrim at times. The Pilgrim does not fully understand how he comes to be in the infernal "dark wood" at the foot of a great mountain. He fears the unknown: "I found myself at the foot of a hill, / at the edge of the wood's beginning, down in the valley, / where I first felt my heart plunged deep in fear"

(*Inf.* 1.13-15). The Pilgrim must familiarize himself with his surroundings in order to learn from them; in this same way, so the reader must also become intimate with the poem's landscape in order to advance intellectually to the allegorical, and ultimately anagogical, levels of interpretation.

An understanding of Aristotelian cosmology also aids the reader in her search for a full interpretation of this poem. Aristotle determines the top and bottom of the universe and of the Earth: "By the length of the heaven I mean the distance between its poles, and I hold that one pole is the upper and one the lower" (*On the Heavens* 145). According to Dante, Jerusalem occupies the terrestrial pole of the Northern Hemisphere. At the opposite pole, Dante places the Mountain of Purgatory. Beyond the Mountain of Purgatory lies heaven. Therefore, in order for the soul to return to heaven it must move in an absolute upward direction, since Aristotle states that heaven occupies the uppermost position in the universe. The attached image (Fig. 1) illustrates the Pilgrim's upward path, continually moving toward the Southern Hemisphere and, thus, the Empyrean.

The gyre serves as the natural form for the Pilgrim's journey through hell. Dante followed cartographical convention and committed Earth's northern hemisphere to land and its southern hemisphere to water (fig. 1). The Pilgrim, traveling

from the realm of the living to the glory of heaven, must endure hell to reach the center of the earth. There, he continues in the same direction that he has been travelling, relative down. He actually moves absolute up, however, since he travels into a different hemisphere. At first it seems as if he converts to an upward motion, but in reality the Pilgrim has always been moving upward. This allows the Pilgrim to work his way up the mountain of Purgatory to the earthly paradise and ultimately into heaven.

Dante emphasizes directions throughout the *Divine Comedy*. In *Inferno*, Virgil describes the shape of their path and the direction of their movements through hell: "'You know this place is round, / and though your journey has been long, circling / toward the bottom, turning only to the left'" (*Inf.* 1.124-126). Nearing the end of his journey through hell, the Pilgrim also points out that, "still keeping to the left," they make their way deeper into the pit (*Inf.* 1.52).

Why does Dante place emphasis upon the directions in which the travelers move? Dante's preoccupation with direction is the key to his Pilgrim's movement through the Aristotelian cosmos. As John Freccero states: "For Dante . . . an absolute right and left existed: the 'right' and 'left' of the closed Aristotelian cosmos" ("Pilgrim in a Gyre" 72). This fact becomes important when trying to map the Pilgrim's precise movements throughout the poem. Understanding the direction he travels allows the

reader to see that his constant motion upward illustrates the Pilgrim's physical travel to heaven while the gatekeepers mark his spiritual uplifting.

According to Aristotle, "right" begins in the east where all motion in space begins. Thus, movement "to the right" literally means movement to the left, which is west, in order to return to its point of origin in the "right," which is east. According to Dante and Aristotle, clockwise movement was motion to the left, which would literally have been movement back to the right by way of going left ("Pilgrim in a Gyre" 73). Traveling clockwise meant moving to the left to get back to the right. Aristotle based this definition on the movement of the heavens, which "seemed to rise on his left (east), move to his right (west), to return after twelve hours to his left" ("Pilgrim in a Gyre" 73). Thus, Aristotle considered this version of clockwise movement (leftward) the direction of heavenly motion.

Following this, Dante concludes that terrestrial south should be designated as absolute/celestial up because, if it were, the cosmos would actually be moving to the right. As Freccero explains: "[T]hen indeed the sun and all the other stars would move counter-clockwise, rising on the right and setting on the left, to return once more to the *right*" ("Pilgrim in a Gyre" 73). The key to understanding this confusing

argument comes with the determination that, for Dante at least, terrestrial south was "up" and terrestrial north was "down" (fig. 1).

This works in accord with the Pilgrim's movement throughout the poem. According to Aristotle's understanding of up and down, north and south, the Pilgrim indeed moves upward the whole time. This explains why, when reaching Satan's waist after climbing down his body, Virgil reverses their direction and begins to climb up the beast's leg. Being frozen in the center of the Earth, Satan's waist acts as a kind of equator. Thus, when passing it, the pair would have been passing into the Southern Hemisphere. The fact that Satan's waist serves as an equator explains why Virgil reverses their direction. This reversal of motion allows them to climb up Satan's leg on the other side (figs. 2 & 3). Although his head points in different directions during the journey (toward the north in the Northern Hemisphere and toward the south in the southern), the Pilgrim moves in the same direction throughout the whole poem. Once crossing the satanic equator, Virgil and the Pilgrim move progressively "south," up the mountain and out into the empyrean.

In hell, Satan seems to be frozen right-side up with his head sticking vertically up into the center of the pit. This seems to contradict Christian descriptions of Satan's fall from

heaven. If hell ended in the deepest pit, and if the Mountain of Purgatory were not on the other side, then Satan would be right-side up in hell instead of having fallen headfirst. When looked at from the Aristotelian perspective, with the southern hemisphere being the home of Mount Purgatory and the closest peak to heaven, Dante places Satan in the natural position. Since he fell face-first from heaven, he would have landed headfirst at the center of the earth, with his feet sticking up in the Southern Hemisphere (figs. 2 & 3). His fall created hell in the Northern Hemisphere with the worst sinners being closest to him at the center of the earth.

Although Dante's literal journey complies with the Aristotelian universe, it also works in unison with Christian ideals of the time. If readers must see the poem on something other than the literal level, however the journey through hell must be understood as something more than a gyral movement down to the center of the earth.

Figuratively speaking, the Pilgrim must begin at the most basic level in order to appreciate his rise to the highest point. The Pilgrim himself acknowledges that at the point in his life when the journey begins he has strayed from the righteous path: "Midway along the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood, / for I had wandered off from the straight path" (*Inf.* 1.1-3). John Freccero explains the logic

of the Pilgrim's starting at the lowest point rather than what he calls a neutral zone, Purgatory: "The Christian does not begin from a zero-point on his journey, but rather from the world of generation and corruption, a topsy-turvy world of inflated pride where directions and values are both inverted" ("Pilgrim in a Gyre" 85). As Dante also states: "The subject of the whole work, then, taken literally, is the state of souls after death" ("Letter" 99). Therefore, in this world, the Pilgrim sees the effects of true and horrible sin; the effects of a confused use of free will given to everyone by God. Reason allows him to see the horrors of hell and to understand the consequences of sin, and he does so by spiraling upward through its literal spaces and experiencing sin firsthand.

While the Aristotelian conception of the universe illustrates the Pilgrim's literal upward movement, the ancient gatekeeper tradition marks the Pilgrim's spiritual and intellectual uplifting. Gatekeepers have a long history of interrogating souls in the afterlife. In her book, *Seek to See Him*, April DeConick states that ancient Egyptians believed that "the soul could expect to be interrogated when it attempts to pas through the seven 'Arits' or forts" (50). She uses the *First Apocalypse of James*, where "Jesus tells James the proper responses to the angelic guards," as a basis for the assertion that the gatekeeper tradition greatly affected the early

Christians (51). It is natural, since *The Divine Comedy* is a Christian poem, that such beasts and beings also mark the Pilgrim's journey.

DeConick establishes three main reasons for the gatekeepers' questioning the soul: to establish identity, to test the soul's knowledge, and to demonstrate the purity of the soul (51). Espousing these intentions enables the gatekeepers to distinguish between those souls who are worthy of entering the holy space and those who are not. As souls attempt to move toward God, gatekeepers stand watch at symbolic borders and make sure that they are worthy of passage.

Just as souls in the apocalyptic tradition were questioned by gatekeepers before they were allowed entrance to sacred spaces, so too is the Pilgrim. He must cross a series of borders and answer the harsh inquiries of gatekeepers in order to keep moving. After the guards question the living soul, they typically carry or escort him to the next level of his voyage. Dante's gatekeepers signify the Pilgrim's spiritual uplifting.

The Pilgrim's Journey

O just revenge of God! How awesomely
 You should be feared by everyone who reads
 These truths that were revealed to my own eyes!
 (Inf. 14.16-18)

After considering the Pilgrim's position in the universe, what he learns from those surroundings must also be examined.

As Peter S. Hawkins suggests, in order to familiarize himself and his readers with his position in that universe, the Pilgrim charts his pilgrimage from sin to redemption. In Hawkins' words: "The purpose of Dante's map-making, however, is more than a description of the physical world as shaped by Christian theology; the purpose of the poem is the charting of pilgrimage" ("Out Upon Circumference" 197). Figuratively, Dante makes a map of salvation in order to instruct future readers about the correct pathway toward heaven.

In order for the poem to be taken as a serious account of the Pilgrim's ascent into heaven, the poet must do more than map the journey. Mapping the literal space and then moving the Pilgrim through that space have little impact, if the Pilgrim does not have the knowledge to understand that place. As Dante himself warns, the reading and rereading of this poem must take place on several different levels, each new understanding becoming less literal and more abstract, mirroring the Pilgrim's increasing understanding.

The Pilgrim's surroundings illustrate the literal meaning of the poem, the state of souls after death. Douglas Biow also explains hell as the Pilgrim's natural starting place: "In Dante's poem, one must pass through the impure in order to arrive at knowledge of the self and of the higher truths that move the universe and govern the laws of hell" (48). The

Pilgrim cannot physically handle the powerful light of heaven until he arrives at the acceptable levels of knowledge and purity that are signified by his successful efforts to appease the gatekeepers.

The Pilgrim encounters many souls in hell who provide imperative knowledge about the nature of sin. A complete understanding of this can be gained by examining the gatekeepers and events surrounding every fourth canto, and those on either side, as starting points. At the beginning of canto 5, the Pilgrim approaches Minòs, the judge of all sinners who enter hell: "There stands Minòs grotesquely, and he snarls, / examining the guilty at the entrance; / he judges and dispatches, tail in coils" (*Inf.*5.4-6). Minòs attempts to discourage the Pilgrim from such a mentally arduous journey: "'O you who come to the place where pain is host' / . . . 'be careful how you enter and whom you trust / it's easy to get in, but don't be fooled!'" (*Inf.*5.16-20). Virgil explains to Minòs that the journey has been divinely sanctioned and the Pilgrim must continue: "Do not attempt to stop his fated journey; / it is so willed there where the power is / for what is willed; that's all you need to know" (5.22-24). This portion of the poem establishes God's invitation to the Pilgrim, thus validating his passage past Minòs and his trip through hell, purgatory, and heaven.

The first sinners whom the Pilgrim encounters are the lustful. After entering this circle of hell, the Pilgrim recounts the reason he must stop there: "I learned that to this place of punishment / all those who sin in lust have been condemned, / those who make reason slave to appetite" (*Inf.* 5.37-39). Here, he speaks to Paolo and Francesca, whose misreading and misguided desire led to their torment. Francesca's sorrowful story and weeping cause the Pilgrim to feel pity for them: "[I]n such a way that pity blurred my senses; I swooned as though to die" (5.140-141). At this point in the journey, the Pilgrim's swoon emphasizes his inability to see past Francesca's sad story and recognize the fault of her sin. Although the Pilgrim's reaction to Francesca illustrates his immature knowledge and positioning at the beginning of the journey, his movement past Minòs suggests the pilgrimage's necessary and unavoidable completion.

The Pilgrim crosses another significant border in canto 8. At this point, the Pilgrim again speaks of gaining knowledge from Virgil: "I turned to that vast sea of human knowledge: / 'What signal is this? And the other flame, / what does it answer? And who's doing this?'" (*Inf.* 8.7-9). By labeling Virgil as "that vast sea of knowledge," the Pilgrim establishes his guide's role as instructor. Although Virgil was a pagan, his role as the "vast sea of knowledge" allows him to serve as the

guide to the Pilgrim's progression from knowledge to wisdom. The Pilgrim asks his guide, who provides him with much insight throughout *Inferno*, to explain the signals coming from Dis' gates. Virgil tells the Pilgrim that the signals summon Phlegyas, the boatman of Styx.

Phlegyas serves as the gatekeeper who facilitates the Pilgrim's passage over the river. He mistakes the Pilgrim for a sinner whom he must transport to the lower regions of hell:

"'Aha, I've got you now, you wretched soul!'" (*Inf.*8.18). Even though the Pilgrim's human soul is "wretched," Virgil again warns the gatekeeper of the potential harm in trying to divert the Pilgrim from his path: "'Phlegyas, Phlegyas, this time you shout in vain,' / my lord responded" (8.19-20). Once the Pilgrim boards Phlegyas' skiff, a soul arises out of the water and questions the Pilgrim's identity: "'Who are you, who come before your time?'" (8.33). The questions the Pilgrim faces make sense in terms of Christian tradition, in which gatekeepers serve to establish the identity of souls, especially living souls, in hell and heaven.

Much like the gatekeepers, the river in canto 8 acts as a border the Pilgrim must cross in order to prove his attainment of knowledge and complete his journey. Throughout canto 7, Virgil teaches the Pilgrim about the sin of anger: "And the good teacher said: 'My son, now see / the souls of those that anger

overcame; / and I ask you to believe me'" (*Inf.*7.115-117). The crossing of the river immediately after this learning session illustrates the Pilgrim's new level of knowledge about sin. Without Phlegyas, the Pilgrim would be unable to cross the river, but his passage over the river symbolizes his heightened understanding. Therefore, both Phlegyas and the river serve as important obstacles that must be surpassed in order to advance mentally and physically through the space.

After the Pilgrim crosses Styx, he comes to the Gates of Dis. The arch-heretics, who disputed Christian doctrine while alive, reside inside the city. They are deeper in hell than some of the lesser sinners because of their conscious opposition to Christianity. Thus, it is not surprising that they attempt to keep the human Pilgrim out of their realm. First they slam the doors in Virgil's face, then the Three Furies come down to scare the travelers away from the gates: "'Medusa, come, we'll turn him [Pilgrim] into stone,'/ they shouted all together glaring down" (9.52-54). The two again surpass these obstacles, only this time they receive divine help: "[I] saw more than a thousand fear-shocked souls / in flight, clearing the path of one who came / walking the Styx, his feet dry on the water" (9.79-80). The angelic messenger who walks on water reprimands the Furies and the other sinners for refusing the Pilgrim's entrance to their level of hell: "'Why do you stubbornly resist

that will whose end can never be denied and which, / more than one time, increased your suffering?" (9.94-96). The angel threatens the sinners with God's wrath, which has already placed them in hell. These actions, both horrific and angelic, work together to teach the Pilgrim about God's omnipotence.

In Canto 12, the Pilgrim and his guide encounter the gatekeeper of hell's seventh circle, where the violent sinners reside. The furious Minotaur presides over this circle and serves as another bestial obstacle along the Pilgrim's path. Virgil insults the bull, and this throws the animal into a fit of rage: "[H]e knows he has been dealt the mortal blow, / and cannot run but jumps and twists and turns" (*Inf.* 12.23-23). Virgil and the Pilgrim use the Minotaur's own violence in order to outwit the beast.

Once the two conquer the beast, "quenched in its own rage," they quickly run past him into the chamber of the violent (12.33). Using the Minotaur's own violence against himself in the circle of the violent comments upon the futility of violence in general. The Pilgrim recognizes how they beat the animal by consuming him with fury, takes note of this fit of rage, and sees that violence can consume emotions and intelligence. At the beginning of the next canto, Virgil reminds the Pilgrim of the lesson he has just learned about violence: "[T]he world / has more than once renewed itself in chaos" (12.42-43). His

passage past the Minotaur illustrates the successful completion of this lesson.

At this point in their journey, the two come upon many centaurs shooting flaming arrows at the foreign travelers. The centaurs stand knee deep in the Phlegethon, another infernal river. Again, the centaurs, acting as gatekeepers, question and threaten the Pilgrim: "'You there, / on your way down here, what torture are you seeking? / Speak where you stand, if not, I draw my bow" (*Inf.* 12.61-63). Virgil requests a particular centaur and states he will only answer to that specific beast, Chiron. The centaur notices that the Pilgrim's feet move all that he touches and that he must be a living soul.

Virgil again explains that the Pilgrim is indeed a living soul that must be guided through hell. Upon hearing this, the centaurs become friendly towards the travelers: "Chiron looked over his right breast and said / to Nessus, 'You go, guide them as they ask, / and if another troop protests, disperse them!'" (*Inf.* 12.97-99). An article by Robert Hollander refutes some confusion about Nessus' role in the Pilgrim's journey that Hollander attributes to differing translations: "Despite the evidence and confusion found in many receptions of the concluding narrative action of *Inferno* XII, there can be little doubt that Dante intended us to understand that he was carried across Phlegethon on the back of Nessus" ("Horseback?" 288).

Despite this confusion, Hollander's article and Musa's translation clearly mark Nessus as facilitating the Pilgrim's journey.

At this point, the centaurs act as gatekeepers and also enable the Pilgrim's travel through the underworld. Thus, these gatekeepers' roles are twofold: they must not only sit in judgement of the Pilgrim but also help him cross the physical barriers of his journey. Both of these actions symbolize the Pilgrim's worthiness and intelligence as it grows throughout his journey.

The Pilgrim next reaches the Great Barrier that leads down to the eighth circle of hell. Since the Great Barrier is devoid of any bridges or paths, it can only be crossed by air travel (fig. 2). In order to move to the next level, Virgil summons a flying beast to carry the two down. Virgil takes a cord the Pilgrim wears and throws it over the edge of a cliff to summon Geryon, a bestial symbol of fraud. Mark Musa is one critic who believes that the Pilgrim's giving up his sash symbolizes his newfound humility. In his notes to *Inferno*, Musa explains the cord's function: "It is at the command of his guide, Reason, that he frees himself of the cord, to rely on him fully in the coming encounter with Fraud" (*Inf.* 16 n.106-108). By taking the Pilgrim's cord, Virgil forces his companion to rely humbly upon his guide and their bestial transportation. At this point, the

Pilgrim learns humility because he must rely completely upon another creature to carry him to the next level.

Geryon answers the call and appears at the cliff: "His face was the face of any honest man, / it shone with such a look of benediction; / and all the rest of him was serpentine" (*Inf.* 17.10-12). This symbol of fraud carries the travelers down to the *malebolge*, where the sins of fraud are punished. Before the Pilgrim rides on Geryon's back, he must conquer his fear of the fraudulent beast who has "the face of any honest man" (17.10). Since the cord symbolizes the Pilgrim's humility, it also marks his progressive knowledge. Geryon then works as a gatekeeper because the Pilgrim must throw the sash in order for the beast to approach. The sash serves as proof to Geryon that the Pilgrim is worthy of the flight. Again, the gatekeeper facilitates travel for the Pilgrim because without Geryon the Great Barrier would have been impassable for the living soul.

Geryon takes the Pilgrim down to hell's eighth circle, which consists of the *malebolge*. Each individual *malebolgia* houses fraudulent sinners. In canto 28, the Pilgrim encounters Bertran de Born, one of the schismatics. This sinner teaches the Pilgrim about *contrapasso*, whereby sins committed on earth directly correlate with their punishments in hell. Martha Himmelfarb emphasizes the importance of this type of punishment: "Measure-for-measure punishments are a significant component of

the punishments in most of the tours of hell" (*Tours of Hell* 82). Bertran claims to be the perfect illustration of *contrapasso*: "Because I cut the bonds of those so joined, / I bear my head cut off from its life-source, / which is back there, alas, with its trunk" (*Inf.* 28.139-141). The Pilgrim's encounter with this sinner teaches him about *contrapasso* and the fitting punishments of hell.

The Pilgrim would not have understood the implications of this statement without having seen first-hand the other sinners enduring their proper punishments; for instance, the slothful of the seventh circle who live in a pit of heavy slime, the suicides who lose the rights to their physical bodies in hell and become trees, and the flatterers in the second *malebolgia* who are up to their faces in feces. All of the punishments in hell, as Bertran explains, fit the sins committed on earth. Thus, after passing via Geryon into the eighth circle of hell, the Pilgrim gains even more knowledge about the nature of sin and punishment.

Finally, in canto 31, Nimrod lowers the pair into the lowest pit of hell. Again, Virgil must ask the giant to provide the services, and he facilitates their crossing the final border in hell. The giant, however, does not ask anything of the Pilgrim. Instead, Virgil forces the Pilgrim to learn for himself in these last stages of their infernal journey:

"'Because you try to penetrate the shadows,' he said to me, 'from much too far away, / you confuse the truth with your imagination'" (*Inf.* 31.22-24). Virgil reprimands the Pilgrim for trying to see, or understand, something before he is ready.

Virgil then tells the Pilgrim that in time he will see and understand all that he wishes: "You will see clearly when you reach that place / how much the eyes may be deceived by distance, / and so, just push ahead a little more" (31.25-27). The Pilgrim's swoon in this canto reminds the reader of the pity in the fifth canto where the Pilgrim "swooned as though to die" for Francesca (5.141). Virgil's comment about the eyes being easily deceived subtly reminds the Pilgrim about the danger of pity. Sympathizing with the sinners could stall the progression of the journey. The Pilgrim must learn not to feel pity before Virgil will guide him into the pit of hell. Distinguishing between deceit and honesty becomes the last lesson the Pilgrim learns in hell; the worst he could do would be to pity Satan.

In canto 31, Virgil warns the Pilgrim about being deceived; then, in canto 32 the Pilgrim illustrates his newfound lack of pity for these sinners. Where the sins of betrayal are punished, the Pilgrim walks across the frozen river of Caina. In this river, the traitors reside frozen up to their necks. One sinner immediately warns the Pilgrim not to step on any of the heads, but the Pilgrim ignores this warning: "[B]y fate or

chance or willfully perhaps, / I do not know - but stepping among the heads, / my foot kicked hard against one of those faces" (32.76-78). This instinctual, but learned, action illustrates the Pilgrim's lack of pity. He can now walk alone across the frozen river of Caina and understands the danger in pitying the horrible sinners of hell. As the Pilgrim describes in canto 33 after refusing to help yet another sinner: "To be mean to him was a generous reward" (33.150). By the end of *Inferno*, the Pilgrim is no longer moved to swoon over these poor sinners; instead, he treats them with contempt and proves that he is ready to endure the process of purgation.

Throughout *Inferno*, the Pilgrim must cross particular borders and pass certain gatekeepers. Many times the gatekeepers facilitate the Pilgrim's travel over the different borders, increasing their duties from simply validating his worth to providing him transport to the next level. The gatekeepers literally move the Pilgrim from place to place throughout hell, and their positioning marks the knowledge the Pilgrim attains from the sinners surrounding them.

Conclusion

We climbed, he first and I behind, until,
 through a small round opening ahead of us
 I saw the lovely things the heavens hold,
 and we came out to see once more the stars.
(Inf.34.136-139)

This project uses *Inferno* as a test case for the multi-layered construction of the poem and its interpretations; this schema also applies to *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. In *Purgatorio*, the Pilgrim continues to learn about the nature of sin through the process of its purgation. He moves up the mountain of Purgatory and cleanses his soul in the process. Angels stand as guards to the different borders throughout this portion of the poem. These angels remove the seven Ps, for the seven deadly sins, from the Pilgrim's forehead, and their removal marks his purgation. In *Paradiso*, the Pilgrim reaches heaven where Beatrice becomes his guide. In the empyrean, the Pilgrim understands that God's love moves the sun and other stars. Aristotle's concentric spheres mark the borders the Pilgrim must cross in this section. Continuing the study of gatekeepers, borders, and guides throughout the other two canticles would further and more fully illustrate the model this project posits.

Dante's "Four Levels of Interpretation" establishes the *polysemous* nature of the poem, where everything from its literal space to its final anagogical moment can be interpreted in different ways. For Dante, the most important aspect of

interpretation is moving from literal understanding to spiritual uplifting. He wrote the poem not only as an explanation of the Pilgrim's progression toward salvation but also as a guide for the reader's purification. Like reason, however, the poem can only uplift the reader so far; after that, the reader must individually advance to the anagogical level in order to reach the ultimate moment of divine wisdom.

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