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

by Shelley Manning

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 establishes the concept of *polysemy*, which means “many levels.” 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 interpretation as well. Although most critics rely upon the “Letter,” I find his “Four Levels of Interpretation” more useful. The combination of *polysemy* and hierarchical interpretation is key to this study of the poem.

Dante’s Aristotelian and Ptolemaic universe directs the Pilgrim’s arduous path, while his Pseudo-Dionysian theology helps construct the Pilgrim’s journey toward and within heaven. According to Aristotle’s situation of the cosmos, Dante’s Pilgrim must first travel downward in order to travel upward into heaven. This continual upward motion relates to Dionysius’ concept of spiritual uplifting into the immaterial heaven, anagogy. Theologically speaking, the Pilgrim’s entire journey, both spiritually and physically, moves him upward to heaven and the understanding of salvation. Dionysius describes the anagogical moment: “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 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.

Dante intended the poem to be an instructional device for Christian salvation. According to his “Four Levels of Interpretation,” Dante also understood that readers must interpret the poem in various ways in order for them to arrive at the same moment of full intellection that the Pilgrim reaches in *Paradiso*.

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 traveling through heaven to ask their names and their reasons for being there. The gatekeepers illustrate the Pilgrim’s increasing knowledge of sin.

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 Dionysius’ definition of anagogy with Dante’s “Four Levels of Interpretation,” this paper illustrates the parallel images of the Pilgrim’s spiritual and physical journeys.

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. By combining both Aristotelian and Ptolemaic understandings of the universe, Dante verbally maps these cosmological spaces, hell, purgatory, and heaven, as the Pilgrim travels through them.

Aristotle plays a key role in Dante's understanding of the universe and cannot be neglected in any study of the Pilgrim's surroundings. Charles S. Singleton even explains that Dante simply called Aristotle "The Philosopher." Like Ptolemy and Aristotle, Dante places the Earth at the center of the spherical universe. According to Aristotle, the sphere embodies the perfect shape: "The shape of Heaven must be spherical. That is most suitable to its substance, and is the primary shape in nature" (*On the Heavens* 155). Aristotle depends upon this shape to form the concentric spheres upon which he bases his universe: "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" (157). Gyral movement, a combination of both linear and circular motion, allows the Pilgrim to move between Aristotle's concentric spheres.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Aereopagite's "The Mystical Theology" and "The Celestial Hierarchy" help connect the Aristotelian and Dantean universes. Dionysius' works focus on the movement from the material to the immaterial. The Pilgrim's movement throughout the physical spaces from hell, to purgatory, to heaven structurally represents what Dionysius explains as anagogical movement, or spiritual uplifting. Dante uses this Dionysian concept of *uplifting* to illustrate the Pilgrim's movement into divine understanding as he reaches heaven. The Pilgrim must be purified in order to move as far as humanly possible, and eventually lift his eyes and looks into God's face. 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 for 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. Dante tried avoiding this potential danger by distinguishing between the different levels in the “Four Levels of Interpretation.” In this work, he establishes a four-tiered reading schema: “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” (“Levels” 113). According to Dante, interpretation works hierarchically and moves upward from the literal to the figurative.

Dante defines the four levels of reading as literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical (112). In describing the interpretational levels, Dante also describes the futility of attempting to approach an allegorical meaning or anagogical moment before one understands the literal sense. The literal 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. Upon understanding the literal sense, the reader can then progress to allegorical interpretation. In describing the allegorical Dante emphasizes the importance of looking beyond the literal and understanding the Pilgrim’s surroundings as signs and symbols of deeper meaning. According to Dante, the third level is most beneficial for teachers. Dante believed that religious teachers correctly relied upon this method because the moral interpretation would uncover applicable lessons in Biblical passages. Finally, Dante explains the anagogical level of 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” (“Levels” 113). As stated earlier, Dionysius understood anagogy to be spiritual

uplifting. Dante expands Dionysius' definition to explain his final level of interpretation. Dante believed that anagogical interpretation could uplift the reader's soul and spiritual understanding.

The connections between Aristotle's cosmology, Dionysius' mystical theology, and the "Four Levels of Interpretation" help the reader understand the poem on all levels, from the literal to the figurative. The Pilgrim understands Christian theology as Dante would have, and the Pilgrim walks through the Aristotelian world as Dante did.

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 Douglas Biow suggests: "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 must familiarize himself with his surroundings in order to learn from them. In this same way, the reader must also become intimate with the poem's landscape in order to intellectually advance to the allegorical, and ultimately anagogical, levels of interpretation.

Dante followed cartographical convention and committed Earth's Northern Hemisphere to land and its Southern Hemisphere to water with one exception. According to Dante, Jerusalem occupies the terrestrial pole of the Northern Hemisphere. At the opposite pole, amidst an uncharted sea, Dante places the Mountain of Purgatory. Beyond the mountain, lie heaven and, thus, the empyrean. Therefore, in order for the Pilgrim to return to heaven he must move in an absolute upward direction through hell, up the mountain, and ultimately out into the empyrean.

Dante's preoccupation with direction throughout the *Divine Comedy* 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). 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. 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. 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” (figs. 1 & 2).

The Pilgrim’s movement throughout the poem adheres to this understanding of the cosmos. According to Aristotle’s definitions of up and down, north and south, the Pilgrim indeed moves upward the whole time. Since Satan 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. His fall created hell in the Northern Hemisphere, with the worst sinners being closest to him at the center of the earth, and the Mountain of Purgatory in the Southern Hemisphere. This explains why, after the Pilgrim climbs down Satan’s body and reaches his waist, which acts as a kind of equator, he reverses directions and begins to climb up the beast’s leg. For the Pilgrim, passing Satan’s waist also meant passing into the Southern Hemisphere. Although the Pilgrim’s head points in different directions during the journey, towards the north in the Northern Hemisphere and towards the south in the southern, the Pilgrim moves in the same direction throughout the whole poem.

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 pass 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 had filtered into early Christianity (51). It is natural, since *The Divine Comedy* is a Christian poem, that such beasts also mark the Pilgrim’s journey.

DeConick establishes three main reasons for the gatekeepers’ questioning the souls: to establish identity, to test the soul’s knowledge, and to demonstrate the purity of the soul (51). Espousing each of these three 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

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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 sinners around the gatekeepers in hell teach the Pilgrim about the nature of sin, and the Pilgrim's successful passage past the gatekeepers mark his intellectual progression. Although there are many gatekeepers and borders that mark the Pilgrim's attainment of knowledge, today I will only be discussing a few of the prime examples.

Minòs, the judge at the entrance of hell, attempts to discourage the Pilgrim from such an arduous journey. Virgil explains to Minòs, however, 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" (*Inf.* 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.

The first sinners whom the Pilgrim encounters are the lustful. 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" (*Inf.* 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.

In canto 8, the Pilgrim boards Phlegyas' skiff. As the boatman begins to chart the Pilgrim and Virgil across the river Styx, a soul arises out of the water and questions the Pilgrim's identity: "'Who are you, who come before your time?'" (*Inf.* 8.33). This soul seeks to determine the Pilgrim's identity. This mirrors the Christian tradition, in which gatekeepers serve to establish the identity of souls, especially living souls, in hell and heaven.

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 his words throw the animal into a fit of rage. Virgil and the Pilgrim use the Minotaur's own violence against himself, in the circle of the violent, in order to defeat the beast. The Pilgrim recognizes how they beat the animal by consuming him with fury 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. His passage past the Minotaur illustrates the successful completion of this lesson.

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. In order to move to this 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 states: "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 humbly rely 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 takes the Pilgrim down to hell's eighth circle, which consists of the *malebolge*, where the fraudulent sinners are punished. 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 states that "measure for measure" punishments are common in journeys through hell. Bertran de Born states: "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" (28.139-141). According to this statement, Bertran claims to be a perfect illustration of *contrapasso*.

The Pilgrim would not have understood the implications of Bertran's 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.

In canto 31, Virgil warns the Pilgrim about being deceived. In canto 32, however, 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. The Pilgrim ignores one sinner's warning not to step on any of their heads: "[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" (*Inf.* 32.76-78). This intuitive, but learned, action illustrates the Pilgrim's lack of pity. 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.

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 world and its interpretations within Dante's *Divine Comedy*; additionally, this schema 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 *Ps* 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 illustrate the model this project posits.

Dante's "Four Levels of Interpretation" establishes the *polysemous* nature of interpretation, where everything from the poem's 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.