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Gods of War

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Dante and Virgil: The Road Less Traveled By

Composed by Dante Alighieri in the early 1300s, the *Inferno* describes the journey of Dante the pilgrim through Hell. Written in terza rima, the famous Roman poet, Virgil, guides the pilgrim on a steep descent deep into Hell's nine circles. On this quest, both travelers encounter Hell's numerous dwellers. Starting with the cowardly neutrals and the pre-Christian and unbaptized in Limbo, such as Homer and Horace, their journey ends in the horrific frozen landscape of Judecca where Judas Iscariot is trapped inside Lucifer's mouth in the lowest pocket of Hell. The relationship between the pilgrim and Virgil drives the central physical progression of the *Inferno*. Both adventurers also experience an inward transformation as they descend. For the pilgrim, his journey through Hell parallels his own increasing understanding of sin and God's salvation. Starting the journey in a dark wood, the pilgrim is ignorant and outwardly fearful of the world. This mimics the pilgrim's initial relationship with Virgil. The pilgrim admires Virgil as a leader who represents the classical world that champions strength without fear. In turn, Virgil's relationship to the pilgrim works in an antithetical fashion. The celebrated poet had already experienced Hell's inner workings. Virgil wrote of Aeneas' journey into Hell as far as the City of Dis in pagan times. However, Virgil is not all-powerful. He is unable to enter the City of Dis until a heavenly messenger comes to the rescue. Virgil's limitations start to equalize the growing relationship with the pilgrim that started as a simple master and follower relationship. Indeed, while the pilgrim learns of the countless sinners and their *contrapassos*, Virgil begins to

understand the lessons of Christian compassion in order to bring the pilgrim across an increasingly fraught physical environment.

The early relationship between the pilgrim and Virgil is one of a mentor and mentee. Upon meeting Virgil, the pilgrim declares that “You are my master and my author” (Canto I:85). Virgil is the experienced leader while the pilgrim is the passive follower. The pilgrim even questions his ability to complete the trip by stating: “I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul,” alluding to the famous prior travelers to Hell (Canto II:31-32). The pilgrim suggests that he is not an epic hero but is instead an everyman. Virgil asserts leadership from the beginning. In the second circle, Minos, the half-serpent judge of all sinners, attempts to block Virgil’s and the pilgrim’s path. In response, Virgil states “But why protest? Do not attempt to block his [the pilgrim’s] fated path” (Canto V:21-22). Virgil’s commands overpower Minos, who ultimately steps aside. In the third circle, the travelers are again challenged, but this time by Cerberus, the vicious three-headed dog. To overcome Cerberus, Virgil grabs a fistful of earth and throws it at the dog. This action “stunned the spirits” of Cerberus and allowed the travelers to continue unhindered (Canto VI:32-33). Virgil’s fearless method of conquering the guardians of Hell continues to work against the demon, Plutus, and the boatman, Phlegyas. In each encounter, Virgil displays the characteristics of personal heroism prolific in the ancient Greek and Roman epics. The epitome of Virgil’s approach occurs when he rebukes the pilgrim by saying, “for he who rests on down or under covers cannot come to fame” (Canto XXIV:47-48). In contrast to Virgil’s disregard of the souls in Hell, the pilgrim initially shows compassion to them. After listening to the story of Francesca in the second circle and how love overpowered her reason, the pilgrim states: “Francesca, your afflictions move me to tears of sorrow and of pity” (Canto V:116-117). While in a conversation with the suicidals, the pilgrim states “so much pity takes my heart” (Canto

XIII:84). The pilgrim feels “impatience to embrace” the sinners suffering from fire and brimstone in the seventh circle (Canto XVI:51). Virgil feels none of that compassion. He focuses on personal courage, such as when he rebukes the pilgrim by stating: “Your soul has been assailed by cowardice” (Canto II:45). Virgil later even rebukes the pilgrim’s compassion and calls him a “fool” for bringing “passion to God’s judgment” when the pilgrim shows sympathy for the sinners (Canto XX:26-29). Virgil’s reprimands both solidify an initial master-follower relationship and show his lack of compassion for the sinners.

The travelers’ relationship starts to transform into one between two more equal individuals as Virgil experiences setbacks. After reaching the Gate of Dis, Virgil attempts to access the city. After an initial attempt, the pilgrim recounts that “our adversaries, slammed the gates in my lord’s face; and he remained outside” (Canto VIII:115-116). Blocked at the City of Dis, Virgil’s blunt approach is unsuccessful for the first time. Not coincidentally, the City of Dis was also the location where Aeneas was stopped. The two travelers are only able to continue due to Christian intervention, which was not available to Aeneas. A heavenly messenger appears who, like Christ, walked on water. The messenger “with a wand” opened the gate “for there was no resistance” (Canto IX:89-90). Virgil experiences the first limitation of his leadership and is saved because the pilgrim’s journey is willed by God. Virgil again sustains a setback in the *malebolge* that contains the barrators. In this pocket, Virgil asks the chief demon, Malacoda, who oversees the torture of the barrators, for directions. Virgil appears overly confident and as a result Malacoda almost succeeds in capturing the two travelers through deceptive directions. Virgil later realizes his mistake and admits to the pilgrim: “He who hooks sinners over there gave us a false account of this affair” (Canto XXIII:140-141). For the second time, Virgil’s confidence fails to work. Virgil retains his leadership throughout the *Inferno*. But these instances start to equalize

the relationship between the pair and show the limits of Virgil's classical strengths of courage and confidence. At the same time, the pilgrim's charity and forgiveness begin to ballast Virgil's limitations.

At times, the pilgrim aims to align his actions more closely to Virgil's ideals of heroic vigor. While crossing into the pouch containing thieves, the pilgrim comments that "I spoke as we went on, not to seem weak" (Canto XXIV:64). For his part, Virgil becomes more forgiving of the pilgrim. While in the eighth circle of falsifiers, Virgil lashes out at the pilgrim for speaking too much to the souls. However, moments later, Virgil apologizes to the pilgrim saying, "release yourself from all remorse and see that I am always at your side" (Canto XXX:144-145). Virgil demonstrates a degree of forgiveness he has learned while descending into Hell's abyss. Indeed, as the two travelers pivot closer to one another, their relationship progresses to one built on trust and almost familial bonds. While escaping the deceitful demons, Virgil snatches the pilgrim "instantly, just as the mother...will lift her son...she cares more for the child than herself" (Canto XXIII:37-41). Moreover, the pilgrim does not think less of Virgil for failing to lead him through the Gate of Dis: "My master, you who can defeat all things except for those tenacious demons who tried to block us at the entryway" (Canto XIV:43-45). Virgil becomes more understanding of the pilgrim and of the salvation he seeks. The pilgrim adopts Virgil's exhortations for courage and at the same time relies completely upon Virgil to avoid succumbing to the horrors at the bottom of Hell. There, the weight of evil burdens the pilgrim and he starts to lose his Christian forgiveness. He kicks the head of a sinner and refuses the request to open a sinner's eyes as "it was courtesy to show him rudeness" (Canto XXXIII:150). Indeed, in Ptolomea, almost at the center of the Earth, the pilgrim suggests an almost genocidal hatred: "Ah, Genoese...why have you not been driven from the world?" (Canto XXXIII:151-153). The pilgrim's actions are a

distinct reversal from his early charity towards those trapped in Hell. Thankfully, Virgil understands the need for expediency to escape Cocytus and tells the pilgrim, “we must take our leave of so much evil” (Canto XXXIV:84). It is Virgil who sheltered the pilgrim from the frozen winds of Lucifer’s wings as the pilgrim “shrank behind my guide” (Canto XXXIV:9). The pilgrim was so paralyzed that he “did not die,” but he “was not alive” (Canto XXXIV:25). Virgil carries the pilgrim, as a fireman would, down Lucifer’s hairy back to find the passage out of Hell. Virgil exhibits a tremendous compassion to the pilgrim that allows both of them to escape Hell. As such, their relationship oscillates between each other’s values, which signifies a growing bond.

The great 20th-Century poet and Dante admirer, T.S. Eliot, wrote, “We are all, so far as we inherit the civilizations of Europe, still citizens of the Roman Empire.” In the *Inferno*, Virgil is the personification of the classical world who unlocks history’s bygone figures and values for the pilgrim. Virgil shows the pilgrim the way through Hell and connects him to the ancient world. Through this guidance, the pilgrim grows in his understanding of sin and learns how to avoid it. But he also relies upon his values of compassion to achieve a greater understanding of God and salvation as the journey continues. Virgil too increasingly appreciates the pilgrim’s values of charity and forgiveness. This tension between Virgil’s pagan beliefs and the pilgrim’s Christian values are a double-edged sword. On one hand, they beautifully complement each other as the two move past a traditional master and follower relationship to one that is more equal. Virgil’s strength paired with the pilgrim’s understanding of compassion serve as the force that preserves the pilgrim through the most troubling depths of Cocytus. Yet, their relationship is not completely integrated as Virgil remains classically pagan and is not able to advance to Heaven. His growing adoption of compassion is not enough for him to escape the confines of

Limbo. In the Middle Ages, Virgil can lead the pilgrim only as far as *Purgatorio* as he lacks baptism and Christian understanding. It is the Christian Beatrice who can guide the pilgrim through *Paradiso*. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI abolished the concept of Limbo. The Vatican's commission stated that Limbo reflected an "unduly restricted view of salvation." Perhaps Virgil finally joined the pilgrim in Paradise.