

Flannery O'Connor and Dante's "Divine Comedy"

by Benjamin B. Alexander

Flannery O'Connor in discussing her fiction suggests "what makes a story work" and "what makes it hold up as a story" is "an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both world and eternity. The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the anagogical level. That is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it."¹ This is a remarkable statement from a 20th century writer. The striking use by Miss O'Connor of the communal pronoun "our" to describe the corporate participation in "Divine life" is indicative of an alien idiom to modern ears. O'Connor's pronoun selection belongs to another world, another time, another way of looking at things. Her words are those of a divine comedian and in order to comprehend the massive assumptions behind her descriptions of her work we are beckoned to the patristic and medieval sources of her vision.

In Dante's *Divina Commedia*, we discover explicit portrayal of O'Connor's "Divine Life and our participation in it" in the immediate action of the *Commedia*. The whole scope of the epic entails the connectedness of the theological reality of grace and the supernatural with the natural order and history. The subject of the *Commedia* defines this reality in the indicative statement that opens the *Paradiso*: "The glory of Him who moves all things penetrates the universe and shines in one part more and in another less."² This is the explicit unconditional premise of Dante's comedy that he dramatically sets forth as he, the author himself, comes to observe the "glory of Him" in one part and another. The *Paradiso* is a marvelously amusing religious drama as Dante dramatically illustrates a psychology, anthropology, and spirituality infused by grace that provides a corrective to the deficiencies of reason alone in comprehending the providential order. And when Dante tells of this overwhelming experience in the first canto, he is recollecting the infusion of the Holy Spirit into the mind. Of this experience he says that "I may show forth the shadow of the blessed kingdom imprinted in my brain."³

Tumultuous Events. Such an exalted vision of comedy may seem arcane, tedious, and theologically obscure in our time. This seems to be an even sounder observation as we try to discover the presence of divine comedy in O'Connor's fiction where families are murdered, young boys drown or hang themselves, the retarded are abandoned in roadside cafes, artificial limbs are taken from the handicapped who are left alone in barn lofts, Southern

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- 1 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York, 1962), 111. Hereafter cited as *Mystery and Manners*.
 - 2 Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. John D. Sinclair (Oxford, 1966), 19. Hereafter cited as *Paradiso*.
 - 3 *Paradiso*, 19.

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matrons of grand old families and good taste are gored by bulls, good old Southern boys get pictures of the Byzantine Christ tattooed on their backs, and Polish immigrants fleeing the terrors of World War II are treacherously betrayed in their relocation to the American South.⁴

These tumultuous events are indicative that O'Connor is familiar with her audience's thorough unfamiliarity with divine comedy. This would appear to be an almost insurmountable obstacle with which Dante does not have to contend in the 13th century in the crafting of the *Commedia*. Indeed O'Connor has by education and by disposition all the attributes that would indicate that her comedy conforms to the tastes and sensibilities of our age, which is to say a practice of comedy that could hardly be considered divine in Dante's sense. We discover that Edgar Allan Poe, a fellow Southerner, was the one writer who influenced her before she became a serious writer and reader in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Iowa. O'Connor remarks of Poe's stories: "These were mighty humorous — one about a young man who was too vain to wear his glasses and consequently married his grandmother by accident; another about a fine figure of a man who in his room removed wooden arms, wooden legs, hair piece, artificial teeth, voice box etc.etc; another about the inmates of a lunatic asylum who take over the establishment and run it to suit themselves."⁵

Exalted Vision. When O'Connor speaks of these stories being "humorous," she is talking about humor in a way that would be familiar to a contemporary audience. She also realizes that in the wild action of Poe's stories she found the roots of comedy that would eventually become divine in her mature writings. But what she saw initially was a comedy of sensation, distortion, farce, and extremity. And it is such qualities that a modern popular audience associates with comedy — not the exalted vision of divine comedy that Dante sets forth in epic magnitude in the *Commedia* and that O'Connor would come to embrace in her own writings.

Dante had assured cultural and religious advantages that buttressed his epic and without which he could not have achieved what he does. O'Connor observes that the "model for balance for the novelist should be Dante, who divided his territory up pretty evenly between hell, purgatory, and paradise." She goes on to observe that "Dante lived in the thirteenth century when that balance was achieved in the faith of his age."⁶ O'Connor recognizes that Dante enjoyed a shared communal tradition — the "faith of his age," she puts it — that rooted the theological presupposition of the *Divine Comedy* in the coherent faith of medieval culture. For instance, the proposition derived from St. Thomas that man is a theological organism was axiomatic in Dante's religious culture. What to Dante is an unquestionable truth in O'Connor's world of pluralistic options and existential dilemmas becomes a conditional alternative. The Thomastic premise is no longer an indicative reality. Dante's culture would have understood readily what he meant and executed in his epic as religious comedy, while O'Connor's culture, for the most part, does not embrace or understand such comedy. For divine comedy to be communally understood, there must be a shared faith to interpret the vision. And as the writer of Proverbs succinctly remarks, "where there is no vision, the people perish." What in Dante was a corporate vision that

4 See "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The River," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "Good Country People," "Greenleaf," "Parker's Back," and "The Displaced Person" in Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York, 1988).

5 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* (New York, 1979), 98. Hereafter cited as *Habit of Being*.

6 *Mystery and Manners*, 49.

made it possible for him to write a communal epic has disintegrated, O'Connor reveals, into a modern "age which doubts both fact and value, and which is swept this way and that by momentary convictions." While Dante, O'Connor notes, benefits from an objective "balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve one from a felt balance inside himself."⁷

Misreading of O'Connor. While O'Connor and Dante share similar theological and religious visions, their situations in relation to their audiences are nearly reversed. Notwithstanding the near inversion of cultural and religious conditions, O'Connor executes a kind of divine comedy that Dante would have immediately recognized, but that has spawned consternation, frustration, and misreading of O'Connor. A way of gauging our current unfamiliarity with the dramatic techniques of divine comedy is to recognize the extent to which Dante is virtually unknown as a communal poet in our time. We are unfamiliar with the nature of religious comedy, even though shattered bits and pieces of this kind of drama permeate our culture. We need to review briefly how Dante understands comedy. Once we see how he executes it, we are in a better position to see how Flannery O'Connor parallels him in crafting of stories.

In Dante's epic we discover a massive tapestry of order — political, theological, institutional, and moral — conveyed in the genre of religious comedy. Although Dante wrote a treatise called *De Monarchia* that attempts to account systematically for his political principles, it is the *Divina Commedia* that makes the vision dramatic and universal. The poem's timelessness has to do with Dante's uncanny ability to present in epic scope a total universe far vaster than anything explored by our space shuttle.

Spiritual Universe. One of the great ironies in the history of modern science since the Renaissance has to do with technological progress paralleled by the loss of coherent theological cosmology. While Dante would applaud the achievements of modern space exploration, for instance, he would not mistake its conquest with higher theological reality. He would insist that any kind of flight in space is merely reflective of an invisible flight of the imagination by which we comprehend God's hidden theological universe. And it is this canopy of being that gives physical form to the sky in which the shuttle flies. Indeed, it may take a tragedy like the "Challenger Seven" explosion to remind us of Dante's terrifying, mysterious, yet providential cosmology. And when President Reagan, in his eulogy to the heroic crew of the ill-fated space ship, stated that "they had a new home beyond the stars" and "they had touched the face of God," he made allusion to the spiritual universe that would be familiar to Dante. He explores it in epic proportion, an expedition that would later lead us to append the name "divine" to the incredible journey to God.

What separates Dante's epics from others in the genre of the ancient, medieval, and modern eras is that entire work takes place in another order of existence out of time and history. The setting of the poem is eternity and Dante himself remarks that his subject is the "state of souls after death."⁸ Whereas most other epics have episodes where the hero visits eternal realms of being, such as Odysseus's visit to the underworld in the *Odyssey*, the eternal dimensions remain a background action in most epics. Dante remarkably reverses the process. Eternity is the literal subject of the poem and Dante's cosmic imagination enables him to imagine various episodes of history from a timeless mode of being. The poem presents a dramatic rendition of how God views the history of man and how He

⁷ *Mystery and Manners*, 49.

⁸ Dante Alighieri, "Letter to Can Grande Della Scala," *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York, 1971), 122.

knows the world to be. Therein lies the key to a comedy that is divine. Its point of view has to do with God's understanding of the order of many varieties of existence of which the order of time and history are merely one.

Dante's achievement revolutionizes the capacities for epic action and narrative. Dante is the greatest fantasy writer of all time. He discovers eternity as the central subject of an epic. This feat of genius reinvigorated enduring speculation about other modes of transcendent being rooted in Plato's theology and its utilization in the Gospels of the Bible and the Epistles of St. Paul. Dante is the vital medieval figure who concentrates Hellenic doctrines of transcendence and the Biblical vision of eternity. He shows the relevance of the legacy for subsequent eras. His influence is incalculable for the modern world: without Dante there would be no "Twilight Zone," "No Close Encounters of the Third Kind," and certainly no "ET." All these actions inevitably find their way back to Dante who pioneered the art of a story rooted in eternity intersecting history. The fact that "ET" is one of the most popular movies of all time is evidence of Dante's enduring achievement and contemporary relevance. When we delight in such movies, we must remember who Steven Spielberg's ultimate ancestor is.

Chic Demonic Culture. By the same token when we confront the increasing disordered images, ugliness, and dehumanization of our culture, we must recall that Dante is the preeminent architect of Satan's kingdom in the *Inferno*. While we can rejoice in the enduring popularity of "ET," we must recognize that much of our culture has now identified with the sordid comedy of Dante's Hell; or distorted images and actions are officially promoted as worthy of serious audience attention. We have a rock group naming itself after the revolting polluted marsh of Dante's hell called "Styx" and we have other groups calling themselves "Judas Priest," "Black Sabbath," and "Megadeath." Art awards, funded by tax dollars, have been given to exhibits where religious icons are submerged in human filth. A film portraying Jesus as an indecisive weakling has been nominated for an Academy Award. At a modern art exhibit patrons have been invited to walk on an American flag. A Church teaching series, used in mainline denominations, portrays Christ as an ancient forerunner of Che Guevara and pictures Him leading proletarian, revolutionary mobs.⁹ These are only a few examples of the vast suffusion in our time of what Dante would call demonic culture. Its presence as well its promotion is reflective of the massive disorder in which we live. Such conditions argue forcefully for an understanding of the sources and meaning of the sights, sounds, and images that confront us. The great difference between contemporary culture and that of Dante is that medieval culture could recognize hell as deformed and perverse, whereas contemporary culture increasingly equates hellish iconography with the normative and chic.

The *Divine Comedy* teaches a culture how to be literate. The poem instructs the reader in comprehending how the symbols, icons, and images of his world form a providential economy. Dante conceives of this spiritual kingdom as divine, and he divides it up into three spiritual territories that he systematically explores. These are *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

Lost in a Dark Wood. The poem begins on Good Friday of 1300 with Dante, the central figure of the poem, being lost in what he terms is a "dark wood." The fearful forest concentrates the Bible's banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden of the book of Genesis. The poem begins with a psychological and spiritual triumph. Dante can at least recognize that he is lost and that his life is disordered, and as a result, he has the

9 Episcopal Church Publishing Company, *Must We Choose Sides?* (Ambler, Penn. n. d.).

courage to admit it. Virgil appears as the incarnation of classical reason to lead Dante through the depths of Hell and onward to the recovery of the Garden of Eden at the top of Mount Purgatory. But first Dante must go through a horrifying journey to the center of the earth, during the process of which he observes a massive empire of evil.

Dante systematically divides Satan's kingdom up into moral categories derived from Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. Dante's image of Hell is an inverted cone or funnel. At the top of upper hell reside those souls who in life came to look on the body, not as a divine biological organism, but as an instrument of individual pleasure that is solely a human possession and can thus be treated in any manner. And here we find the drinkers, the eaters, the fornicators, and others, all of whom Virgil tells Dante "subjected reason to desire." In the degrees of evil in Dante's hell, these "sinners of the flesh" are the lowest grade of offenders whose magnitude of evil has not led to violence and disorder on a massive scale.

Deliberate Choice of Sin. This kind of evil comes at a deeper stage in Dante and Virgil's trek, once they enter into the huge fortress city of Hell called "Dis." Here sin becomes a matter of deliberate choice, not an instinct of the flesh. We find the heretics popping up out of burning tombs. We find a massive category of sinners who have been violent against self, neighbors, God, and nature. The suicides, violent against themselves, are deprived of their bodies that they despised and live as trees that are incessantly picked at by ravenous birds called Harpies. Those violent against neighbors boil now in the blood they deliberately spilled. Dante also confronts blasphemers, those violent against God, and sodomites and usurers, those violent against nature. The first group are in hell because they take what is naturally fertile, human sexuality, and make it infertile. On the other hand, usurers, according to Dante's remorseless logic, take money, which is naturally infertile and try to make it breed. They are guilty of a kind of symbolic sodomy.

After surveying the overwhelming realm of the violent, Dante and Virgil are deposited in another region of hell know as "Malebolgia" or the "evil ditches." Here the fraudulent reside, those guilty of premeditated treachery against others. Dante concentrates the image of Fraud in one of the most hideous creations of the *Inferno*. It is Geryon, a monster with the face of a just man, a reptilian multicolored body, and a rapier-scorpion stinger for a tail. If you have ever been gypped or defrauded, Dante's image will not be lost on you. Fraud ostensibly appears to be just. Yet actually its substance is nothing more than the garish paint of deceit that finally stings the victim like a scorpion's tale.

In this pit of the fraudulent, Dante is introduced to an overwhelming institutional structure of sin. In Malebolgia he explores how an "evil empire" gathers momentum that the lone individual, unassisted by divine grace, cannot overcome. This portion of the *Inferno* is particularly powerful in its portrayal of an escalating community of wickedness. The categories of fraud Dante enumerates are pandering and seducing, flattery, simony, sorcery, barratry, hypocrisy, thievery, false counseling, schism, and falsification.

From Bad to Worse. As bad as these categories of fraud are, Dante has yet another division of hell that is worse. He descends from Malebolgia onto the frozen lake of Cocytus at the bottom of Hell where those guilty of what Dante calls compound treachery reside in eternal misery. And here we find those whose have betrayed the trust of kindred, country, guest, and lords. The image of such treachery is cannibalism, the ultimate action of dehumanization. It is such an action that occurs at the depths of hell where Satan monotonously chews, in a bloody parody of the Trinity, the bodies of Judas, Cassius, and Brutus.

Dante and Virgil emerge from the depths of Hell on the morning of Holy Saturday and once again see light and stars and leave the horrifying stench, sounds, and sights of hell behind. The ascension of Mount Purgatory, the second part of the epic is the reverse action of the *Inferno*. Instead of the downward descent into evil, we have the upward ascent to the innocence lost in the Garden of Eden after the fall of man. The epic action is compelling. Dante has shown that, in order to recover Eden, we must learn to recognize evil and to call it by name. He achieves this in the *Inferno* and once that region is put behind him, he can return to the innocence once lost.

Joyful Hope. The action of the *Purgatorio* amounts to the epic conquest of what Dante regards as the seven deadly sins – pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Dante and Virgil climb four terraces of ante-Purgatory and seven terraces of the mountain proper. We witness the poem's version what we might call in our athletic idiom, "no pain, no gain." The pain entails penitent sinners undergoing for a small amount of a few centuries by world time the opposite action of what they so enjoyed in flawed, but not infernally depraved, lives on earth. The prideful learn to be humble by carrying heavy boulders while they look at magnificent portraits of examples of humility and sing hymns of submission. The envious sit in sackcloth with their eyes stitched so that they can now only look at pictures of generosity and sing songs of meekness. The *Purgatorio* usually is regarded as the most accessible portion of the *Divina Commedia*. The reader identifies more with the joyful hope of those in Purgatory and less with the surrealistic damnation of Hell and the beatification of the blessed in Paradise.

Dante ascends through the Garden of Eden at the top of Purgatory. Here we have a poignant moment in the journey in which Virgil makes Dante both a Prince and Bishop over himself and suggests that reason is inadequate for the negotiation of the realms of paradise. A new guide appears in the form of Beatrice who embodies the divine infusion of grace as a theological mystery to usher Dante into the holy realm of heaven.

Looking on the Face of God. The *Paradiso* renders dramatically the ascent of the soul to the invisible world of God's pure being. Dante tells the reader that these realms have never been explored, and he asks for inspiration to recollect for his audience God in his essence. Dante meets the great heroes, doctors, martyrs, and saints of the Faith who now in detached divine wisdom give their estimation of world history that has gone awry. St. Francis and St. Dominic lament the decadence of their orders on earth. St. Peter examines Dante about his knowledge of St. Paul's virtues of faith, hope and charity. He then denounces the sewer of greed that the medieval Papacy has become. St. Peter's criticism balances an earlier hair-raising scene in the *Inferno* where Dante confronts rapacious Popes buried upside down, with their feet on fire, from whom he as a layman hears confession. Dante finally ascends to the Empyrean, a realm of God's pure being. St. Bernard, the final guide of the *Commedia*, explains the flowering of the queen of heaven's court in a beautiful rose. Dante in conclusion looks on the face of God at the end of the journey. He sees in three circles the image of man in the holy visage of Christ.

Dante wrote this massive epic at a crucial time in history. John Ruskin's calling him the "central man of all the world" is not too extreme. Dante provides a towering synthesis of classical philosophy and medieval Christianity. The massive learning and resources of these eras he concentrates to produce an epic picture of an ordered universe.

How to Read Today's Events. The *Divine Comedy* is the poem to read in a time beset by all manner of disorder – the resurgence of Islamic terrorism, the persistent drama of Jim and Tammy Bakker, the sin and television repentance of the Reverend Jimmy Swaggert, the revolutionary activity of Central American priests who carry both Rosary beads and

