Sin in Divine Perspective

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By

Susan Ramsey

Thesis Director

Dr. Wm. T. Liston

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

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Dante's *Divine Comedy* is essentially a document of moral order. As a vehicle for presenting this moral order Dante uses, in John Ciardi's words, "...nothing less than the total universe." (1) A lesser artist than Dante could not use this vehicle. He would become lost in its immensity. Dante demonstrates his greatness in his choice of subject matter, but at the same time he places a great burden of comprehension upon his readers. If we become lost in the immensity of his universe he will not stoop to retrieve us. Before he begins his journey through Paradise he immodestly warns us:

O you who in your wish to hear these things have followed thus far in your little stuff
the wake of my great ship that sails and sings,

turn back and make your way to your own coast.
Do not commit yourself to the main deep,
for, losing me, all may perhaps be lost.

(Par. II. 1-6)

We can come to understand Dante's universe on many different levels. If we examine Dante's view of the nature of sin we will discover a great deal about his universal scheme and hierarchy of values.

1 Dante Alighieri, *The Purgatorio*, trans. and "How to Read Dante" by John Ciardi (New York, 1970), p. 347. All quotations from the text of the Comedy will be taken from the Ciardi translation unless another rendering is more illustrative of the point I am making. Any translation other than Ciardi's will be appropriately identified.
We may be inclined to think of sin primarily in connection with the Inferno. In truth, we learn very little about sin and sinners in the Inferno alone. Our understanding of sin is complete only after we have made the entire journey through all three realms with Dante, the poet and pilgrim.

It is necessary to the coherence and sensibility of the Comedy to assume that the same divine principles apply to every level of the universe. In other words, sin must have the same meaning in the Inferno as it does in the Purgatorio and Paradiso. The souls in Purgatory must be undergoing purgation of essentially the same sins as those in Hell are being punished for, and those in Paradise have been purified of. We find evidence to support these assumptions in the story of Count Guido da Montefeltro (Inf. XXVII.). Guido is well on his way to Purgatory with St. Francis until the black angels intervene and carry him to Hell because of his failure to repent. He tells us very simply that he "... who does not repent cannot be absolved" (XXVII. 114.). It seems to be of little importance in Dantean theology how sin-ridden one's life is in determining whether one goes to Purgatory or Hell. The only apparent, and real difference between the souls of the damned and the souls of the saved in Purgatory is that those in Purgatory repented at some time before death. This is a startlingly simple idea. It is even a little annoying when we think of Virgil and his eternal confinement to Limbo.

Let us examine the schemes of the three realms, contrast
and compare them, and consider the meaning and results of sin in them. In so doing we can understand and appreciate Dante's moral structure and come to understand why a simple gesture of faith and repentance is enough to save a sin-filled soul from damnation.

Of the three realms of Dante's universe we may think of Hell and Paradise as being maximally separated. This is true if we are thinking spatially or of the states of the souls which inhabit these realms. Ciardi says, "For Dante ... there was no real distinction between moral and physical law" (Purgatorio, "How to Read Dante," p. 347.), and so there actually is no need to distinguish the spatial distance from the moral one which separates these realms. Obviously the souls in Purgatory are nearer to Paradise in space and condition than are the souls in Hell, but if we are thinking structurally we notice that the proximities are rearranged. Purgatory is set apart from Hell and Paradise because of its transitional nature. It is transitional in three ways. The souls in Purgatory move from one cornice to another according to their need for purgation; their stay on the mount is temporary. The mount of Purgatory is itself temporary. It will cease to exist after the Last Judgment. Both Paradise and Hell, on the other hand, are permanent in all respects. The inhabitants of both are permanently fixed in time and position. Hell and Paradise are structurally similar because they have the same underlying ideology. In Paradise we learn
from Piccarda that though the souls may possess different degrees of blessedness, they all experience as much bliss as they are capable of enjoying. Dante listens to Piccarda and then explains:

Then it was clear to me, that everywhere in Heaven is Paradise, though the Perfect Grace does not rain down alike on all souls there.

(Par. III. 88-90.)

Beatrice explains further:

All add their beauty to the Highest Wheel, share the sweet life, and vary in it only by how much of the Eternal Breath they feel.

(Par. IV. 34-36.)

There are absolute differences in their states of blessedness in that some have a greater capacity for blessing than others, but these absolute differences are not experienced as relative fulfillments by the souls of the blessed.

Beatrice's explanation implies that the absolute difference in blessing is determined by the soul, not God. God does not withhold or bestow his blessing variously, but it is variously absorbed by the blessed.

Note what Piccarda says about the blessed state: "What we desire, we have" (III. 71.). Now consider what Virgil says about the state of the damned: "Their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear" (Inf. III. 123.). John Ciardi comments on Virgil's description of the state of the damned, saying "Hell is what the damned have actively and insistently wished for" (Purg., "How to read Dante." p. 346.). Hell's scheme is similar
to the scheme of Paradise in that its inhabitants eternally
live the lives they have wished for, but, of course, the blessed
experience bliss in their blessedness and the damned experience
fear and dread in their damnation.

The damned are also categorized according to degrees of
damnation. As there are absolute differences in degrees of
blessedness in Paradise, there are absolute differences in de­
grees of damnation in Hell. Some of the damned are farther from
God than others. Though it isn't so clearly and deliberately
announced in the Inferno I believe we should understand that
the souls of Hell, though more or less damned, do not experience
more or less suffering.

Most reasonable people, I think, would obviously prefer
the castle of Limbo to the burning sand and fiery rain of the
circle of the Violent, or the hornets and maggots of the vesti­
bule of the Opportunists, but this is a very objective and mean­
ingless preference, and the nature of the punishment of sin is
highly subjective. We know Minos does not distribute his new
arrivals arbitrarily; therefore we may not evaluate their plights
arbitrarily. All souls find themselves suffering the punishment
which has most meaning for them. I believe that Virgil, who has
seen the Earthly Paradise, is as tormented as Satan, who has
dwelled with God. As the souls of the blessed in Paradise have
an increasing appetite, or aptitude for bliss as we come nearer
to God, the souls of the damned have an increasing hardening of
the heart as we descend further from God in Hell.

Dante's God is a very accommodating one. Throughout the *Comedy* we see God giving all souls exactly what they wish for, but Hell is certainly no paradise suited to the tastes of those who reject God. Men may reject God while they live, but they cannot escape God's judgment when they die. This is a truth that all souls realize, after death if they failed to realize it in life. They realize the truths that God exists, God is supreme, faith brings reward, and sin is evil and brings suffering. The only difference between unrepentant sinners before death and after is God's revelation. The souls of the dead see themselves as God sees them, and this enlightenment is what makes the punishments of the damned painful.

Can one argue that it is the highly symbolic twists the punishments take that make them painful rather than pleasurable? For example, do the Gluttons suffer in Hell because they now lie wallowing in what Dante calls "stinking dirt that festered" (VI. 26.), and "putrid slush" (I.12) rather than gluttoning themselves with food and drink as they did in life? I don't think this argument is valid. In God's view there is no difference in the Gluttonous life and the Infernal punishment. If we insist upon declaring that there is a difference then we admit to rejecting God's revelation of the nature of sinful action and we had better bring our little skiffs ashore. Even Bertran de Born, only two levels removed from Satan recognizes the equivalence of his sinful life and his terrible punishment. As he carries his head
in his hand, his punishment for sowing discord, he says, "Thus is my measure measured to me again." 2 Can one argue that the punishment is painful because the sinful act is turned upon the souls of the damned making them victims of their own sin? I think not. They were slaves to their sins while living, and victimized themselves by denying faith and its inevitable reward. One would be foolhardy to suggest that their sins bring real rewards in life and suffering only after death. A sinner can only appear to gain from sin, but in reality he always loses. Dante grimly comments on the false victory of sinners in the Round of the Sodomites. As he watches Brunetto Latino go off to join his fellow sinners in their perpetual and purposeless run he says,

... he seemed,
across that plain, like one of those who run
for the green cloth at Verona; and of those,
more like the one who wins, than those who lose.

(XV. 119-122.).

A sinner loses eternal life in Paradise for his sins, and this he brings upon himself. Being the victim of his sins is not a new state of affairs when the soul arrives in Hell. Again, the difference is recognition of Divine Truth.

We can, and are likely to place too much emphasis on analyzing the specific punishments of the damned in our attempt to evaluate the relative intensities of their suffering. We must primarily recognize that all of the inhabitants of Hell are there because they rejected God. They are eternally punished for their specific sins, but punishment of sins is not the greatest manifestation of Divine Justice in Hell. The most important fact of Hell is that all its inhabitants have lost God. If we lose perspective and place too much importance on their specific punishments we are making a foolish mistake. As we emerge from Hell, ascend the Mount of Purgatory and soar through Paradise we should understand unquestionably that the Grace of God is of supreme importance throughout the universe, and losing this grace is a far more terrible punishment than any of the specific punishments in Hell which are of the sinners' own making. The damned all have this loss of grace in common. The Virtuous Pagans, and the less offensive sinners in the upper regions of Hell are sure to suffer this loss more acutely than the hardened, animal-like sinners of the lower circles whose punishments might seem more unbearable. We can recognize a parallelism between the different sensitivities of the damned for the loss of God and the different capacities of the blessed for God's blessing.

The Purgatorio is spoken of in superlatives by many scholars. Sayers calls it the tenderest, subtlest, most human and most beloved. Ciardi considers it to be Dante's most personal Cantica. Barbi finds it to be the sweetest and most serene.
Eliot calls it the most difficult. For me it is indeed all of these things, and the most interesting and instructive.

Purgatory has a scheme quite different from those of Hell and Paradise. Hell is the punishment of sin, Paradise is the reward for faith, and Purgatory serves to prepare the impure faithful for their blessed reward.

The souls of Purgatory are the souls of sinners. Some of their sins are as detestable as the sins of the damned, perhaps even more so, but in Purgatory we can consider the souls to be blessed. They are blessed because they surrendered their souls to God and died in faith.

In Purgatory we begin to see the significance of sinful actions diminish. God cares for the state of a man's soul, and as Allan Gilbert comments, "A man is not condemned by God for any number of evil deeds, but only for a character in which evil wholly rules." 3 I think Gilbert's statement represents an excellent analysis of the ultimate difference between grace and damnation. It is the nature of Dante's God to forgive even the most despicable sin, but it is against his nature to force faith upon the living. One has only to accept God to be saved from damnation, but he must do it of his own free will. Any act of faith or con-

3 Dante's Conception of Justice (New York, 1965), P. 119.
trition is evidence of a character in which evil does not wholly rule. Those who find a mere act of contrition a poor compensation for a sin-filled lifetime, and difficult to accept as the sole requirement for salvation may find consolation in two facts: (1) God cannot be fooled by false faith. We find those of false faith in the vestibule of Hell. They are beyond the gate which tells them "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE." The truly contrite have more than hope; they have God's promise of Paradise. (2) The ascent through Purgatory is a very difficult one, and as lengthy and painful as is necessary to purify the sinful. When a soul arrives in Purgatory it is faced with suffering and pain. This suffering is different from the pain of Hell. Different souls suffer as much pain as is necessary to rid them of their sinful tendencies. In Purgatory we see different souls enduring different quantities of suffering, whereas in Hell we could not quantitatively distinguish the suffering of the damned.

Dante was a scholar of and believer in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Dorothy Sayers points out that Dante applies the Thomist concept of sin to his universal scheme. Aquinas says, "Two things may be considered in sin; the guilty act and the consequent stain" (Summa Theol. I. II ae, q. 87, ad 7.). The sinful act is central to the scheme of Hell, and the residual stain on the soul is central to the scheme of Purgatory.

Purgation purifies the soul by removing that which is evil and sinful. The soul is not itself reconstructed and nothing
is added to it. The idea here is that the pure soul is innately good. Virgil's discourse on love, perhaps the single most important passage in the Purgatorio, suggests the natural goodness of the soul. He says the soul is created prone to love (XVIII. 19.). Earlier in his discourse he explains that

... love alone
is the true seed of every merit in you,
and of all the acts for which you must atone.

(XVII. 103-104.).

Sin is the result of misdirected or untempered love. Man's intellect and coincidental free will enable him to love correctly and virtuously, and to be responsible for his sins. The task of Purgatory is to purify the soul's love by correcting the intellect and uniting the will with God's.

The activities of the souls of Purgatory are remedial, not vindictively punitive. Purgatory must be more than a temporary Hell. These souls have yet to learn virtuous ways. To train their souls to the right they practice constant surrender to the virtue opposite their sin. Of the souls in Purgatory Michele Barbi says, "The spirits no longer live in their sin as a still present and perturbing passion, but aspire instead with all their ardor to an entirely different life." The new life to which they

aspire unites their wills with God's. Let us begin at the base of the Mount and see how the activity of each cornice inspires a new life for these sinners, and cleanses their souls of the stain of sin. I shall limit my discussion to the activity of each cornice, and overlook the whip and rein of each because they so clearly speak for themselves.

The first group of souls we encounter is not yet within Purgatory proper. Here we find the souls of the late-repentant including the Excommunicate, the Indolent, the Unshriven, and the Negligent Rulers. The late-repentant must now wait to enter Purgatory, exercising great patience and steadfast faith, since in life they neglected matters of faith.

The first level within the gates of Purgatory proper is that of the proud. The souls of the proud now circle the mountain doubled over under the weight of enormous slabs of rock. The weight they bear is the weight of their sins, but the weight forces them into a posture of humility. Contrast this to the image of Farinata in Hell:

Erect,
he rose above the flame, great chest, great brow;
he seemed to hold all Hell in disrespect.

(X. 34-36.).

This is indeed the image of a proud man. Farinata was a proud man in life, and highly respected and feared; but for all his pride and magnificence in Hell he is totally impotent. *

* Farinata is, of course, being punished for heresy, not pride specifically. I shall consider Farinata's position again in a different context.

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On the next cornice we find the Envious. These souls all sit together supporting each other, but unable to see each other because their eyes are wired shut. The enforcement of virtue is two-fold here. The eyes are wired shut so that no soul can look enviously upon another, but Dante has arranged this level so that no soul has anything enviable. He likens them to beggars of his day, "the impoverished blind who sit all in a row / during Indulgences to beg their bread" (XIII. 61-62.). The arrangement of this cornice splendidly exemplifies the cooperative nature of Purgatory. Each soul on the cornice of the Envious is instrumental in the healing of each other soul. Each gives support to another, and each is himself unenviable.

We have seen how each of the preceding level's activity has enforced virtue, but the cornice of the Wrathful is troublesome and not as readily understood. Here we find the souls of the Wrathful engulfed in a thick and acrid smoke, more obnoxious than any encountered in Hell. Dorothy Sayers says that wrath blinds the judgment and suffocates reason and that "the penance of the Wrathful is therefore ... the endurance of the sin itself" (Purg. XVI. Images. p. 192.). This is a common interpretation. John Ciardi says, "As Wrath obscures the true light of God, so the smoke plunges all into darkness" (Purg. XVI. Summary. p. 170.). Can the smoke on this cornice be an allegory for the sin of Wrath? If so, then as Gilbert points out, we must assume that here in Purgatory Dante has represented another Hell. (Dante's
In Hell we have seen souls wallowing in and being tormented by their sins, but we have established that this is not the nature of Purgatorial penance. Dante says very little about the smoke of this cornice. He says nothing in particular to support the view that it is an allegorical representation of the sin of wrath. What he does say stresses the irritating quality of the smoke. The irritation of the smoke could be expected to have the effect of inciting wrath. An agitating element is present in other areas of Purgatory. Of the levels we have discussed so far we have seen the great lengths of time the Late-repentant and Negligent must endure in patient faith, and the great weights the Proud must succumb to when their sinful tendency is to shirk the humility the weight enforces. (There is no agitating factor in the cornice of the Envious. This is because one great lesson of this cornice is that in Divine Reality there is nothing of another's worth envying, and any agitating factor would undermine this lesson.) The time spent in Ante-Purgatory serves to strengthen patience in the Negligent, the weights of the Proud reinforce humility, and the smoke of the cornice of the Wrathful enforces the virtues opposite wrath: caution and meekness. Note the great caution with which the pilgrim and his guide proceed. Dante tells us:

My wise and faithful Guide drew near me, ..., and let me grasp his shoulder with my hand.

Just as a blindman - lest he lose his road or tumble headlong and be hurt or killed - walks at his guide's back when he goes abroad;
so moved I through that foul and acrid air,  
led by my sweet Friend's voice, which kept repeating:  
"Take care. Do not let go of me. Take care."

(XVI. 8-15.)

Ciardi makes an excellent observation about Virgil's warning.  
Throughout the Comedy Virgil is representative of reason and  
Ciardi says, "Thus Virgil is warning Dante, allegorically, not to  
lose his Guiding Reason in the blind immoderation of wrath  
(1. 15 n.). The repentant Wrathful soul, Marco Lombardi, guides  
Virgil and Dante to the Angel of Meekness, but turns back himself,  
saying "It is not fit he see me" (XVI. 145.). He moves back into  
the smoke meekly to endure its irritation.  

The next encounter we have is with the Slothful. Their  
almost comic zeal needs no comment.  

We find the Hoarders and the Wasters on the next level.  
They are bound facing the dust. Again, Sayers sees this penance  
as an allegory of the sin: "The souls are so fettered that they  
can see nothing but the earth on which they once set store"  
(Purg. XIX. Images. p. 221.); and again Gilbert's countertheory  
is impelling: "The question arises: Are earthly things and the  
earth substantially identical? Or can we feel that there is in-  
stead a contrast in meaning? Earthly things are the good things  
of this earth which the eyes of those who are now groveling in  
the dust no longer look upon" (Dante's Conception of Justice,  
p. 132.). These souls were obsessed by earthly riches while living,  
and now they must contemplate the humble dust. Since hoarding and
wasting keep a soul earthbound it might seem more appropriate
and corrective for these souls to look toward heaven, but purga-
tion must bring earthly things into proper perspective for all
sinners, and the Hoarders and Wasters must recognize the humble-
ness of the earth.

The souls of the Gluttons whom we see next appear pain-
fully emaciated. Their determined abstinence in the presence of
great temptation is clearly corrective.

The next, and last cornice of sinners is that of the
Lustful. Lust is the least offensive of the Seven Deadly Sins.
Dorothy Sayers calls it "the noblest of earthly loves" (Purg.
XXV. Images. p. 267.). These souls are punished by being en-
wrapped in a wall of flame. The use of fire is a common method
of purification, but Dante's use of fire as a means of purging
the sin of lust is particularly interesting, and his most ingeni-
ous way of demonstrating his tolerance of this sin. Sayers says
"Fire, which is an image of Lust, is also an image of Purity.
The burning of the sin, and the burning charity which is its op-
posing virtue, here coalesce into a single image and a single ex-
perience" (Purg. XXV. Images. p. 267.). The Fire of Purgatory
is a purifying one, and one which exceeds the heat of Lust. This
fire is not peculiarly the penance of the Lustful and so it can-
not be equated with the fire of Lust, but here at the top of the
Mount Dante shows this sin merging with its opposing virtue rather
than being replaced by it. We might also note that Dante does
not use fire as an allegory for Lust in Hell. He uses fire in
connection with Lust only in Purgatory where the souls have
saved themselves from damnation. Only the Lust of the rependant
is akin to Pure Love.

The Angel of Chastity tells the three poets, Dante, Virgil and Statius,

...til by blame purified
no soul may pass this point.

(XXVII. 10-11)

Ciardi suggests that this could mean that no soul is entirely
free of Lust, but is more convinced that the best explanation is
that "Since no man's soul is perfect in its love ... it must en-
dure the fire that purifies impure love" (XXVII. 11. 10-12n.).

After passing through the wall of fire a soul is pure and ready
to enter the Earthly Paradise where it will lose all memory of
evil by being immersed in the waters of Lethe, and strengthen the
memory of goodness by drinking the waters of Eunoe.

In the Earthly Paradise we have seen the last of sin.
We can learn no more about sin directly in Paradise because of
its absolute and necessary absence, but let us go back and consider
the idea of sin in Hell and Purgatory in another way.

In accordance with the Thomist theory of the dual nature
of sin, the act and the residual stain on the soul, we have seen
that the sinful act is central to the scheme of Hell and the stain
is central to the scheme of Purgatory. We understand how and why
the activities of the inhabitants of Purgatory tend to their damaged and sin-weakened souls, but why is only the sinful act treated in Hell? To be sure, God damns his unrepentant sinners because of their corrupt and unhealthy souls, but the unrepentant must be punished in a way that they will understand. Dante explains God's neglect of the basic corruption of the souls in Hell in one line which Virgil speaks. Virgil describes the damned as "souls who have lost the good of intellect" (Inf. VII. 18.).

The intellect is that part of a man which enables him to aspire to the Divine, and in denying God the soul destroys its own intellect. Any punishment which is directed toward the basic intellectual corruption of the damned would be lost on them because they have no intellect with which to perceive this kind of Divine Justice.

Some interesting consequences result from the absence of the intellectual element of sin in Hell and the absence of concern for sinful actions in Purgatory. We acknowledge that the actual sins of those undergoing purgation are essentially the same as the sins of the damned, yet if we attempt to play some speculative games in which we would assign Purgatorial positions to souls in Hell had they repented, or Infernal positions to souls in Purgatory had they not repented, we rarely find success. Perhaps we can assign reciprocal positions in the opposing realms to souls in each for the sins of Lust, Gluttony, Avarice and Prodia-
lity, and Wrath.* Hell contains these categories which correspond to identically named categories in Purgatory, but here the correspondence ends.

There is the weak explanation for the correspondence of these areas only which claims that Dante began the Inferno intending to treat sin in Hell according to the standard Seven Deadly Sins and then abandoned the project after completing seven Cantos. In response to a friend's persuasion he continued his allegorical journey years later but took a different direction which departed from his original intentions and thus the correspondence was destroyed. It seems rather careless, chaotic and unlikely for a poet as careful and orderly as Dante to change directions in mid-stream if the change didn't fit the scheme of his universal order. The evidence to support the theory that there was a lengthy interruption between Cantos VII and VIII of the Inferno is convincing, but we need not conclude that the resumption sets off in a direction other than Dante's original intention. Of the Seven Deadly Sins, the four we find specifically punished in Hell - Lust, Gluttony, Avarice (and Prodigality) and Wrath - lead to specific and narrowly defined sinful actions. This is why the sinful acts resulting from these sins can be identified and punished in Hell.

*We cannot feel very secure in making these assignments. In light of the fact that Dante places the Sodomites with the Lustful in Purgatory and with the Violent Against Nature in Hell, we can conclude that Dante himself didn't intend significant correspondence.
The correspondence exists but the treatment remains different. Francesca's long and detailed story provides us with a distinct image of lustfulness. In Purgatory there is no sense of lustful activity. We find a vivid and disgusting image of gluttony in Hell, but there is no sense of this sin in the corresponding area of Purgatory. The sins of Wrath and Avarice pervade their respective areas of Hell, but are absent in Purgatory.

The remaining three of the Seven Deadly Sins - Pride, Envy and Sloth - lead to a much broader range of sinful actions because of their more abstract nature.

When we go deeper into Hell we are stumped in our speculative games. What Purgatorial position shall we assign to the Heretics in Hell if we imagine they had repented? Or the violent? Dante devotes five Cantos to sins of violence in Hell, but there is no area in Purgatory where violence is specifically treated. The remaining areas of Hell are devoted to punishing various forms of fraudulent behavior. There is no mention of fraud in Purgatory. There are no areas in Purgatory which correspond to the Infernal areas of Heresy, Violence and Fraud because these sins are secondary to deeper and more basic intellectual corruption. We can half win our game by assuming that the Heretics, the Violent and the Fraudulent would spend much time on the cornices of the Proud, the Envious, the Slothful, and probably the Wrathful, had they
repented. These are the sins of which they are all ultimately guilty, but we absolutely cannot determine what Infernal sins the souls in Purgatory would be punished for had they not repented. This is crucial—there are no details given describing the sinful actions of the souls in Purgatory and we cannot transplant them into Hell because our map of Hell is drawn only according to actions.

We were able to make a comparison between Farinata in Hell and the Proud in Purgatory. It is not surprising that we can perform imaginary redemptions, limited though they may be, and not imaginary damnations. It is naturally easier to fit the specifics of Hell into the abstracts of Purgatory. It is impossible to do the reverse.

We see that this lack of interchangeability, or equivalence, between areas of Hell and Purgatory is not something we can pass off as a meaningless quirk. It is a natural and necessary consequence of the moral and theological foundation upon which Dante builds his Universe.

Dorothy Sayers has given consideration to this non-correspondence between areas of Purgatory and Hell. She says, Dante "is the most symmetrical of poets; but the symmetry of art is like that of nature, and is produced, not by a dead uniformity, but by a correspondence and balance of parts" (Purg. Introduction, p. 14.). These two realms are, in fact, superbly balanced, but not in such an obvious way that we can readily second-guess Dante.
What is our overall image of Hell? Within a deceptively orderly framework we see chaos, clutter, crowding, and futility. There are twenty-eight separate areas where sinners are punished in Hell, all isolated and inescapable.

What is our overall image of Purgatory? We find thorough order, harmony, spaciousness and a sense of unified upward surging. At most there are eleven areas of Purgatory. There are only eight if we consider the four classes of negligent to be one distinct group.

What is the ultimate meaning of our topographical ratio and contrasting images? Thomas Bergin answers this question for us. He says, "There is but one way to salvation and there are many avenues to error!" (Essays on Dante. "Hell: Topography and Demography," p. 78.). I especially like this thought of Bergin's because it reveals a mind that so very well understands and mimics Dante's. There is but one way to salvation. It is the willing surrender of the soul to God, a declaration of faith. Bergin says there are many avenues to error; he does not say there are many avenues to damnation. There is only one way to damnation, and that is rejection of God, but there are many ways that men can turn from God. Bergin's thought contains the same artistic symmetry which characterizes the entire Comedy. He has set up a parallel, but only to emphasize the immense disparity between salvation and damnation.
We cannot correctly liken anything in Hell to anything in either of the realms of Grace because Hell is everything that is apart from God. Hell was devised by God to separate and remove the evil from the pure. Dante has created an exciting and fascinating image of the damned and their realm, but we must not be deceived and dazzled by its spectacular nature. The message of the gate is clear - "I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE;" and as God has forsaken them, so must we.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


