When Hell Freezes Over: Dante as Pilgrim and Poet in *Inferno* XXXII

Lukas Cox '19
lukas.cox@yale.edu
Prof. Kathryn Slanski
DRST001

Argument summary: A close reading of the *Inferno*'s canto XXXII reveals a striking tension between the poem's author ("Dante-Poet") and its protagonist ("Dante-Pilgrim"). This, in turn, reveals a domination of retrospective literary objectives over the "lived" experiences they describe.

DRST001: Literature
Professor Kathryn Slanski

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Writing Center to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize, and includes publication on the Yale College website or in a booklet prepared for Yale College students or faculty. –Lukas Cox

When Hell Freezes Over: Dante as Pilgrim and Poet in *Inferno* XXXII

After moving through burning sand, fiery rain, and boiling blood, canto XXXII of Dante's *Inferno* plunges us into a serene, frigid world of translucent ice. This is the ninth and final Circle of Hell, where sinners charged with the treacherous, premeditated betrayal of their kin (*parenti*) and homeland (*patria*) languish in the frozen rings of Caïna and Antenora. In a phenomenon molded by *The Divine Comedy*'s deeply intimate use of the first person, the narrative thrust of this canto is propelled by a tension between two separate, and yet intrinsically linked, "Dantes." Dante-Poet is our author and narrator throughout the *Comedy*, recounting an already completed journey, continually examining his capacities as a writer and ostentatiously suggesting his own eminent literary status among the great poets of antiquity. Dante-Pilgrim is his mortal Everyman protagonist, accompanied by Virgil as he experiences the grotesque iterations of Hell in real time. While both *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* portray a dance between the two consciousnesses, this short canto presents the height of their tension. A close examination of the seeming discord between the characteristics and attitudes of Dante-Poet and Dante-Pilgrim, however, reveals the striking domination of the poet's literary objectives over the experiences of his protagonist.

In the canto's opening lines, Dante-Poet humbly addresses his lyrical capabilities. "Had I the crude and scrannel rhymes," he begins, "to suit / the melancholy hole upon which all / the

other circling crags converge and rest, / the juice of my conception would be pressed / more fully;" and yet,

> because I feel their lack,
> I bring myself to speak, yet speak in fear;
> for it is not a task to take in jest,
> to show the base of the universe —
> nor for a tongue that cries out, "mama," "papa."
> But may those ladies now sustain my verse
> who helped Amphion when he walled up Thebes,
> so that my tale not differ from the fact.[1]

Dante-Poet is deeply troubled by the ostensible inadequacy of his lyrical capacities in the face of such a momentous task: he has to describe the "base of the universe," after all, and he is exceedingly afraid that he'll get it wrong. These qualms stem from his strict sense of poetic truth-telling, one that attempts to match visceral, sensate experiences with their "suitable" semantic connotations — all with the goal of adhering to the "facts." In this declared commitment to accuracy, Dante-Poet appears modest, self-doubting — indeed, he asks for artistic aid from the Muses for the first time since the beginning of the poem.[2] And of course, it is the truth of his *protagonist's* experiences that he tries so hard to convey — the "facts" of the tale are the observations and actions of Dante-Pilgrim. In this light, then, these opening lines already reveal a serious tension between the two poles of identity: Dante-Poet is afraid that he can no longer follow Dante-Pilgrim into the new circle, that the power of his poetry does not extend to the bottom of Hell.

Placed in the Ninth Circle, Dante-Pilgrim's actions and reactions in conversation with an irreverent sinner initially seem to amplify this tension. Walking along the frozen river Cocytus,

---

[1] Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Bantam Classics: 1982), 293.
[2] Ironically, of course, this invocation and Dante's general professions of poetic deficiency cleverly serve to *magnify* the immensity of the moment and the path ahead; and we know from the rest of the canto that Dante-Poet *is*, in fact, able to convey Dante-Pilgrim's voyage with admirable lyricism.

Dante-Pilgrim hits a sinner's face with his foot; after the sinner complains, asking "why do you molest me?", Dante-Pilgrim addresses Virgil:

> 'My master, now wait here for me,
> that I may clear up just one doubt about him;
> then you can make me hurry as you will.'
> My guide stood fast, and I went on to ask
> of him who still was cursing bitterly:
> 'Who are you that rebukes another so?
> …[I] can be precious to you if you want fame…
> for I can set your name among my other notes.' (XXXII. 82-93)

When the sinner responds flippantly — "'I want the contrary; / so go away and do not harass me'" — Dante-Pilgrim "grab[s] him by the scruff," exclaiming "'you'll have to name yourself to me or else / you won't have even one hair left here'" and finally "'pluck[ing] from him more than one tuft'" (XXXII.97-105). At first glance, Dante-Pilgrim appears diametrically opposed in tone and instinct to the Dante-Poet of the opening lines: where Dante-Poet appeals to the authority of his artistic guides for narrative assistance, Dante-Pilgrim commands authority *over* his guide, commanding Virgil to wait and reclaiming his agency to address sinners without an introduction; where Dante-Poet seems respectful, conscientious of his foreboding literary duties, Dante-Pilgrim appears clumsy, inadequately self-aware, impatient, and *cruel*, violently ripping out the sinner's hair for his disobedience. It is no coincidence that these divergent tendencies reach their climax in the final circle of hell: Dante-Poet's fear of recounting the coming events is, of course, a direct result of the circle's sheer magnitude, and Dante-Pilgrim's propensity for individual expression has been fermenting since the *Inferno*'s first cantos. And yet, in spite of these characterological discrepancies, Dante-Pilgrim's overarching objective — to know the sinner's true name and background in order to set them among his "other notes" — is a precise corollary with Dante-Poet's urge to "tell a tale" that doesn't "differ from the fact" — poet and protagonist share the same aspiration for accurate, representational story-telling.

This shared aspiration finally cements the link between Dante-Poet and Dante-Pilgrim in the interaction's last lines. As Dante-Pilgrim continues to pull the sinner's hair, to no avail, another sinner cries "'what is it, Bocca? / Isn't the music of your jaws enough / for you without your bark? What devil's at you?'" (XXXII.106-108). Dante-Pilgrim replies:

> 'And now, I said, 'you traitor bent on evil,
> I do not need your talk, for I shall carry
> true news of you, and that will bring you shame.
> 'Be off,' he answered; 'tell them what you like,
> but don't be silent, if you make it back,
> about the one whose tongue was now so quick.
> 'I saw,' you could say, 'him of Duera.' (XXXII.109-116)

Thus, in an ingenious narrative turn, it is neither Dante-Pilgrim's violence nor his flustered invectives that grant him the information he demands, but rather a perfect, bitterly sardonic construct of *Dante-Poet*'s conception of hell: the dual betrayal of two sinners explicitly condemned for their treachery. Dante-Poet's introductory qualms of lyrical inadequacy ring hollow here: not only does he *follow* Dante-Pilgrim into this new circle, but he *saves* Dante-Pilgrim from the possibility that he might not be able to "carry true news" to the mortal world, and thereby fulfills his own mission to tell a truthful story. Whether or not the news is really "true" — that is, if the lives of these men were worthily treacherous, or if they really deserve the "shame" that Dante-Pilgrim prescribes — is (fittingly) up to Dante-Poet, but the two have successfully conveyed to their readers that these men are the Florentine nobleman Bocca degli Abati and Ghibelline leader Buoso da Duera; the rest is up to us. In this way, Dante-Poet's poetic objectives entirely subsume the narrative drive of Dante-Pilgrim's journey.

While it is easy to assume that the *Inferno* is inherently didactic, concerned with strict moral boundaries and codified delineations of sin, the poem's genius in fact lies in its ambiguity: Dante continually asks us to question the placement and treatment of sinners, to find for

ourselves what this conception of hell truly *means*. With this in mind, it is important to consider the larger implications of this phenomenon — what does it mean, for this canto and the work at large, that the poet's emanating literary urges so completely inhabit and consume the actions of his protagonist? The most striking of these ramifications suggests that Dante-Poet, *not* Virgil, is Dante-Pilgrim's true guide through Hell. This in turn entails a cogent argument for the usefulness of poetry itself as an art of *retrospection*: a lived experience, Dante-Poet urges, is only as frightening, only as formidable, only as breathtaking, as the story that tells it.