

How Not to Think Like Dante Alighieri: Guilt, Punishment and the Components of Dantean Space

THE CLASSICAL ROOTS OF DANTEAN SPACE IN EURIPIDES, OVID AND OTHERS

We begin Part III by examining some of Dante's precursors, focusing on stories that use individual elements and devices of Dantean space. Perhaps by first unpacking this aesthetic into the parts that Dante then synthesized to create his powerful aesthetic machinery, we might then better grasp its social and psychic effects. We locate examples of these different elements in certain canonical Greek tragedies such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' *Bacchae*, while other aspects are similar to the medieval narrative form of the psychomachia.

EMOTIONAL PROJECTION AND THE CHARACTEROLOGICAL MANIFOLD

First, there is what we might consider the kernel of Dantean space, that element of the spatial elaboration of an emotional problem, or in other words the projection of an inner emotional struggle out onto the world of the story where it takes some physical form outside the character and becomes a mirror of that conflict. We actually find this element in flower as early as Aeschylus's play the *Agamemnon*, the oldest extant Greek tragedy. His play presents us with Clytemnestra, the queen of Argos and the wife of King Agamemnon, who is away at Troy leading the Greeks against the Trojans.

The play begins as a guard joyfully sees a distant signal fire in the night: King Agamemnon's ship is finally returning from the war. His wife Clytemnestra has ruled the palace in his absence for ten years, and in all that time her emotions have swirled around one specific Dantean moment: she has never overcome her husband's killing of her favorite daughter, Iphigenia, of whom he made a human sacrifice to keep his army unified as they left for the war. Clytemnestra's long-simmering tumult of grief and rage becomes spatially manifest in the play's grand operatic penultimate scene when she invites her returning husband to ascend the palace steps. She tells him that in honor of his accomplishments she has had a blood-red carpet woven just for him, and she now orders this 'celebratory' carpet to be unrolled down the great steps to his feet. Despite his better judgement a flattered Agamemnon is lured onto the red carpet and on up the steps into the palace: there Clytemnestra dismembers him with an ax, completing her revenge and echoing the trauma of Agamemnon's initial bloodying of their house when he killed their daughter.

Aeschylus's idea of the red carpet is powerful not simply because the carpet dramatizes the spider's invitation of the fly into her web. The scene's deeper power comes because this web carries several levels of dramatic meaning. When Agamemnon unwittingly steps onto this large carpet leading up the stairs to the palace, the theatrical space of the palace manifests her simmering rage in many ways because it is simultaneously entangled with their past, present and future. Her fashioned web rings both *historically* with the past—with the remembered blood of the daughter he murdered—and also *foreshadowingly* with his own coming bloody murder. But as the audience knows, this carefully-made red carpet and the treacherous palace it leads up to are also a manifest spatialized presence of his wife's *current* inner emotional storm. In this scene she is like a dramatic character with an external goal and an inner emotional goal, but by creating and deploying the red carpet (itself a kind of tunnel of memory), Clytemnestra's inner goal is projected outwards and shapes the very nature of the space of the story and expresses all of the levels of the characterological manifold.

Writing slightly later, Sophocles then achieves something similar in *Oedipus Rex*. In this play the transgressions of King Oedipus—his murder of his own father and his sexual relations with his mother—are simultaneously cause and externalized and embodied in the plague that is decimating the city he leads. Here the city's plague-strewn streets are

somewhat like the red carpeted palace entrance of the *Agamemnon*: in each we have a space that echoes with both a past crime and the current inner conflict of a protagonist. This device again appears in Euripides' play *The Bacchae*: when Pentheus refuses the power and reality of Bacchus, the god of sex and theater, Bacchus is inspired by this king's sexual repressions and youthful prurience to then turn his city-state first into rubble and then into a landscape of violent sexual madness, punishing Pentheus and also presenting him with this wild murderous mirror of the king's own disordered inner state.

This operatic aesthetic of canonical Greek tragedy offers two building blocks of Dantean space. First, these plays all externalize a protagonist's inner conflict and conflictual history by transcribing it onto the space and place of the character in such a way that it drives the plot forwards and marks its completion. Secondly, these stories suggest the idea that the inner desires of a character can also be mirrored in his or her specific *punishment*. All three plays reflect the dramatic logic of the arithmetic or balancing idea that 'the punishment fits the crime.' Such simple ideas have the persuasion of a monetary exchange, in the form of payment or of a measured and meted-out balancing of pain and agony.

But while this dramatic use of punishment embodies important elements of Dante's design, they do not fully constitute it: Narcissus' story, as told by Pausanias (x. 31. § 6) and Eustathius (*ad Hom.* p. 266) offers a new element. Narcissus's story is straightforward: in love with himself and no-one else, he then tries to grasp his own reflection in the water of a well and drowns in it. This story offers an aesthetic compactness that forever defines narcissism—the loved reflection of Narcissus's own image is his downfall. This story elegance offers a new refined dramatic pleasure and economy: the idea that a story's conclusion and a character's punishment can be a direct mimetic attribute or image of the character's desires, flaw or crime. While Oedipus's and Pentheus's own crimes, forbidden desires and inner disorder are vaguely externalized through the punishment of the cities they rule—in the form of a plague for Oedipus and of a band of murderous naked women for Pentheus—Narcissus' fate has no such obscurity: his death by drowning in his self-image literally and overtly mirrors his own character flaw.

While also possessing this aspect of overtly expressing one's crime or flaw, Echo's story goes further, containing an element that will appear again in Dante's stories of Ugolino, Francesca and Capaneus: Echo commits a kind of crime for which she is divinely punished in a very specific way that is not only architected by her crime but is also

an infinite repetition of it. Like an inhabitant of Dante's *Inferno*, she continues to exist but cannot ever escape from her cursing actions.

Her story can be given in simple outline. Hera comes looking for her husband Zeus who is busy having sex with nymphs, and an unwise Echo tries to cover for him by chattering on and on with Hera to distract her. When Hera realizes what Echo is doing she grows furious and punishes her, denying the nymph's voice and allowing her only to repeat what she has just heard. Echo now experiences a mirror-image of her crime, turning her punishment into an eternal reminder of her defining character moment, and this aspect can also serve as a warning to all who hear her story.

Note that however painful and horrid the punishments visited on Narcissus, Agamemnon, Oedipus and Pentheus, their final fate is not one of suspended animation and torture as Echo's is. But the Greek tradition has other examples of a permanent divine punishment for a crime against the gods, a punishment that should last for all eternity. Think for example of Prometheus's eternal punishment on the cliffs of Tartarus, where his liver will forever be devoured by an eagle. Here, as in Hera's infinite punishment of Echo, there is no balance, no even exchange for a crime: there is instead simply a transgression of the divine that then tips Prometheus (and Echo) into a new existential yet eternal condition. This pedagogical logic—of a punishment architecture married to the character's permanent and enduring struggle with it—is also foundational for Dante's stories.

One final precursor of Dantean space can be noted. This is found in the medieval narrative form of the psychomachia, a form that continues to influence mainstream cinema in films like *Identity* (2003), television shows like *River* (2015), and others. In the psychomachia a series of characters are in fact different manifestations of aspects of one mind. In this form we often have a clear elaboration of an inner conflict, a moment when the dramatic stage becomes nothing more nor less than a mirror of an inner conflict of a protagonist who is struggling to come to some big revelation, insight or decision. (Arguably this form is implicit in some Greek tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex* and *The Bacchae* but these plays are not overt psychomachias.)

In this short survey of Greek tragedy, the Echo myth and the medieval psychomachia, we have identified five of the six main elements of Dantean space.

1. **The spectacular external spatialization of an inner conflict** is found in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.
2. **The creation of a dramatic logic between crime and punishment** is also found in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.
3. **The construction of an ongoing *eternal* punishment that embodies the character's conflict** is found in the Prometheus myth.
4. **Eternal punishment *and* the invention of a punishment that mirrors the character's crime** are both found in Ovid's story of Echo.
5. **The creation of characters and settings whose struggles and debate are aspects and projections of a protagonist's mind** is found in the medieval *Psychomachia*.

Given these elements it is not difficult to imagine a character who has landed in some permanent state of spatialized internal conflict because of a specific event that they are responsible for. We can also easily imagine that that specific event is *mirrored in* the state they are trapped in on some physical or sensual level. But these by themselves do not constitute Dantean space. The one last element that is so prevalent in Dante is the sense that the core conflictual event of a character's story is also a trauma, an inescapable memory from earlier life from which the character cannot escape.

And that brings us back to our first example. Clytemnestra is clearly wrestling with and cannot escape from the traumatic moment that happened ten years before the play starts: the Dantean moment when her husband killed her beloved daughter. When she murders Agamemnon she creates a new Dantean moment, a new murderous trauma, in her own son Orestes, who years later will then himself return to this very scene to murder her and her co-conspirator Aegisthus. And so,

6. **The use of an inciting trauma that then dictates a character's obsessive thought, raging emotions, conflict and objectives** is found in the character of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*.¹

To see how close Clytemnestra is to the characters in Dante's *Inferno*, we might imagine that her crime were somehow divinely wrought into an eternal mirroring punishment like Echo's. If for example we imagine that Clytemnestra was condemned to relentlessly ax her husband through all eternity we can then easily imagine her as a denizen of Dante's ninth circle of Hell, an intent, eternally-butchered neighbor ensconced within screaming distance of Ugolino.

JUDICIAL PLEASURES VERSUS THE JURIDICAL HARMONIES
OF DANTEAN SPACES: *RECONSIDERING THE STORIES OF
FRANCESCA AND PROMETHEUS*

We should distinguish between *judicial* pleasure, the pleasure we take in “rightly” judging someone in real life—be that our child, our partner, our friend or sister or neighbor—and the *juridical* pleasures granted by dramas, that pleasure we gain from feeling a character’s fate is a right match for her actions. Judicial pleasure is our own judgement, and our own act of judgement feels right to us when it seems correctly formed and informed by our own construction of events, our moral precepts, history and emotions. These judgments in life embody a sense of power and responsibility. By contrast, the juridical pleasure of *drama* is an appreciation of someone *else’s* judgment of people and events, expressed in a fixed way through dramatic form. This dramatic construction of empathies is not spontaneous but is instead composed of symbols, oppositions, rhythms and rhymes and other techniques inherited from thousands of years of story vernacular. However, though it is constructed, Juridical pleasure is not balanced or codified the way our modern legal codes legitimate themselves. Even if the pleasure of perceiving some story ‘balance’ between an action and a punishment sometimes informs the instincts of our juries and judges, it isn’t supposed to: in general we no longer invent punishments but have legal codes that determine what is just.

Justice in *drama* is anchored in an emotion of catharsis tied to a gushing and satisfying feeling of affirmation in the viewer or reader. Dante’s *Commedia* is rife with this device: we love Dante’s stories because they offer such strange and challenging juridical pleasure. Every case to some degree argues that it is a case of poetic justice, of your crimes coming back to haunt you. As Dante himself uses Dantean space it is always just, giving the impression that Dantean moments only happen to those who deserve it.

We love it when stories have this balance: it provides us with an intense feeling of closure and often of catharsis. But of course this is an aesthetic fiction: however pleasurable and reassuring, this aesthetic is highly powered by a profound resentment. In fact in real life Dantean moments are almost never actually just: they are not punishments or the signs of what character work we must now do to become a complete and moral person. In real life, as opposed to so many pedagogical stories, Dantean space is usually inflicted upon us, by an abuser or by random events, and do not befall us by our own actions.

Francesca's story breaks from the juridical pleasures of Dante's other characters. In fact Dante's own uncertainty, emotional anguish, and his fainting spell at the end of Francesca's tale, the only time he faints in *The Divine Comedy*, hints at just this tension in his whole massive edifice. It seems as if Dante finds that Francesca, alone among the denizens of Hell, has her own convincing logic that bears up against his god's. She chose love over propriety, chose love over conventional ideas of the boundaries of marriage, chose love even over her god. To put love first above all else is a moral choice as well as a social one, and she accepts the consequences and is forever with her lover now because at least they are together, ghosts that will forever haunt each other.

Hers is also an empathetic choice, and Dante's own emotional uncertainty in dealing with Francesca's case is the one area where two different moral logics crash together. Her case is like that of Prometheus, chained forever to that rock by the unjust gods: we can see this punishment as motivated by the punisher, as feeling right and satisfying in the eyes of the gods who punish. But the reader can also see it as also very unjust, that there is a great crime happening in this particular Dantean space: we see here that the gods operate by their own rules, that life might in certain intensely dramatic moments have more than one juridical logic. Like Dante, we are unsure if Francesca's fate is truly just. Like certain Greek tragedies, her tale highlights juridical pleasure in a way that fascinates and troubles the reader's own sense of right and wrong.

The uncertainty produced in this example of Francesca fuels the entire Romantic Movement, the first revolt against the law of Moses, against a patriarchal logic, and in favor of stories that have far-less-clear moral lessons, such as fairytales, Greek myths and tragedies and our romantic heritage. In drama we speak about the cut-line, the line that ends a scene and can hang in the air. With Prometheus and Francesca we have a kind of cut-scenario, an ending in a story leaving a character suspended outside of justice, an emotional abrasion left in our consciousness. In this lack of juridical closure we can feel two forms of abrasion: that of identifying empathetically with the character, and thus imagining ourselves left in that nightmarish situation, but we can also ask ourselves if their punishment is just or unjust. We cannot get Francesca out of our minds because she is still there, still floating in that space, still wrongly judged in some sense, and so she stays with us, a story lacking closure and juridical pleasure, a whirlpool of our empathy like Prometheus, deserving rescue like a character left buried underground, eternally trapped in a coffin, alive and beating on the wood.

THE SOCIAL ISOLATION OF DANTEAN SPACE

All of our focus on Dantean spaces in the last seven chapters has ignored one pointed question: does this form of narration teach us to see ourselves and others in a specifically anti-social way? People in Dante's *Divine Comedy* are isolated, trapped within themselves by themselves. Is it a coincidence that Dante's originary landscape is so marked by alienated, atomized and misanthropic characters? Is Dantean space itself implicated in this? Does it as a form somehow carry a certain sense of self that necessarily imposes certain forms of alienation? What are the effects of consuming narratives that deploy Dantean space?

In short, is Dantean space bad for us?

The question seems to break down into two parts. First, though we've largely divorced Dante's form from his thirteenth-century metaphysics and religion, this aesthetic model was originally also a *moral* model, one that welds personal history to responsibility and a code of punishment, and this punitive moral system can still be felt in our stories. And obviously his Hell and Purgatory are both spaces of punishment: both are really prisons, though Purgatory offers time off for good behavior.

Since it is an aesthetic of the self in a form of self-absorption, is it somehow fundamentally opposed to community? Could *that* help explain why *The Divine Comedy* is so alienated and socially dystopic in so many ways? Consider for example the very negative role of community in the poem's hundreds of stories: both in life and death many of its hundreds of characters successfully pull others into Hell or Purgatory, and yet there is hardly a single character in 300 cantos who actually helps another to escape his or her dark fate.

Perhaps this social distrust and alienation is deeply connected to the fact that Dantean space is different from dispassionate and dramatic space in one crucial way. A Dantean space is the emotional space of only one person: it is the singular experience of one injured traumatized heart. Thus it offers only one emotional point-of-view, and it is usually of a heart that, like Dante's, has been made distrustful, bitter, antisocial and misanthropic from the deeply injuring experience, it often drives a person deeper into emotional, social and psychological isolation, to search

out some particular isolated pocket of personal Hell. But it needn't: some characters, like Ripley or Amelie, then fight to break out of their isolation to save and to re-enter the community.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF DANTEAN SPACE

It is time to evaluate the positive and negative social effects of Dantean space on readers and viewers.

On the positive side, there is simply the absolute necessity of having a mimetic representation of Dantean moments to appreciate certain kinds of human experience. This was a powerful and useful invention. Those living a Dantean moment usually do not realize the nature and shape and role it plays in their lives: an external perspective is required to inform them of this condition, and arguably it was Dante as much as any other pioneer of psychology who makes this reflection possible. Before artists began holding this mirror up to us, this entire aspect of human existence was arguably fairly invisible both to Dantean characters themselves and to others. Those of us not experiencing Dantean moments need these representations to recognize this fate in others, and also of course to simply appreciate the true range and nature of what it is to be human. Only these mimetic representations, only journeys into such points of view and experiences can help us understand this.

Once you understand the impacts of Dantean moments on people, you begin to see life differently: you understand that we are all rather like wild bonsai trees caught in a storm: the traumas of the past shape and snap the branches of our character in ways we do not entirely control but which often grant us our singular beauty and brutishness. Dante's characters suggested that our memories of harrowing events stay with us over time, and that some can stretch like taffy into our future. After Dante it was easier to understand that the injuries and buffeting winds of our life, the acidic soils we are born into, and so many other battering forces help shape us into the characters we have and the beauty and darkness we possess, that these forces shape the very ways that some of us hope and desire and live. But the particular mirror he fashioned holds that guilt, punishment and a somewhat primitive definition of responsibility binds the self together, proposing a type of agency and responsibility that to many seems quite wrongheaded and oppressive today.

In addition, the dark side of Dantean moments should give us pause here. After all, despite a few positive examples, Dantean space is by and large a portrait of trauma, of its power to create isolation through negative emotions such as consuming bitterness, obsession, guilt and fear. Dantean space is essentially the portrait of the singular experiences of singularly disaffected human beings. Most Dantean space separates and does not bridge the social realm: it shows people trapped in their own distorted pocket of the world.

Moreover, the human sciences that were invented in subsequent centuries rather convincingly argue that we are not really the architects of our own Hell. In the next chapter we will consider the Dantean space of a rape victim, but only a moment of reflection shows us that life is full of examples where others thrust Hell upon a blameless person. The blinders of this form of individualism, with its attribution of responsibility for pain and suffering, have a very long and suspect history.

These two individualistic aspects of this aesthetic of trauma help explain why the entire *Divine Comedy* is both so alienated and so socially dystopic. Consider, for example, the overwhelmingly-negative role of community in the poem's hundreds of stories. This social distrust and alienation may not bother a modern reader but our urbane response is only a symptom of the way we live now and not a sign of our comparative sophistication. Dante's portrait remains a striking contrast to—and a lightning strike against—the communally grounded sense of self portrayed in Dante's time. Dante's portrait of Florence was certainly drawn from his experience: life there was vicious and unstable for the merchant class and the upper class but there had been few aesthetic representations of life like this. His contemporary readers would almost certainly be far more shocked at the bleak psychological realism of his nether-world than we are because we are far more individualistic and alienated than his first readers were: individualism is of course not a constant in cultures.

We might also speculate that this trailblazing aesthetic of alienation might originate in Dante's own trauma of being betrayed and then banished from his native Florence. This bitter aspect of *The Divine Comedy*—its long passionate and authentic portrait of social atomization, social betrayal and individual responsibility, self-deception and akrasia—can help explain the dramatic impact of Dante's poem on his times. Dante's journey makes a long persuasive argument that the individual is alone, responsible for God's judgements and all-too-often betrayed into

Hell's pits by others. As such, Dante's alarming portrait arguably helped free the individual from the social bonds of the medieval community and thus helped unleash the Renaissance sense of self. But perhaps there is a deeper level of alienation here. Since it is a model that marries memory to responsibility, does it thereby cast guilt as the self's fundamental cement? Also it seems to put suffering memories at the center of so many of its best-drawn characters, and for this reason the empathy that it draws from us is always compassionate empathy: in this chorus of suffering there are no clear voices of powerful communal empathy.

For these reasons and others, it is crucial to understand Dantean space—so deeply connected to the deployment of Dantean characters and story arcs—because it has now spread throughout our world. As we have shown in our examples, we find vivid dimensioned instances today in all forms of storytelling, and this includes other forms of art like paintings, sculpture and video-games that make a commitment to story. In extending our investigation we argue that in whatever genre they appear, spaces animated by this Dantean machinery are not only more powerful and far more enveloping than either dispassionate or dramatic characters, spectacle and space. We argue that such spaces are also more marbled with ideas of the self and of responsibility and thus deserve attention on a sociological and anthropological level.²

Lastly, we should return to the point that Dante's examples all create compassionate empathy and lack communal empathy. Dante's system was created almost five centuries before Kant's invention of Deontological ethics, well before Utilitarian ethics, Marx, Weber and Said, and nearly seven centuries before our best philosophers wrought both an ethics of care and an ethics of capabilities. Considering how much of its aesthetic is guilt-based, punitive, connected to juridical pleasures and deeply anchored in subjectivity, Dantean space might not be a good aesthetic for these later ethical systems because it cannot look at the Other in the alert fashion and with the dimensionality that these later moral frames all insist on. Faced with our modern attempts to understand and reveal cruelty and oppression, Dante's ethic and aesthetic seem perhaps a bad match for our contemporary problems.

Ecstatic Space, however, seems a far better fit.

To see this very different form of empathy being married to Dantean space, we have to move forwards three hundred years to the innovations of the architect and sculptor Bernini.

NOTES

1. Arguably, we will see this again when we discuss the myth of Apollo and Daphne in the next chapter.
2. Dedicated to Michael Small, who fashions justice every day.

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