

Dante's Infernal Baptism

In the *Inferno*, Dante the protagonist undergoes a moral transformation from a lost and confused (*smarrito*) initiate who is prone to feeling pity for the damned, into the proper Christian Dante of the final cantos who understands the courtesy of rudeness to the souls of hell (Inf XXXIII). This transformation, which acts as a sort of infernal baptism for Dante, is tied to his movement out of the fifth bolgia of the eighth circle, which itself acts as the conclusion of a parodic inversion of triple immersion baptism that begins with the movement into the first bolgia of circle eight.

The first clue towards the importance of the fifth bolgia is the apparent moral transformation of Dante. Before entering the *inferno*, Dante braces himself to “sustain the strife, both of the journey and of the pity” that he anticipates encountering (Inf II). Dante as a protagonist does not yet know how hell burns its various inhabitants, but just the thought of the pain he will see fills him with sufficient anticipation of pity to cause him to make ready for what is to come. He was quite right in this anticipation, for every canto until the eighth shows him overcome with sadness: the lukewarm were “so that at first they made [Dante] weep” (Inf III); “great sadness seized [Dante’s] heart when [he] heard” Virgil speak of the great souls of limbo (Inf IV); Francesca’s “torments make [Dante] weep for the grief and pity” (Inf V); Ciacco’s “misery so weighs upon [Dante] that it bids [him] to weep” (Inf VI); and Dante felt “heart-wrung” at the sight of the inhabitants of the fourth circle (Inf VII). Dante continues to feel pity and to weep as the *inferno* continues, and goes for quite a while without any significant reduction to the magnitude of the pity he feels. For even in canto fifteen he feels great sadness for Brunetto Latini, and in canto sixteen the condition of the tormented Florentines fixes “not contempt, but sorrow” within him (Inf XV-XVI).

Canto twenty is the last time Dante weeps due to the punishment of the damned. Here he weeps at the sight of the tormented diviners, whose heads are twisted round and face their backs. Noticing this, Virgil scolds Dante: “who is more impious than he who sorrows at God’s judgement?”

(Inf XX). Dante has no response to this, and remains in a state of grief through Virgil's discussion of Manto. A remarkably similar event occurs again in canto twenty-nine, when Dante longs to "stay and weep" at the sight of the schismatics (Inf XXIX). Here Dante does not truly weep but instead only has the desire to weep, and when similarly scolded by Virgil he responds that he does not feel pity for the inhabitants of the ninth bolgia in general, but for a family member named Geri del Bello. Dante does not see Geri del Bello, and in fact overlooks him while viewing another. Dante sees the horrible torments of Mohammed, Ali, Bertrand de Born, and many unnamed members of the train of schismatics, but does not weep or feel pity. He instead looks for a source of pity that he is unable to find, even though he feels quite sure that it should be able to be found. He has, without yet fully realizing it, come to begin to be unaffected by the damned in much the same way as Francesca and the angel of canto nine are unaffected. This is the result of some transformation, Dante's infernal baptism, that occurs after the encounter with Manto and before the schismatics. To further bolster this claim, though over a slightly wider section of the poem, we will see that Dante is also shown to dramatically change his response to torment at some point after the thirteenth canto.

At three points in the *Inferno*, one of the major damned figures is shown to call upon the pity they expect to receive from Dante. Francesca boldly speaks to the pity that Dante feels for her "perverse ill" (Inf III). She is met with an extreme showing of grief, both through weeping and then through swooning. Later on, Pierre della Vigna, after having a twig broken off by Dante, calls out "have you no spirit of pity?" to the frightened traveler (Inf XIII). Dante then says that "such pity fills my heart," thus again fulfilling a damned soul's request for grief (Inf XIII). The third and final request comes not until canto thirty-three, from Count Ugolino. In his long and deeply saddening story of starvation and cannibalism, Ugolino expectantly calls out to Dante's pity by saying "and if you weep not, at what do you ever weep?" (XXXIII). This mimics both Francesca's and Pierre della Vigna's calls for pity as Ugolino both expects Dante to weep for him, as did Francesca, and asks of

grief from Dante who did not yet express such feelings, as did Pierre della Vigna. But Dante does not pity Ugolino, and instead only focuses his grief towards the children that needlessly died alongside Ugolino in his tower. So again we see that Dante changes through the course of the *Inferno*, and quite dramatically so.

This transformation, or purification of morality, can tie in very neatly to the movement from the fifth to sixth bulgia, which Dante both builds to and treats with significant baptismal imagery. The first component of this imagery is the ascent of Dante. Through the *Inferno*, Dante is continuously descending, lower and lower till the Christian-paradoxical descent into ascent in the thirty-fourth canto. However, the eighth circle (and only the eighth circle) shows Dante making ascents instead of strictly descending. Trivially, Dante and Virgil make slight ascents while moving across the arches above each of the pouches, but four ascents are made up out of pouches into which they descended. Their exists from the first, third, and seventh bolgia are given only a line or two, and their functions here serve only to call attention to and to highlight the major ascent from the sixth bulgia, the discussion of which spans the first sixty-four lines of the twenty-fourth canto. This ascent, or more importantly this descent-into-ascent combination that does not contribute to the downward progression through the *inferno*, is the point at which Dante is ‘baptized’ and ceases to grieve for the damned.

The importance of this third ‘dip’ into the sixth bolgia will be shown in a moment to be the center of a larger program of baptismal metaphor, hence the use of baptism to describe the transformation, but first it is prudent to produce a piece of conversation from the text that Dante the poet uses to show transformation occurring through the descent-into-ascent of this bolgia. Before this bolgia, Dante had shown pity to nearly all the damned he meets, and afterwards is neither able to conjure tears nor grief. In the sixth bolgia itself, locked between these two extremes, Dante responds to the meeting of the jovial friars by saying “O frati, I vostri mali...” (*Inf* XXIII). This phrase is

intentionally ambiguous, as had he continued, Dante the protagonist could have went on to lament the evils that are the punishment of the jovial friars, or he could have gone on to condemn the foul evils of their sins that caused them to face the punishment that he sees them enduring. This ambiguity can be roughly and unconvincingly worked out in favor of one side or the other, but the more natural and internally resonant reading would be to allow this ambiguity to be intentionally irresolvable.

Dante at this point is in a state of suspension, he is currently being immersed for the final time in the baptismal waters, and is not yet baptized but not yet unbaptized. Dante, as a poet, is unable to identify the moral state of his past self as a protagonist, and thus must leave his response to the jovial friars in a similarly unidentifiable condition.

This at last brings us to Dante's use of baptismal imagery to tag this event as a sort of baptism through hell. Throughout the inferno there are quite a few similes used to compare objects to water. The first water simile is used to refer to Virgil as a "fount which pours forth so broad a stream of speech," thus beginning a program of referring to Virgil's poetry as having a Christian redeeming quality (Inf I). Several of the four rivers of the inferno also get treated with water similes. The only non-Virgil non-river objects that get similar treatment are Geryon and the pitch of the fifth bulgia. Geryon takes part in two similes comparing him to a boat moving through the air like water, and a third treating him as a beaver laying on the bank of a shore (Inf XVI-XVII). This three-part water simile links the air through which Dante is about to travel with water, and Geryon as the vehicle for Dante's first immersion into this water. Geryon immerses Dante in the metaphoric waters of the sky above the first bulgia, then leaves him in the pocket of that first bulgia. From this bulgia, Dante and Virgil make their first ascent in the poem, thus concluding Dante's first immersion.

The second dunking of Dante's triple immersion infernal baptism is his brief journey into the third pouch to better view the punishment of the simonists. While not treated to baptismal simile as such, this immersion is quite apparently linked to Dante's infernal baptism both through the descent-

into-ascent and the explicit analogy to baptism in the description of the punishment offered in that bulgia. However, the water simile picks up again in bulgia five. The pitch of this bulgia, in much the same way as the rivers Styx and Cocytus, becomes water in a simile relating its inhabitants to frogs (Inf XXII). The pitch is set apart from the four rivers of the inferno not only by being the only liquid not derived from old man of Crete, but also by being the only liquid to receive two water similes, as it also partakes in another where its inhabitants are called dolphins (Inf XIV). The passing across this final baptismal fluid is the last part of Dante's transformation, though he is not meant to go into the pitch itself. This is probably because the punishments of hell cannot truly act as salvation. A proper discussion of this goes beyond the space allotted here, but the necessity of descending into the sixth bulgia due to the earthquake that occurred during the harrowing of hell, as a divine proclamation of this fact, seems to be an important aspect of Dante's transformation.

Now the fifth bulgia itself gets water similes to show that it is the final step of Dante's infernal baptism, but the full force of this baptismal imagery comes through Virgil during the fall into the sixth pouch. Virgil is described as carrying Dante down the slope "not as his companion but as his child," and the speed of their fall is given a water simile: "Never did water run so fast through a sluice to turn the wheel of a landmill when it approaches nearest to the paddles as my master went down that bank" (Inf XXIII). So Dante is made a child, one who in life traditionally receives the sacrament, when Virgil, one who has already been tagged as a baptizer, falls as water with Dante. This dramatic penultimate step of Dante's infernal baptism leaves him as a child having received his third and final baptismal immersion through Virgil, the great poet whose tragedy holds Christian truth. This episode not only allows for the important transformation of Dante, but also powerfully culminates the 'Virgil as John the Baptist' program that Dante started back in canto one. All that is left for him to do now is to make the final ascent out of the sixth pouch, and to exit his paradoxical baptism state.

Furthermore, the punishments of the damned in each of these key bulgia are parodies of baptism, for hell cannot offer salvation to its inhabitants. In the first bulgia, the panderer's punishment is given a comical description that subtly hints at their inability to be properly baptized: "I saw horned demons with large scourges, who smote them fiercely from behind. Ah, how they made them lift their heels at first blows! Truly none waited for the second or third!" (Inf XVIII). While this punishment as such is not baptismal, Dante mentions their failure to endure beyond the first blow of the devils. This, while on its own is quite unconvincing, within the greater picture of the importance of this episode is quite likely a jab at the fact that these souls will never acquire the "second or third" immersions required of a proper baptism. The parody is quite evident in the third bolgia, where the souls are stuck upside-down in pits described as "not less wide or larger than those that are made for the baptizings" (Inf XIX). They are stuck submerged, halfway through a baptism, in a vehicle resembling that in which true baptisms are performed. But instead of ascending, as Dante does, they are forced deeper and deeper as new souls come to top them. Finally, the barraters of the fifth bolgia are, through simile, immersed in water as one would be for baptism. But instead of being dunked in the pitch, and living in the outside, their situation is inverted. The barraters live in the pitch, and only exit when caught by the Malebranche. When caught, continuing the theme of inversion, the sinners do not get absolution but are torn and abused by the Malebranche until they are thrown back into the pitch with the other sinners.

As a closing remark, it would seem wrong not to note the numerological significance of the fifth bulgia. These points do not seem to be strongly suggestive to support claims of the importance of this section of the text, but in concord with the arguments above they serve to further indicate that the conclusions of this essay were intended to be discovered by Dante. In the epic tradition, followed by Virgil, the first word(s) of a poem inform the reader as to important themes of the piece. Dante did not follow Virgil in singing of arms and man, but his *Commedia* does tell us that we ought to pay

attention to “Nel Mezzo” (Inf I). In fact, there are two important middles that correspond to the cantos of the barraters. The Inferno proper, that is after the first nine introduction cantos before the city of Dis, is twenty-five cantos long, and the middle canto of which is canto twenty-two. This happens to be the middle of the three cantos that are given to the fifth bulgia. Furthermore, as noted above, Dante changes his response to calls for pity between the call from Pierre della Vigna and from Count Ugolino, or between canto thirteen and thirty-three. The halfway point between these cantos is canto twenty-three, which is the third and final canto dedicated to the fifth bulgia, and the canto where Dante culminates his infernal baptism. Finally, quite interestingly though possibly reading too far into a coincidence, the middle line of the middle canto of Dis, that is canto twenty-two, contains a repeated word in the middle of the line: “intorno intorno” (Inf XXII). This phrase ‘turning round’ perfectly summarizes (at least as well as one repeated word can) the central event that passing over the fifth bolgia signifies. For canto twenty-three is the location of Dante’s most significant moral rotation in the Inferno, and the most significant turning round that takes place within Hell.