

## *Purgatorio*

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Dante, like many poets and authors in the Middle Ages, is a numerologist. Part of the poet's skill is weaving numbers into the warp and weft of their works. In the *Comedia* the number 3 representing the trinity is stamped everywhere. Consider there are 3 divine realms presented in three *cantiche*. This may seem obvious, but purgatory as a tenant of Catholic doctrine was only first proposed at the Council of Lyons in 1274 when Dante was 9 years old, and only after was his story open to take place in 3 parts. There are 100 cantos in the entire *Comedia*, but *Inf I* has long been considered an introduction to the overall work, so commentators prefer the breakdown 1+99 in which each of the 3 *cantiche* has 33 cantos (+1 makes 34 in *Inferno*). The verse itself is written in rhyming three-line tercets with the scheme ABA, BCB, CDC, etc, and each tercet (in Italian) is 33 syllables long. Three *cantiche* of 33 cantos... 3line tercets of 33 syllables. The building blocks of the poem reflects its overall structure!

Each of the divine realms has 9 levels, a multiple of 3. There are 9 circles of hell, 9 spheres of heaven, and in purgatory we have a 7-story mountain bracketed by ante-purgatory at its base and the garden of Eden at its top. Each terrace of the 7-story mountain contains penitents working out their purgation of a particular deadly sin. Dante breaks it into 3 regions based on how love is corrupted by each sin – Pride, Envy and Wrath all love the wrong thing, while Sloth loves too little, and Avarice, Gluttony and Lust all love too much. A similar tryptic structure can be found in levels of hell and heaven. The stairway to the entrance of the mountain is adorned by 3 steps. On the, mountain Dante sleeps 3 times, has 3 dreams, revealing a vision of 3 women. He has 3 guides between the dark wood of *Inferno* and the throne room of God in *Paradiso*. Three is everywhere.

Dante's Purgatory is a great mountain made from ejected flotsam from Satan's impact that created the pit of hell through which Dante and Virgil have just passed. The ejected matter piles up on the opposite side of the Earth forming the mountain of Purgatory. As such it is, antipodal to Jerusalem. Drawing a line straight down from the top of the mountain through the center of the earth, and out the other side to Jerusalem we see Eden and Golgotha aligned, which reminds the reader of the place of mankind's fall, and the place of his redemption. All of spiritual history is held in the geography of Dante's world. The base of the mountain is a place of Dante's own imagination, an ante-purgatory where we find excommunicates and the late repentant. Commentators have long scratched their heads about the presence of Cato in ante-purgatory, as he both committed suicide (suicides are found 7<sup>th</sup> circle of hell), and was a traitor to Julius Cesare (which did not go well for Cassius and Brutus, circle 9). He was almost certainly

never a Christian. The reader must remember, in purgatory, we are not in the presence of sinners, but penitents, and everyone we find will end up in heaven. Cato is a poor candidate for the crown of bliss. We have to chalk it up to poetic license.

Once he ascends the 3 steps into the mountain proper (he is warned not to look back conjuring Lot's wife, and Jesus' warning that all who put their hand to the plow and look back are not fit for the kingdom of heaven) his forehead is adorned with 7 "p"s. The "p" represents "pecare", Latin for sin, and one by one they will be erased as he progresses up the seven stories of the mountain. The sequence of events on each terrace is similar: 1) description of the terrace, 2) exemplar of the virtue at odds with the sin (Mary is always one of the exemplars), 3) Dante and Virgil talk with the penitents, 4) exemplars of the vice, 5) an angel removes a single "p", 6) they progress up to the next terrace. Like *Inferno* where the punishment fits the sin, here the work of purgation also reflects the sin. The prideful are doubled over by heavy rocks, their eyes to the ground, antithetical to prideful heads held high. The envious have their eyes sewn shut so they can not gaze on the people who were the objects of their derision in life. The wrathful are wrapped in acrid and blinding smoke, just as in life they were wrapped in suffocating anger. The slothful are whipped into a frenzy, running so fast that Dante and Virgil cannot keep up. Here the sequence described above unfolds in a mere 40 lines compared to 250-300 lines on the other terrace... even the poetry is in a hurry. The avaricious are lying face down on the earth, such that their eyes cannot see the things that provoked greed in life. The gluttons are emaciated while being tempted by the fruit of a tree, perhaps a shoot from the garden of Eden just 2 terraces above. The lustful are wrapped in flame, just as the incontinent animal passions burned them in life. It is interesting that Dante places both heterosexual and homosexual penitents among the lustful. Remember, all here are headed for heaven. Dante's medieval Catholicism seems more charitable to the sin of homosexuality than some 21<sup>st</sup>-century evangelicals.

At its root, the *Comedia* is a love story. Dante was in love with a girl named Beatrice (and we mean a girl – they probably first met at the tender age of 9-11). In his book of poems called the *Vita Nuova* Dante ascribes to her literal angelic grace bestowed upon her while still a mortal... she is the perfect embodiment of love. We also learn from *Vita Nuova* that she died young. It is Beatrice from her blessed perch in heaven that has sent the poet Virgil from his normal place in *Inferno*'s Limbo to bring Dante through the divine realms to be reconciled to her. His will and intellect will be perfected by the journey, allowing him to eventually stand in the presence of God. Upon reaching the mountain, the reader expects a grand reunion between Dante and Beatrice, but upon topping the mountain and entering the garden of Eden we are presented with the mysterious Matelda. Her job is to baptize in the waters of Lethe and Eunoë penitents whose purgation is complete. This has the effect of causing one to forget their sin and remember only blessings. This is the final step before a penitent becomes a saint and is

transported into the heavenly spheres. Matelda's active work is contrasted with the more contemplative work of Beatrice, who will act more as a teacher and guide to Dante's intellectual training for the rest of the poem. Commentators have long noted the active-contemplative pairing of Matelda-Beatrice compare to that of Leah (representing active faith) and Rachel (representing contemplative faith). And just as Jacob labored 7 years for the hand of Rachel only to be given that of Leah, here Dante has labored up 7 stories of the mountain to be reunited with his Beatrice, only to be presented with Matelda.

In what may be the theatrical climax of the entire *Comedia* Dante is treated to a vision of the church triumphant. The reader (and Dante) are seeing the inevitable victory of the church at the end of time, and while for the sake of time and space I will save for the discussion the symbolism that has been ascribed to each element of the parade, it is fitting to examine the numbers: 24 elders + 4 living creatures + 1 griffon + 3 women in red, white or green + 4 women in purple, + 2 old men + 4 more men + 1 last man "asleep and keen" + 100 angels and finally 1 Beatrice makes 144 creatures in the train, the number of perfection from Rev chapters 7 and 14. Always the numerologist, the allegory, metaphor, and layers of meaning in the *Comedia* are a playground for the student of literature ... and have remained so for over 800 years.