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John Ciardi

“The Longest Walk in the Universe”

April 1, 1965

Portland State College

Portland State University Library Special Collections & University Archives

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JOHN CIARDI: [recording begins mid-sentence] ...but it's a combination of synecdoche and hyperboles. He's trying to indicate a burst of inconceivable speed. Learn to read Dante as a synecdochist, he's a master of this figure in which you take one central detail to represent the whole. For example, some of the students might weigh this, he's trying to describe a path in hell, a rather steep one. But all he says about it is, “The road was such, but the way could make... the foot could make no way without the hand.”

See, if you stop and think, you know how steep that path is. You need hand holds and foot holds, but get the difference, you know what the freshman would say? “As I clambered up the vertiginous declivity [laughter] of the sheer face of the cliff, the soaring granite mounting to zenith above me, and the abyss falling away forever below.” He hams it to pieces; he overdoes it. But the master knows how to do it with a touch and leave it. “The road was such that the foot could make no way without the hand.” Which is firm as that, as precise as that. That's one of the things we value, but you see, you can't get it runningly.

The way to read Dante, I think, is one canto a night, and think about it in between and return to it. You should read the headnotes, maybe you should read the footnotes first. Then read the text, then reread the footnotes and then maybe reread the text and think about it. It's a terrible exercise, it might take you thirty-five minutes. You'd have to miss *Gunsmoke*. [laughter] But then you've got something to think about for a long way, but the details have to be marked.

“Caritas” is not a matter of giving a check to the community fund, it’s the active outgoing love of others. That is what is really originally meant by charity.

And the souls in heaven are full of it. They fly down, they throw themselves at Dante, trying to make his way, by the way they rejoice in his joy. You see, that is “caritas.” And when you say faith, hope, and charity, and the greatest of these is charity. Don’t ever get confused into the notion that this means, you know, giving a little of your earnings is something of the sort. It includes that. But *charity* in this sense is the English corruption of Latin *caritas*, which is just that: the active outgoing love of others. The brotherhood of [...]. Virgil says to Dante the great central... he strikes the great central theme of the *Divine Comedy*, which is experience. He says, in essence, you're not going to get to the light that way.

However, if you’d like to reach the light, I’ll try to be your guide, but you have to go the long way ‘round. You have to undertake the arduous journey to total experience. And in this case, it consists of the painful descent into hell, which is the journey to the recognition of what sin is. It is followed by the arduous ascent of purgatory, which is the journey to the renunciation of sin, the getting it out of one’s system. Then and only then may one begin, as his senses are refined by experience, an approach to the light, but it's a long process. When Dante sees his first angel, for example, his eyes won’t bear the light. They can't stand it, you see, he hasn’t developed his sensibilities up to the point of that understanding. By the time he gets to the fourth circle of the *Inferno* his eyes have... of the *Paradiso*, his eyes have adjusted.

The souls there are so bright that when they move in front of the sun he can see them. But he’s also able to look at them by that time, you see; he has developed toward his own possibilities. And this is the point, the point is active seeking experience. That’s what makes Dante such a great intellectual experience. Now, Dante did believe in the existence of the simple soul. The soul with no contradictory impulses. And I’m not at all sure but what he conceived Beatrice to be this simple soul. The soul born with no impulse in it except good. And therefore, there was no need in it for self-seeking. All it had to do was obey its own natural impulse, and it would come to the good.

Dante himself achieves this state at the top of the *Purgatorio*, where Virgil finally releases him from his tutelage, and says to him, “Lord of yourself, I crown and miter you.” He says you are now free to obey any impulse, you don’t have to worry about it, there is no evil impulse left in you. Now, this would be an enviable condition, but if... one of the points Dante is making is, mind is responsible for itself. He was a man of mind and he had to work to his own identity. And time... note, that time and again as Dante and Virgil are making their passage through the *Inferno*, their way is blocked by fiends who won’t let them pass.

And in every instance except one, when they touch absolute evil—I'll leave that up for a moment—Virgil says to the fiends almost the same thing. The words vary a bit but the essence of the message is always “that this man may experience all he has been sent.” And that statement is always sufficient, the way is always opened. The fiends let them pass through. Now whether or not you can accept the premise that the ardour for total experience will conquer all doors, the point of Dante's allegory is quite simple. A man must actively engage himself in the pursuit of the good. This is the total message, if you like, of the *Divine Comedy*, infinitely refined. The remaining journey is the way Dante should've taken instead of just trying to run up that hill without committing himself.

You see, it's the journey to a total spiritual and intellectual experience, and step by step it reveals itself; but this is all sermon I have been preaching so far, with only a touch here and there of the aesthetics of the poem. I said I was first drawn to it because of the economy of the vehicle. There is much more to be said on that particular score. One of the rules of hell, you see, Dante is talking about good and evil, but considering how thoroughly he has set out to categorize good and evil, he says astonishingly little about that because he has active devices for transmitting these things. His map of the universe evaluates things on one level but... For example, the economy that is made possible by his way of describing the sinners. There is a rule of hell: as ye sinned, so are ye punished. And so, as a refinement, every punishment is a refiguration of the sin. And Dante is a master of the symbolic punishment that explains itself.

Over and over again, when he is way down in the *bolgia* of the sowers of discord, he runs into one of the most memorable figures in the *Divine Comedy*, Bertran de Born, the Provençal poet, who reputedly—on no evidence but Dante's, but reputedly—advised the English prince to war against his father. So he divided father from son; he was a sower of discord. His punishment is that his head is divided from his body. The souls in this circle suffer a Promethean punishment; they drag themselves around the ledge in agony while their wounds heal. And as they complete the circle of the ledge, a demon stands there with a sword and rehacks them in certain prescribed ways, just as the eagles performed liver surgery on Prometheus every morning at 10 o'clock or whatever the time was. And so he had a day of convalescence before the eagle returned to make another incision. So these souls are endlessly mutilated and dragging themselves together again, just as the pain of healing is over they're re-mutilated. And this is Bertran de Born's thing, so his head has been lopped off and he is walking around this long circle, and eventually somehow it will grow back on him. But meanwhile he is carrying it in his hand.

It is a memorable picture; Dante is standing—well I hate to suggest this, but Dante is standing where I am—rather, Dante is standing up in the balcony there, see, looking down on me. See, I'll take this light, and Bertran de Born wants to speak to Dante up there, but his head is down here. He is carrying it by the hair as if it were a lantern. Dante says that; now, he wants to speak to the man up in the balcony, but his head is way down here and his vocal cords, as you might imagine, are not in very good shape. So he picks up his head and holds it up like this at arm's length. It's a memorable picture, you can't forget it. [laughter]

But not comical either, it's powerful; and he explains who he is, holding up his head, as a terrible example, he says "Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso," "So, you observe in me the counter-thrust." What he's saying is, in this way is the law of symbolic retribution observed in me. As I divided father from son, so am I divided from myself. That's the rule of hell throughout. It takes a lot of saying, but the actual encompassment of it is quite simple. The first sinners Dante meets in the vestibule of hell are the opportunists. They aren't allowed into hell because no soul in hell gets any satisfaction from any other. Now these souls include the angels who would take no side in the wars of heaven. They weren't for God, they weren't for Satan; they were for promotion.

I have a feeling we have a member of such people in the Senate from time to time. [laughter] The fence-straddlers waiting to see. Now once God got rid of Satan, he's not going to keep these types in heaven. But they can't let them into hell because the actively damned would feel superior to them. You see, at least I got here honestly. [laughter] There's a moment of satisfaction in the thing, you could [...] over this other man and feel a little bit better. But nobody in hell gets any satisfaction from anybody else because, you see, the opposite rule of hell is the opposite of caritas. It's complete self-enclosure; the closest you can get to the infernal condition in our terms is the state of the addict. Whose one reality is the dope, see; nothing else matters, no relationship counts, he's enclosed in his own need. And is grappled within his own enclosure, always that.

But the souls, here are the souls in the vestibule of hell, they run 'round and 'round and 'round. They are pursued by a swarm of wasps and hornets who sting them and raise eruptions on their naked body. These eruptions pour blood and pus down their sweaty bodies. And all this falls to the floor of hell where it is feasted on by loathsome worms and maggots. Now Dante doesn't often get into this tone, but when he does he has a point for it, you see. People say, he is the master of everything all right: he is the master of the disgusting. But there's a point: I want you to see the thinking of it. He has to do it with this tone because he could not make his point otherwise. Opportunism is a moral filth that gives rise to moral filth, and the judgment cannot be softened and be right; that's the point he's trying to make there. Over and over again. You

can't get too delicate about this if you're going to make... There is a point that Dante registers, particularly, in the marsh of Styx, what he calls "giustos venio," which is the Aristotelian mean between wrath and the permission of evil: righteous indignation. And that has to score in a good man's life. If you're too "namby pamby" toward evil, you haven't found a true center, which is the point he's making.

Well here, of course, is the strength of Dante. With his structure and with the fact that as soon as you see a class of sinners and have them identified, the punishment gives you a little dramatic interpretation of what they stand for. In consequence, the cantos average about 140 lines; it normally takes very much less than, oh, from 20-40 at most to describe the sinners. Now that leaves Dante all these other lines of the canto to do so many of the other things that he does that enrich the *Divine Comedy*. You see, he has treatises on how the states of mankind come into being. He pauses to invent a death for Ulysses. He manufactures dramatic incidents. Remember, he had set out in the *Convivio*, the work before the *Paradiso*... the *Divine Comedy*—and thank heaven he had abandoned it, I think he had dull work—he had set out to translate all learning into Italian. He was going to set out a feast of learning in 12 courses. Well, he got indigestion before he got very far into it and gave it up, but he was an encyclopedic personality, a mind. He had set out to write an encyclopedia, and he wants to do all these things, and the vehicle gives him a place to hang them.

And I'd like to conclude by illustrating a few points in which I think he achieved, in which he used his vehicle, everything else having been taken care of, to achieve various kinds of greatness in dramatizing his poem. Before I do that, I'd like to take maybe three minutes to say one thing about Virgil. Virgil is usually presented—and in my edition it is too because I've changed my mind recently—as representing human reason. I was never happy about that generally accepted allegory, and I'd like to apologize for it now. If all that Virgil represents is human reason, think how many other great souls of the past might better have applied for the job. There's Aristotle, you see, the master of those who know. He is a kind of human reason, but he's something else. Think of Virgil as representing—and you can think about this at great length—aesthetic wisdom. Not categorical, philosophical, scientific, or practical human reason, but aesthetic wisdom. And I mean everything that a great artist acquires in a lifetime of devotion to his art.

You might think of it as everything that went out of Dante's eyes at the moment he died. You see, it's all that possibility, that body of knowledge and experience that makes the great artist. It's more than rational, and I don't imply anything mysterious about it; it's a huge body of learning, but not necessarily a codified and classified body of learning. There's a difference

between aesthetic wisdom and... One of the things aesthetic wisdom comprehends is the ability to project oneself into the situation of another and to feel it.

So we get one of the tremendous strengths of Dante. So when we are reading of Paolo and Francesca, of Ruggiere and Ugolino, of Farinata degli Uberti, of Bertran de Born, of Ulysses, we believe we are in the presence of these people. We believe it is Francesca speaking. We are convinced that this is the way Francesca would speak in this situation. Moreover, he makes of them mythologized personalities who seem to be more than what they are, and I'd like to illustrate just a few passages where I think... where I dare read my lines in comparison with Dante's.

He's talking about Paolo and Francesca, and what I'm happy about in this passage is the catch of the final rhythm. He asks if Paolo and Francesca sinned for love. Never mind the historicity of the incident; Dante was historically wrong, he was just spiritually right. But they are whirled 'round and 'round together because, again, that's their punishment; they are blown forever in a dark wind. See, isn't that what passion is, the dark wind of passion? The sin was they only thought about one another's bodies and they did not think about God. So they shut God out of their thinking. They lost themselves from the light, and so through all eternity they are whirled 'round and 'round together. But the twentieth-century sentimentalist always misreads. They say, "How sweet, even in hell they are together," [laughter] "the perpetual marriage."

But actually they are more closely in the condition of Sartre's *No Exit*. They are not there to comfort one another. No soul in hell is there to comfort anyone else. There is no exception to that rule. Rather, they are there to increase one another's torments. There is Francesca's body whirling around beside him and through all of eternity, Paolo sees her and says, "For that, I lost eternal life." You see; and the other way around: she looks at him and wonders if was it worth it and she knows the answer. [laughter] So they're not there in an act of sympathy; they were one another's doom, and in that sense they are forever tied together, but in a way of reminding one another for how little they lost how much, to add that lack of refreshment.

So Dante calls to them, and Paolo and Francesca fly to him out of the cloud and Francesca speaks; Paolo says nothing. I don't know whether there is an implied criticism in that or not. [laughter] "At last I spoke. Poet, I should be glad to speak a word with those two, swept so lightly on the wind and still so sad. And he to me: Watch them. When next they pass, call to them in the name of love that drives and damns them here." See, there's the point, drives and damns them here. "In that name they will pause."

“Thus, as soon as the wind, in its wild course, brought them around, I called, ‘Oh, wearied souls, if none forbid it, pause and speak to us.’” And then a lovely passage: “As mating doves that love calls to their nest glide through the air with motionless raised wings, born by the sweet desire that fills each breast.” You see that image? They’ve been swirling around in that cloud and then they glide over, they don’t have to be... they just... “Just saw those spirits turn on the torn sky, from the band where Dido whirls across the air, such was the power of pity in my cry.”

And Francesca explains who she is and then there’s a great passage. Dante asks how she came to commit her sin and she answers, “The double grief of a lost bliss is to recall its happy hour in pain. Your guide and teacher knows the truth of this.” That’s Virgil, you see, who is in limbo but still in hell. “But if there’s indeed a soul in hell who asks of the beginning of our love out of his pity, I will weep and tell. On a day for dalliance we read the rhyme of Lancelot, how love had mastered him; we were alone with innocence and dim time, pause after pause that high old story drew our eyes together while we blushed and paled. But it was one soft passage overthrew our caution and our hearts. For when we read how her fond smile was kissed by such a lover, he who is one with me alive and dead breathed on my lips the tremor of his kiss. That book and he who wrote it was a pander; that day we read no further.” I think that’s the power of the Italian, and I think my success in that passage is in getting that “that day we read no further” into the right rhythm. Because that is the same accent Dante gives to it.

Now the book they were reading was the medieval French romance of Galehaut. Not Galahad, but Galehaut. Galehaut, Galeotto in Italian, was the go-between Guenevere and Lancelot. And you have an untranslatable pun in that thing, the original line is “Galeotto fu ’l libro e chi lo scrisse.” Now *galeotto* has passed into Italian as the word for *pimp*. So in a sense when you say, Galeotto was that book and Galeotto the author, you’re saying a pimp was the book and a pimp the author. But you can’t quite work it into English, can you—you’ve got to lose some of it.

So there’s... all I can say is “That book and he who wrote it was a pander; that day we read no further.” Now I said that if you compare juxtapositions, I’m giving you an example of what I call vertical juxtaposition in the case of Farinata degli Uberti and Sordello and [...] Now if you get to the bottom of hell, you’ll find another pair of sinners, not exactly lovers, and that is of course the famous figures of Ugolino and Ruggieri. Now, they are the two most famous pair of sinners in hell. If you look again, you can’t conquer a feeling that these two are related. In the first place, Dante runs into Paolo and Francesca just one circle into hell itself. Above them there is only limbo. And you meet Ruggieri and Ugolino when they are within one circle of getting out of hell. So the first the first pair is the next to the least sinners in hell, and the second pair is the next to the worst sinners in hell. Now, they have that same position within the architecture of

things. Also, they are pairs, also both of them say, "Since you asked, I will choke back my tears and tell." There is a singleness in tonalities, see. Now what's Dante doing?

Learn to look for these architectural comparisons. I don't know the answer to it except that Paolo and Francesca are forever related to Ruggieri and Ugolino. Both, I think, to illustrate one thing, if I had to make a moral point, in each member of this pair was the other's doom. You see, if Paolo hadn't met Francesca, then he might've made it, and the other way around. If Francesca would have never met Paolo. If Ruggieri and Ugolino. Now a further moral might be derived, if any one of these two had thought of God rather than about themselves, both would've been saved. I think that's one of the points that Dante's making. That it was the conflict of their own... and the fact that each grabbed for his own feelings. And I think that's part of the moral thing, but Dante doesn't say it, you have to guess it out of the juxtaposition. See, that's why it's inexhaustible.

I'd like to read you a little part of the passage. Ugolino—Dante finds them in the ice and Ugolino is chewing the nape of Ruggieri's head. This reverent soul is the Archbishop Ruggieri, he says. Now this is the one point in the *Inferno* in which Dante touches upon cannibalism. He makes it up. We know that Ugolino, the Count Ugolino was locked up in a tower with his grandsons and that they died there by starvation. But it seems to be implied that before Ugolino died, he ate his grandsons. And it's reinforced by the fact that he is now eating the nape of Ruggieri's skull, you see. And Dante asks him about his sin and he answers, "You ask me to renew a grief so desperate that the very thought of speaking of it tears my heart in two. But if my words might be a seed that bears the fruit of infamy from him I gnaw, I shall weep, but tell my story through my tears."

You see how much they sound alike. You can carry this a step further: there's a passage in Virgil that deals with a similar area, and Dante... he did it consciously. He did everything consciously. Uses—if take the six lines from Virgil, you'll find that half the language has been translated in the Paolo and Francesca incident and half has been translated in the Ruggieri and Ugolino incident. There's a further relationship of the two. He was always making these structural comparisons.

"I was Count Ugolino. I must explain this reverent grace is the Archbishop Ruggieri." You see, there is a bitter irony there, he's chewing on the nape of the man's skull, and they're both locked in the ice of hell. He said, "This reverent grace is the Archbishop Ruggieri. Now I will tell you why I gnaw his brain. That I, who trusted him, had to undergo imprisonment and death through his treachery you will know already. What you cannot know, that is the lingering inhumanity of the death I suffered [...] and here in full. Then judge for yourself if he has injured

me. A narrow window in the coup of stone, now called the Tower of Hunger for my sake, within which others yet must face alone, had shown me several waning moons already...”

[tape runs out; program ends]