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Chandler Baker Beall
"The *Divine Comedy* and Tradition"
Portland State College
March 11, 1965

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[recording begins mid-sentence]

CHANDLER BAKER BEALL: ...was born 700 years ago this May. And as my part in this celebration of this septuacentennial, I wish to talk about *The Divine Comedy*, which has become, through all these years, an integral part of our own literary patrimony. And I wish to say some rather simple and often-said things about this complex work, and to point out its larger distinguishing features. If, as my title suggests, I indicate its place in tradition, this does not imply a serious attempt here to study its origins. This is rather a strategy for situating it roughly in literary history, for providing some useful comparisons and contrasts, and leading by easy stages into the world of the poem. I do not mean that Italian world in which the poem was created, but rather that marvelous world which was created in the poem.

The Divine Comedy was composed in Italian in the early 1300s, four or five decades before Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Petrarch's *Sonnet*, and three-fourths of a century before *The Canterbury Tales*. Thus it therefore occupies a most strategic position near the beginning of modern cultural history, and this great figure is still one of the most prominent peaks on our own literary horizon. But, since Ruskin has called Dante "the central man of all the world," let us glance backward to the very bounds of our Western literary life, to the beginning of the tradition, and start with Homer and his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

With these two poems, the epic becomes and remains for some twenty-five or more centuries, the highest and noblest of literary forms. A “Homeric” tradition is constituted, which departs immediately after Homer from composition for oral presentation, from formulaic language, from dependence on memory, and becomes a series of written books. Now, when writing a book, an author can insert a richer complexity of subject, a greater diversity of perspective, a more precise proportion of dimensions, and several levels of meaning. The advantages of written composition over oral composition are so tremendous that in the 19th century, the post-Darwinian evolutionist scholars spoke of the primitive epic and the civilized epic: one coming at the dawn of a nation’s life, the other at the high point of civilization.

I could argue with these anthropological puns, but my present point is that Homer started a literary tradition in the Occident, and tradition means imitation and the progressive enrichment of subject matter. Homer had many imitators in both Greek and Latin, but never one of the first magnitude until the Roman poet Virgil. More than any other poet, it was Virgil who abided and perpetuated the epic tradition in the West, seven... six or seven or eight centuries after Homer. Virgil knew Greek well. His *Aeneid*, a “civilized”—civilized in quotes now—a “civilized” epic, combines the warfare of the *Iliad* with the far-flung journeying of the *Odyssey* to describe the founding of the Roman race by refugees from Troy, and to glorify Roman valor, Roman history, Roman ideals and the newly founded Roman empire. And beyond this general imitation of the two Homeric poems, Virgil continues the Homeric tradition in a more direct sense. That is, he takes over one of the Trojan warriors of the *Iliad*, Aeneas, and makes him figure in a second epic in which he makes him the protagonist, just as Homer himself had taken Odysseus out of the *Iliad* to make him the protagonist of the *Odyssey*.

But Aeneas becomes a new kind of epic hero. Tradition means imitation; it also means progression, when it’s alive. And Aeneas becomes a new kind of epic hero; he becomes a man who grows through hardship and experience, into a leader capable not only of winning battles or outwitting monsters, but of bearing the destiny of the nation or indeed interpreting the ways of the gods to men. Virgil’s epic, like Homer’s, is heroic and it is anthropocentric; that is, it is primarily involved with man and man’s work. And like Homer’s, it gives a broad cultural synthesis of the temper and the spirit of a race, as well as insights into the human spirit and its more universal aspects. It was to remain, for two millennia, the foremost and finest model of what might be called a straight epic, the heroic epic of a nation or a people. Homer’s true greatness was recognized too late because of the lack of Greek in the West for him to fill this role.

The third great poet in the epic tradition is Dante, who lived fourteen centuries after Virgil. The Middle Ages intervened between the two; a great part of Greco-Roman culture had been lost;

the Greek language had been lost in the West, but Latin was still very much alive as a written language and was still a classroom text. Europe had become Christianized and the papacy was a great power. The Roman empire was long since dead and gone. The Germanic invasion had brought new nations and the feudal system, which by Dante's day had about run its course, at least in Italy. The old nobility was dying out as a ruling class, especially in Italy, leaving behind a sort of ideal of what it might have been but never really became; a Christian knighthood in flower. Knighthood never really flowered anywhere except in fiction. The Galahads and the Lancelots are bookish characters. Dante's hell is filled with the real nobles, and by and large that's where they belong. [laughter]

Dante had heard of Homer. He honors him in his poem, but he had never read more than snatches of him in Latin authors. The greatest poet on Dante's horizon was Virgil, and Virgil becomes his principle literary inspiration, his model and guide for a long, complex, massive poem dealing with great issues. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is filled with Roman references of the *Aeneid*: borrowed descriptions, borrowed similes, direct quotations, allusions and so on. But Dante's protagonist is not a fictional hero borrowed from an earlier epic. Dante's poem is distinguished from all other great epics in having as its protagonist, its author. This central fact has tremendous consequences for the poem, as we shall see. Dante's epic is no longer an objective, heroic work. It is a personal, and of necessity, a non-heroic narrative.

But if Dante does not choose one of Virgil's heroes as his protagonist, he does something vastly more interesting: he takes Virgil himself, the pagan poet, and makes of him the second most important character of his Christian poem. This fact, too, has tremendous consequences for the poem. Here, imitation becomes annexation and absorption, not only of the older poem, but of its historical creator as well. Dante's character Virgil plays an essential role in his poem, but he remains also, in the poem, the author of the *Aeneid*, the representative poet of Rome, and the greatest product of Roman culture. Thus, the two main characters of *The Inferno* are two historical personages, both great poets who become travelling companions and great friends. Their fictional roles include and extend their biographical and historical roles. Dante criticism today urges us quite rightly to keep in mind the two Dantes and the two Virgils and the perspectivism which is thus introduced into the poem. Virgil, the character, for example, the disembodied spirit who is a creation of Dante's, can look back upon the life and works of a historical Roman poet and claim them as his own, even though he has now lost them. And he can discuss them with the character Dante, or with other characters in the world of the dead. And the responses of the historical Dante to the works of the historical Virgil can be conveyed by the fictional Dante to the fictional Virgil. These historical dimensions added to the characters, enhanced enormously their interest and their consistency, although they have led

some scholars into the error of using the poem as a document to establish biographical facts about Dante and about other persons mentioned in the poem.

Nor should we miss the constant play of relationships of Dante the author and the recreation of himself as character in the narrative. For instance, Dante the character is facing his adventure with trepidation and uncertainty, whereas Dante the omniscient author already knows the outcome of the journey which, so the fiction has it, he is recording from memory. And he looks back upon the first Dante from a considerable distance and portrays him with a variety of author's attitudes, such as amused detachment, or affectionate interest, or pity and so forth. And he allows the first Dante to tell us things he wants us to know about Dante the author, Dante #2 if you will.

You can see here we've come very far from the almost total objectivity of Homer. We are dealing here with a poem which portrays the author himself both as such, and as protagonist in a curiously subjective manner. This gives an intensely personal flavor to the work, or at least the illusion of one. Moreover, Dante's eyewitness accounts tend to lend a persuasive air of authenticity to the narrative. In this work of fiction, the primary fiction is that it is true. Shelley once wrote, "The poetry of Dante may be considered as the bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and ancient world." And indeed, Dante seems to have been keenly aware that fourteenth-century Europe could come of age and achieve cultural maturity only by assimilating Greco-Roman culture as well as the writers in the Christian tradition, and by building upon both traditions. And Dante consciously intends to become this bridge that Shelley mentions, this link between the modern world and the ancient world. And he deliberately makes of his poem a learned synthesis of ancient Rome and modern Europe. This explains the dual character of large portions of the work. The presence, side by side, of creatures from pagan mythology and from Christian legend, functioning as demons in hell or as gatekeepers in purgatory, and the souls of pagans as well as of believers in the Christian hereafter.

This is one meaning of the association of the two poets as characters in the poem. Virgil's culture is transfused into the modern work as the two walk and talk, for each travels amid his own culture, tangibly exteriorized and made visible and substantial by the modern poet. This fact will indicate the great wealth of material that this marvelous poem offers for our instruction and our enjoyment. Dante is able to fuse, and yet to distinguish, real life and literary life. He is able to fuse, and yet to distinguish, his culture and Virgil's culture, his own age and antiquity. The ability to handle such vast temporal perspectives and such complex cultural dimensions is absolutely new in the epic tradition, and would probably have baffled both Homer and Virgil.

But Dante does not stop here. To his capacious cultural epic, he adds the further all-important dimension of the life beyond the grave. That life, for the Christian, is what gives meaning to *this* life, and permits us to view it in its proper perspective. And this life, here and now, is what determines the status and the locus of *that* life. Dante's poem is not only cultural in content, it is also and primarily a religious poem, if I may distinguish cultural from religious. And the true subject of the Christian epic is not the course of a war, or the genius of a nation, but rather the eternal destiny of the human soul. Here we have a further reason why *The Divine Comedy* is not a heroic poem. The heroes of the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid* placed no hope in the afterlife of the soul. They are totally unable to lay up treasures in heaven. Their noblest aspiration is to achieve glory and honor in this world and in this life, and such immortality as fame among men can bestow.

But the protagonist of the Christian epic need not be heroic in the Homeric or Virgilian sense at all, and Dante's poem may not properly be called a heroic poem. It is concerned with the careers and the eternal destinies of all men, of whatever character or calling, and it judges them by a code which is higher than that of knightly honor. The role of the character Dante, is to be a representative of mankind who, by a special dispensation, is being allowed to make this journey into the afterlife, and to write what he has seen in a book. Here, to the tradition of Homer and Virgil, Dante is joining the tradition of St. John the Divine, who on the island of Patmos, was granted the symbolic and prophetic visions which he wrote down in the book of *Revelation*. *The Divine Comedy* is a vision and a revelation, and it belongs not only to the epic but also to the literary type of the apocalypse, a form that has been popular in the West from the Bible to John Bunyan and Blake and Thompson and so forth.

And here again in a sense, Dante annexes to his cultural domain, the Hebrew-Christian cultural and religious traditions. He becomes, also, a broad imitator of the Bible, not of Revelation only, but of many parts of the Old and New Testaments. He imitates the Bible precisely as he imitates Virgil: borrowing and adapting all sorts of material, characters, description, motifs, and so on. The Bible is the most-quoted and most-cited of his sources. And then he imitates the Bible also in a second fashion, in that he makes his poem, like the Bible, carry a spiritual message behind its literal meaning. He sets forth his revelation in a carefully planned action, in the form of a journey in which he, Dante, is permitted to take at the Easter season through hell, purgatory, and paradise. And this journey is, in the highest degree, educational. The traveler, and the reader who struggles along behind him, constantly grows in knowledge and in understanding. Indeed it is, or it becomes, a mystical journey, in the strict sense of this time, a journey in quest of wisdom, human and divine, and its final goal is the beatific vision of the godhead. It is a pilgrim's progress from the human, through the supernatural, to the divine and the eternal. The

epic, as Dante has transformed it, is of deep concern to all living men, but it is no longer merely anthropocentric. It operates now in a tradition which is centered on the divine.

And now from this tradition, Dante once again borrows an author to play an important role as a character in his poem. I do not mean St. John the Divine, but God himself, whose word the Bible is. And this fact has tremendous consequences for the poem. As a character in the action, God is the last of a multitude of personages whom the pilgrim is permitted to encounter. To ascend to him, to stand in his immediate presence, to see him face-to-face, is the final goal and the whole purpose of the pilgrimage, the ineffable experience for which Dante can find no words as the poem closes. But God is an author in a double capacity, who produced not only the Bible, his word, but also the universe, his work.

And Dante is bold enough to imitate both. He imitates God's work, in the first place, by making of the universe the scene of the pilgrim's visionary journey, which extends from the center to the outermost rim of the universe and beyond. And he describes the topography, the geography, and the cosmography at every step of the way. Now, the symmetrical structure of the universe, the round, motionless Earth within a concentric nest of nine spiritual heavens, was furnished to the poet by Ptolemaic astronomy, which was current in his time of course and by current, official church doctrine. And let me pause here, to dispel—or try once more to dispel—a persistent modern myth current in our country, which holds that before Columbus everybody thought the Earth was flat. And that if you sailed far enough, or if in a modern version if you were pushed far enough, you'd fall off the edge. Let me assure you that in Dante's time *no one* believed the world was flat, except of course the sort of people who still think it's flat. [laughter] It was motionless, however. That was a difference from our view.

Dante, then, did not have to invent his universe. He had only the very considerable task of filling these bleak geometric abstractions with graphic imagery and arresting personalities, and of infusing into them the breath and warmth of pulsating, poetic, life. He creates, for his own artistic needs, a universe in the image of God's universe. He imitates God, the author of the world. And he fills his universe with a multitude of inhabitants and he introduces into it, God himself. This he accomplishes most strikingly in the last part, *The Paradiso*, where the pilgrim is guided by Beatrice through the nine spatial heavens and up beyond them, into the tenth, the Empyrean heaven, which is the true abode of God and the blessed.

For the spatial structure of the two other regions, purgatory and hell, the situation was somewhat different. Ptolemy doesn't mention these regions, and both science and theology were extremely vague on the geography of hell and practically silent on purgatory. Dante could then set to work with a rather free hand to construct these two realms, and he found it

symbolically appropriate to derive their construction from the symmetry of the heavens. One is an enormous cone-shaped cavity within the Earth, the other an enormous cone-shaped mountain rising to a height from the Earth, and both are ringed with nine circular ledges, or sections, corresponding to the nine circles of heavens. These ledges are peopled with sinners undergoing various degrees of punishment—or in purgatory, of purification—just as the several heavens are peopled, at least momentarily, with souls enjoying different degrees of bliss. But it must be remembered that if the circles of these two regions were derived historically from the heavens, they are implied within the artistic progression of the poem to prefigure and imply the heavens, the goal of the soul's pilgrimage.

There's a second fashion also in which Dante imitates God's universe, the most striking feature of which is its marvelous order and symmetry. Dante has determined not only that the universe he describes in his poem shall be tightly unified in symmetry and order, but that a like order and symmetry shall be exhibited in the presentation and the action, and in the proportions and plans, of the work. That is, the poem itself, the literary work in words, is an image and an epitome of the universe. And as such, it has its own laws and its own strict organization, its elegant proportions and its strictly planned symmetry. This symmetry is an architectural element of the poem and is organic to it. It is worked out with unbelievable care and minuteness, even to ending each of the three main divisions with the same word, the word *stelle*, "stars." And even to the invention by Dante of a special and fascinating rhyme scheme based on the number three, the so-called "*terza rima*" or "triple rhyme." And this rhyme scheme corresponds to the threefold ordering of the poem, and it signifies and declares that the poem is an analogue of God's poem of the creation. It has the sort of implied divine signature of the trinity in this triple rhyme scheme.

And if you will permit me, I think I will pause here a moment and read you just a few of these lines in Italian to show you how the *terza rima* goes. I'll read you the first nine lines of Canto III, which is the inscription over the gate of hell. Let me first state very briefly what this triple rhyme is: the whole poem is composed of eleven-syllable lines arranged in little stanzas of three lines each. That's the first system of threes, and these stanzas are interlinked by rhymed words, each of which occurs three times; rhyme sounds, rhyme syllables, rhyme endings, but the system of three rhymes always straddled two different little stanzas so that you have a series of *chained* stanzas, interlinked stanzas, linked by the rhyme. And this has a very fascinating consequence, one of which is that if a scribe, through negligence, were to omit a line or two lines or a whole stanza or a whole batch of lines or a whole batch of stanzas, if he checked back he would immediately note that the rhyme scheme was deficient in this place, and he'd go looking around for what he'd left out and go put it back in. The result of this was that *The Divine Comedy*, an enormous poem, is the only poem of any length we have from the

Middle Ages which is supposed to be complete; nobody has ever pointed out a *lacuna* in it, whereas *The Canterbury Tales* are incomplete, even the Bible has incomplete spots, and authors are always complaining—and there's one in the Bible who makes the same complaint—that due to the stupidity of scribes and copyists, his work, no matter how carefully he composed it, runs the risk of being mutilated. They've all complained about it, but Dante is the only one who ever did anything about it, and what he did worked. Here is the first nine lines of the third Canto of *The Inferno* in my Italian; and you remember it begins in a sort of slow series of four minor syllables which the more romantic critics like to say suggests the tolling of a bell or of a knell:

*Per me si va ne la città dolente,
per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,
per me si va tra la perduta gente.*

There, three lines: the outside rhymes with the *dolente* and *gente*. The middle line has an ending “-ore,” “dolore.” That's taken up in the next stanza, in the outside lines:

*Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;
fecemi la divina podestate,
la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.*

And before this series of three “-ore” rhymes is exhausted, he's already introduced one in “-ate,” “podestate,” so that runs through its course of three, and before it's finished, another one comes in:

*Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
se non etterne, e io eterno duro.*

“Duro” is the next one, new, the new rhyme:

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate.

And so on. There you have nine lines. The last one I read is the one that Longfellow translates “All hope abandon ye who enter here,” and “here” isn't here.

Order, then, informed the universe. “Ordo forma universis,” I used to say. Order also therefore informs the poem. God's power is manifest throughout the universe, the heavens declare his glory, as you know. And in this great Catholic poem, Dante not only emulates the divine

handiwork, but he actually succeeds in making us, the readers, feel the very presence of God throughout the entire poem. That is, he makes us feel the presence of the creator who is an operative force throughout his creation, through law and love. The subject of the poem, according to Dante, is literally speaking—I'm quoting him, paraphrasing him here—"The presentation of the state of souls after death, and allegorically speaking, it is a presentation of man exercising freedom of choice, and making mistakes of course, and making himself liable to reward or punishment by justice." And the goal of the poem, he says, or the purpose of it, is to "remove those living in this world from a state of misery and to direct them toward temporal perfection and toward eternal perfection." To this end, Dante animates his poem by peopling it with the souls of interesting historical or literary personages who take on an exemplary and emblematic existence. In Dante's other world, each soul preserves his human individuality, and his essential character and his essential work are made manifest in his ultimate destiny. Each can be viewed there, to use the words of a French poet, "Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change." *Such as, at last, eternity changes him into himself.*

Dante's inferno, therefore, is a miserable gallery of men who have failed as men, their failure now held fast in all its intensity, and becomes their ultimate fate. This explains the graphic realism of Dante's depictions. This explains the law of retribution; the *lex talionis*, the *contrapasso*, he calls it. According to which Dante makes the punishment roughly figure for and fit the crime. Thus suggesting that the sin itself *is* its own punishment, and both are what the sinner himself chooses. This is easily the most striking feature of *The Inferno*. Here the sinners are all at home, so to speak, in that proper circle of hell. And they are disclosed to our view, as you remember, with a precise and gruesome ingenuity; the misers and the prodigals spend their strength rolling heavy weights or heavy money bags against each other, the wrathful souls tear each other and bite each other, murderers are up to their necks in burning blood and tyrants up to their eyebrows, flatterers are immersed up to their lips in filth, hypocrites with painted faces walk under the weight of hooded cloaks of lead, gilded on the outside. The loveless souls of the traitors are plunged in the frozen lake of Cocytus, frozen tears blinding their eyes. Guilty lovers are punished by being eternally driven through the air by the violent whirlwinds of passion, forever in each other's arms. And that is hell. [laughter] Dante sees exactly what the sinner chose, and he conceives of divine justice as giving him precisely that. He does not explain hell to us, but he does give it a solemn meaning. And that inscription I just read you, over the gate of hell, says all this in beautiful poetry. Translated into Oregonian, it could be put very succinctly as "You asked for it." [laughter]

He does establish the Dantean universe as a reasonable universe in which rewards and punishments are administered with perfect justice. And here we can measure how far we have come since the Greek epic. The gods of Homer often cause human suffering or death out of

pique or whim or caprice. Beyond good and evil, they seem all too human in their fashions and their foibles. They would be absolutely unthinkable in Dante's strict scheme of things. Man, here, is no longer the measure of all things, nor of gods, nor of men.

Purgatory is a great mountain springing towards the sky from the southern hemisphere. This is entirely of Dante's invention. On the summit is located Eden, the old garden of innocence so promptly abandoned by mankind. The repentant souls must work their way up through the various ledges of the mountain and be cleansed by pain of their sin. Here the poem experience is not the sin itself nor its image, but the opposite of the sin. It is not a punishment but a penance, not retributive but remedial. The lustful, for instance, cannot be purified by the flames of lust but by its opposite, which is "*caritas*" or "charity," in a sense of divine love. And this too is aflame in Dante. And love and justice, are one. Once cleansed of their sins, the souls, symbolically enough, find themselves on the mountaintop. They have been redeemed from Adam's fall and they're back in Adam's Eden. They have worked their way home, so to speak, after the great adventures of life [audio volume drops very low] in a sinful world. Repentant salvation through merit and grace. Death, and purification. They are now ready to ascend to their final reward, in the heavenly paradise. *Purgatory* does not show their ultimate destiny, it shows them preparing for it.

The Paradise is unquestionably the finest part in the poem; here dwell the blessed in their realm of light, enjoying and reflecting the love that streams upon them from God in greater or lesser degrees according to their capacities. And this is a fascinating point that Dante makes. And he is careful to show that the allotment of these differing capacities is scrupulously just. And the fact that there are differing capacities for bliss, is of course one of the aspects of predestination. You may have thought this was invented by John Calvin, not so. Here, Dante, under the guidance of Beatrice, rises through the various spatial heavens, in each of which he is greeted by a courteous, blessed spirit, whom it would be improper to refer to as a shade since he manifests himself now in the form of a light. These spirits do not have their fixed abode in the heavenly spheres, but they have graciously come forth from God's city to meet the traveler on his way, and to prepare him, progressively, for his arrival in the Empyrean, beyond the universe of space and time, where God and the blessed have their true dwelling place. And where the pilgrim, as I say, is finally granted the mystical experience of the vision of God.

And since this experience, like all deep experiences, is inexpressible in human words, the poem, of necessity, comes to an end. But in order that it may not end in a helpless silence merely because words now fail him, the poet makes of ineffability itself a recurrent theme throughout the *Paradise*, and thus prepares a splendid ending which is a glowing tribute to the

overwhelming glory of the godhead. The silence that follows the final verse is not that of dropping back to Earth, but that of wordless contemplation.

I have indicated, I hope, a few of the more important aspects of the work. I should like to touch on one more of these, the allegory. The very word [...] many a prospective reader. But we can be reassured on this score. There are two main traditions of allegorical heroes, if I may oversimplify the situation. In one, we deal with personified abstractions. That is, the allegorical character has a meaning which is never himself but something else, and we could hardly become interested in him because he is hardly a person. He tends to be unsubstantial, two-dimensional, without complex psychology and bearing a label like "Everyman," "The Red Cross Knight," "Christian" in *Pilgrim's Progress*, or *Candide*. These are no longer popular with the modern reader. In the other allegorical tradition, the character means what he himself is; he is three-dimensional, alive, with a mind of his own, and with a soul, with a history, with an outlook. He is interesting in his own right. And, in addition, he typifies some predominant quality like "Don Quixote," or "Iago," or the great figures of the Old Testament. Dante works in this second tradition. He avoids the pitfalls of personification by choosing from history or literature an interesting personality who at the same time is endowed with the quality he wishes to represent. Thus, Virgil is not a personification of Reason with a capital "R," he is a fascinating personality...

[recording ends mid-sentence; program ends]