

## The Present-Day Message of the Divine Comedy

Mariann Tóth

### Introduction

Dante's life, his works, and philosophy can be dated to a transitional period between the medieval times and the Renaissance. Similarly, the poet takes a journey in his Divine Comedy, at the end of which he holds up a mirror to the reader showing the controversial aspects of the journey the completion of which is then a certain solution followed by a cathartic experience. Namely, love is such a value that it attracts the most attention. In his work, he confirms the words of the Bible verse: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (King James, 2012, 1 Corinthians 13: 13).

"The path indicated by Dante, a true pilgrimage..." (Vatican News, 2021) – wrote Pope Francis in his Apostolic letter marking the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the Italian poet. Taking the journey is a tiresome privilege accompanied by struggles. During this journey, one can get to a point where they desire an inner peace and wish to follow their dreams with the help of a higher power. They can purify themselves confessing their sins then get forgiveness thus leading them from chaos to order. The Divine Comedy shows us that humans can get purified if they are helped by God and faith, and they can also find their peace. Dante's journey is a certain travel topos in his work, which connects our worldly place with the three tiers of the underworld. This shows the fundamentals of the religious character revealing that the true path can be found, which can be reached by experiencing God's love. Dante knew that finding the true path is accompanied by detours. According to Mihály Babits, these detours are not meaningless: "Bad experiences only serves as tools to become better. He, poor last soul, had to go through hell then get purged in the purgatory to find home, in his own soul's paradise. He felt that human knowledge and art were his valued guides through hell and purgatory, though it was Beatrice who could lead him to paradise (Babits, 1995, p. 130)<sup>1</sup>.

Dante sets off towards the dense forest of life:

*"Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost"*  
(Inferno Canto 1)

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

Soon after his departure, he encounters hurdles on his way to the mountain of virtues. His ascend is stopped by three beasts. One of them is a panther, which according to the tradition of that age, is the symbol of persistence, the other one is a lion, which embodies pride and violence, and finally, there is a wolf representing greediness and envy. The parallel to the text in the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament is interesting. It portrays the overwhelming number of sins and treasons of the people in Judea and the punishment awaiting them was the following: “Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased” (King James, 2012, Jeremiah 5: 6).

Among the many wonders, I would like to underline the various connotative interpretations we can create while reading the *Divine Comedy* as we have to puzzle out and understand multiple references whose meanings are rooted in the Christian mythology. According to the medieval ethos, the underworld is divided into three parts. One of them is Hell, Lucifer’s empire, where souls end up if they committed serious sins. The other is Purgatory, the purifying fire, where one can find peace, and the third is Eden where the blessed souls come into the presence of the three-person only God. The order of importance of these three empires is in balance as the order of cosmos is determined by a number of relationships based on the symbolic interpretation of the number three (Bán, 1988)<sup>2</sup>. Dante’s world unfolds as our earthly life. “The structure of the comedy follows Ptolemy’s geocentric model, which is tinted by theories and the works of the poet’s genius and creative mind” (Bán, 1988, p. 99)<sup>3</sup>. The sphere-shaped Earth is presented as the centre of the universe. At the north end of its supernatural axis is Jerusalem and the hill of Golgotha where our Saviour suffered. As the axes goes through the centre of the Earth, we can see Lucifer ruling in his domain then it ends at the hill of Purgatory. “This imaginary axis disappears in the infinity of Empyreum, the Lord’s residence, though the Emyreum does not exist in space (non é in luogo). It is only present in the Lord’s intellect (Bán, 1988, p. 99)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>3</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>4</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

Virgil, who is the moral hero of intellect and purity, helps him find the explanations. Dante regarded him as a poetical idol and a leader helping him in his journey.

*“My master thou and guide!  
Thou he from whom alone I have derived,  
That style, which for its beauty into fame  
Exalts me”  
(Inferno Canto 1)*

I wish to refer to the ingenious structure and aesthetic value of the work with the astrological examples. This value can be read as a topic sentence of numerous studies, namely, its encyclopaedic richness provides an infinite repository for literary interpretations (Kardos, 1966)<sup>5</sup> and it proves the timelessness of the work. In addition, with the help of poetry and the visual sensation of the words, he conveys that finding our real path, the journey and the arrival which is based on our strong faith in God is of sublime importance.

Every part is divided into thirty-three cantos, which add up to a hundred with the introductory canto of Inferno, which means the multiplication of ten. In Dante's times, the number ten was the symbol of perfection. The mystical numerical scale can also be found in Inferno. This scene of suffering has nine circles housing sins according to their severity, and it is also subdivided into rings. As we travel deeper and deeper in the direction of the centre, we meet sinners who committed more serious crimes. Outside the circles the indifferent reside: “They were not wanted either by Heaven or by Hell” (Inferno Canto 3).

I would like to introduce the circles of Hell using and supplementing Imre Bán's study.

In the first circle are those who never knew Christ and were not baptized. In the second circle, the lustful are punished and their soul cannot come to rest. At this point, let me draw your attention to the episode of Paolo and Francesca which is the most emotional part of the work. Our hero is also badly affected by the story about Francesca who fell in love with her brother-in-law, and finally, her husband killed them both:

*“I through compassion fainting, seem'd not far  
From death, and like a corpse I fell to the ground”  
(Inferno Canto 5)*

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

Dante's reaction to this episode transcends his time since if he had accepted the set of values and rules in his time (adultery and the violation of the sanctity of the marriage are deadly sins), he would not have felt so devastated by the outcome of the story. He expresses his compassion with using the number three, as Francesca refers to Amor's power three times:

*“Love, that in gentle heart is quickly learnt”  
“Love, that denial takes from none belov'd”  
“Love brought us to one death”  
(Inferno Canto 5)*

In the third circle are those who overindulge standing in filthy water up to their necks. The fourth circle is inhabited by those whose sin was greed. In the fourth circle, the wrathful and sullen are punished while fighting with each other. In the sixth circle of hell, we can see the heretics in their flaming tombs, then the seventh circle houses the murderers, suicides, and the blasphemers. The eighth circle is the place where the fraudulent suffer. Among them we can see Ulysses, about whom due to his desire for knowledge Dante supposed that he would not stop there (The Pillars of Hercules, the entrance to the Strait of Gibraltar, the end of the ancient world), where no one dared to go any further (Bán, 1988)<sup>6</sup>. Ulysses encouraged his men to go on and the message of his endeavours are still relevant:

*“Call to mind from whence we sprang:  
Ye were not form'd to live the life of brutes  
But virtue to pursue and knowledge high.”  
(Inferno Canto, 26)*

According to János Kelemen (1999)<sup>7</sup>, Imre Bán is not only committed to the concept of regarding Ulysses as a positive character, but he also suggests that Dante identifies with him.

The ninth circle is the narrowest in the cone-shaped Hell. It is occupied by traitors like Lucifer, the fallen angel, who gets the same punishment as Brutus, Judas, and Cassius. The division of Hell was based on Aristotle's ethics (Bán, 1988)<sup>8</sup>. He believed that the three main sources of sin are fraud, violence, and gluttony. Gluttons sin against themselves, the other two commit sins against themselves, their environment, and their God (Bán, 1998)<sup>9</sup>. He also notes heresy is not included in Aristotle's concept of sins.

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>7</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>8</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>9</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

Experiencing the stench and filth of the circles of Hell, Dante and Vergil manage to reach the light with some help:

*“Thus issuing we again beheld the stars.”  
(Inferno, Canto 34)*

The Divine Comedy, which is rich in emblematical and metaphorical references, gives the reader exceptional experience. According to Pope Francis, “Dante is a genius whose humanism is still relevant. Dante Alighieri is the forerunner of our multimedia culture since images, sounds, and symbols are assembled to convey a message” (Vatican News, 2021). This stirring and graphic visualisation emerges especially in Hell, where he flashes or depicts the significant characters in detail. Barbi also confirms this kind of visualisation: “In his depiction Dante utilizes certain sounds and colours which match the different sinners....so as to make the empire of the afterlife more diverse and vivid” (Barbi, 1964. p. 87)<sup>10</sup>.

Having passed through the centre of the Earth, they continue their journey in Purgatory where the souls repent in accordance with the description of the seven sins stated by the Christian Church. Dante acts likewise since an angel marks seven “P”s on his forehead.

*“Seven times  
The letter, that denotes the inward stain,  
He on my forehead with the blunted point  
Of his drawn sword inscrib’d.”  
(Purgatory Canto 9)*

These marks gradually disappear during his penance. Seven angels wipe them down with flaps of their wings one after the other in seven days (Chappelli, 1966)<sup>11</sup>.

The place of the purification is the contrary of that of Hell, as it is not cone-shaped. It looks like a pyramid, and ascending on its slopes, the sins become less and less serious. However, their punishment is not directly proportional. In Purgatory, the feeling of hope and peace prevails. The souls do not atone in vain as on Judgement Day their pain cease to exist and they receive the promised salvation.

In the final part of Purgatory, in the Earthly Paradise, a great experience awaits the poet. After ten years, he can finally meet Beatrice who is the female epitome of unearthly beauty, the purity of the soul, and perfection. In his work

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<sup>11</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

Dante refers to Beatrice with the number nine for which the explanation is elaborated in his work *The New Life* (Baranyi, 2003)<sup>12</sup>. One of the reasons he consistently uses this number is that the nine spheres of Heaven affect one another, and their arrangement also influences the Earth. When Beatrice was born, a perfect and harmonious constellation could be observed. Later, in his train of thought, he makes it clear that the number nine is Beatrice.

The number three is the root of the number nine as without any help of the other numbers if multiplied by itself, you get nine. Therefore, three as such is the component of nine. In addition, the number of the creator of wonders is also three, namely the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which refer to one unity, but is three persons as well. All this makes it clear that the reason why this lady was always accompanied by the number nine is that she was a number nine, a real wonder herself, and this wonder is rooted in the Holy Trinity. (Baranyi, 2003, p. 55)<sup>13</sup>. Sensing renewal and rebirth, Dante listens to her words with reverence, and they enter Paradise together. Similarly, to his ending of Hell, he also finishes Purgatory with appropriate form of the word “star”. When they meet Virgil, his former leader disappears, and Beatrice takes over his role now.

*“I return’d  
From the most holy wave, regenerate,  
If ’en as new plants renew’d with foliage new,  
Pure and made apt for mounting to the stars.”*  
(Purgatory Canto 33)

Paradise, which “is Beatrice’s song above all” (Barbi, 1964, p. 90)<sup>14</sup> is the setting where the poet is escorted to the heights by the love of his life. In accordance with the moral law, Paradise is divided into nine spheres according to the merits of the redeemed. Based on the division in the third part of the work, it doesn’t only depict an imaginary universe but:

It also takes our world to a place beyond the Earth not only with its present, but also with its past that lives in our memories and emotions, and the future that lives in our hopes: God and man, thought and passion, religion and politics, theology and philosophy, science and art, everything that interests man, the reason why he tortures himself during his contemplation and work and what makes him worry and rejoice. (Barbi, 1964, pp. 92–93)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>13</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>14</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>15</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

Faith, hope, and love, the three theological values, appear in the last third of Paradise. The poet is questioned by three saints whose identities are not revealed. We can only deduce who they actually are from allusions by symbols. The poet affirms his knowledge of faith before Saint Peter *“Of him, within whose mighty grasp our Lord Did leave the keys,”* (Paradise Canto 24) and he explains his idea that:

*“Faith of things hop’d is substance, and the proof  
Of things not seen; and herein doth consist  
Methinks its essence”  
(Paradise Canto 24)*

Later he also indicates the subject and content of his faith putting all this into words as:

*“I in one God believe,  
One sole eternal Godhead, of whose love  
All heav’n is mov’d, himself unmov’d the while”  
“In three eternal Persons I believe,  
Essence threefold and one, mysterious league  
Of union absolute, which, many a time”  
(Paradise Canto 24)*

In the following canto, Saint Jacob *“Lo! lo! behold the peer of mickle might, That makes Falicia throng’d with visitants!”* quizzes the poet about the hope in his soul. His answer is:

*“Hope,” said I,  
“Is of the joy to come a sure expectance,  
Th’ effect of grace divine and merit preceding.”*

Finally, in his answer to Saint John, the Eagle of Jesus, concerning the importance of love he states:

*“ in this palace is the weal,  
That Alpha and Omega, is to all  
The lessons love can read me.”  
(Paradise Canto 26)*

The theme of the last parts of Paradise is the mystery of the vision of God (Bán, 1988)<sup>16</sup>. The culmination of the ever more fulfilling devotion of love will be the sight of God. This is also a spiritual experience of a religious person, which everyone longs to achieve at some point. The last lines of the Divine Comedy portray the comfort in God, the love found in God, and how love reveals its existence in perpetual motion in other words the right path and true path that leads to God:

*“Here vigour fail’d the tow’ring fantasy:  
But yet the will roll’d onward, like a wheel  
In even motion, by the Love impell’d,  
That moves the sun in heav’n and all the stars.”*  
(Paradise Canto 30)

It reflects the magnificence of the work and the sharpness of Dante’s mind that all the three units set in the underworld end with the word “star”. He demonstrates such a high level of numerical mysticism that its exploration exceeds the scope of this study. The interpretation of the numbers provides the organizing principle of the poem since the presence of the number three mentioned several times in the work, by which the structure is organized, represents one of the most important numbers in Christian mysticism, the Holy Trinity. In his study Bán (1988)<sup>17</sup> uses the mystical symbolic interpretation of the medieval encyclopaedist, Maurus Rabonus as a basis for the meaning of the numbers. Based on this, the number one means deity, two refers to the two Testaments, three is of the Holy Trinity, four represents the four Gospels and the four elements, five refers to the Books of Moses as well as the five senses that is sin, six symbolizes the six days of Creation, seven has many meanings such as peace, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven cardinal sins, eight is the number of Resurrection, nine symbolizes the nine angelic arms, also Jesus died in the ninth hour of the day and ten is the number of perfection (Bán, 1988)<sup>18</sup>. The narrative poem contains a total of a hundred cantos (10 times 10), thus elevating perfection to heavenly heights with this structural solution. Starting with an introductory canto, the poet builds up the three structural units with thirty-three cantos in each. He breaks it all down even further with an ingenious solution of the mainstay containing thirds speckled with chain rhymes (aba, bcb, cdc, ...), which creates a feeling of infinity in the reader. All this serves as a testament to his tenacity through a hundred cantos in order to keep form and content in

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<sup>16</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>17</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)

<sup>18</sup> Translated by Tóth (2023)



harmony with a poetic feat in which he always finds the third rhyme. We who read this poem in Hungarian, can enjoy all this in a translation that is worthy of Dante done by a similarly great talent, Mihály Babits.

## **Summary**

Illuminating the structural complexity of the Divine Comedy by harmonizing it with his profound knowledge, Dante displays the possession of such knowledge that we marvel at today. All this certainly makes it difficult for the reader to comprehend; therefore, the teachers who try to convey the beauty, cultural value, and Dante's message together with its rich language and figurative meaning of the poem deserve our appreciation. According to Pope Francis: "This is why Dante is a 'prophet of hope': because with his work he urges humanity to free itself from the 'dark forest' of sin to find 'the right path' and thus reach 'the fullness of life and time in history' and 'eternal beatitude in God'. The path indicated by Dante, a true 'pilgrimage'. The Pope points out that "it is 'realistic and within the reach' of all. The Pope also says that "God's mercy always offers the possibility of change and conversion" (Vatican News, 2021).

A question might arise what new messages can a poem, which was written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and is the subject of numerous studies tell the reader. Moreover, what makes a form of artistic realisation classic? The fact that its contents and messages were formulated in such a way that it could be enjoyed by the people of the past centuries and it also delivers a current message for the readers today. Our world together with our value system may change, but certain stages of development can be experienced the same way even if today's digitalised world demands an accelerated lifestyle. We are all on a personal journey that is our own. Taking the values set forth by the socialisation requirements of social media as a basis, our modern way of life tries to adapt to the ever-changing situations. However, there is a developmental stage in a person's life, the realisation of which cannot be replaced by digital tools. The path Dante takes and sets out for his readers is an allegorical allusion whose interpretation lies in the Christian mysticism. This is a struggle for harmony and a sense of security, which everyone aspires to achieve on a personal level, and it is us who decide how much we are willing to do for it.

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study is to systematize the message of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* experienced after rereading it with a special focus on structure, the rich system of symbols, allegorical references of the work, the significance of which has hardly been debated in literature. The journey that Dante takes and offers to the reader is such an allegorical one, whose understanding is hidden in Catholic mythology. It is a struggle for harmony and a feeling of safety, which is done individually. To what extent one wishes to engage in this endeavour is up to the person. The goal is not to proliferate the literature related to Dante, but to focus on what guidance his work can give the reader and shed light on the issues we experience in our lives with the help of his narrative poem.