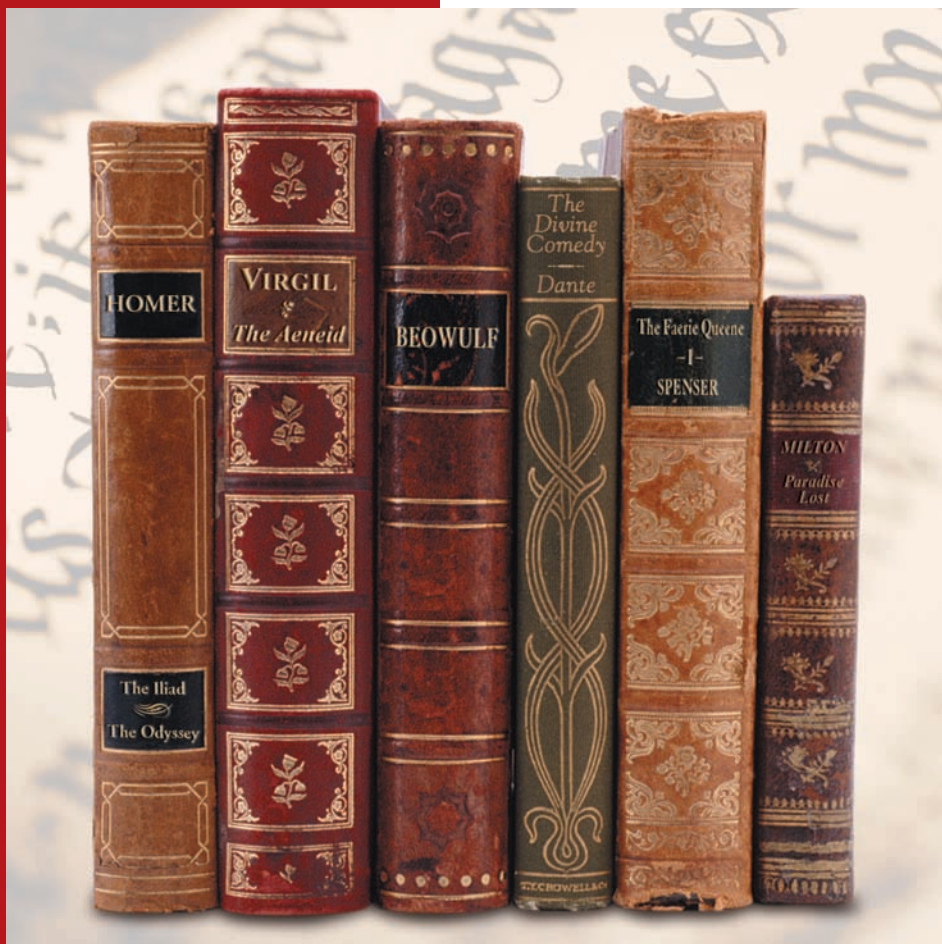


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MONSTERS, GODS, AND HEROES: APPROACHING THE EPIC IN LITERATURE COURSE GUIDE



Professor Timothy B. Shutt
KENYON COLLEGE

Monsters, Gods, and Heroes

Approaching the Epic in Literature

Professor Timothy B. Shutt
Kenyon College



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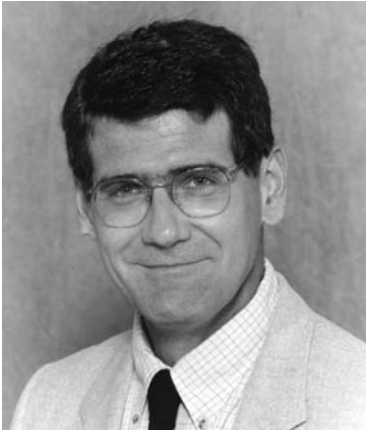
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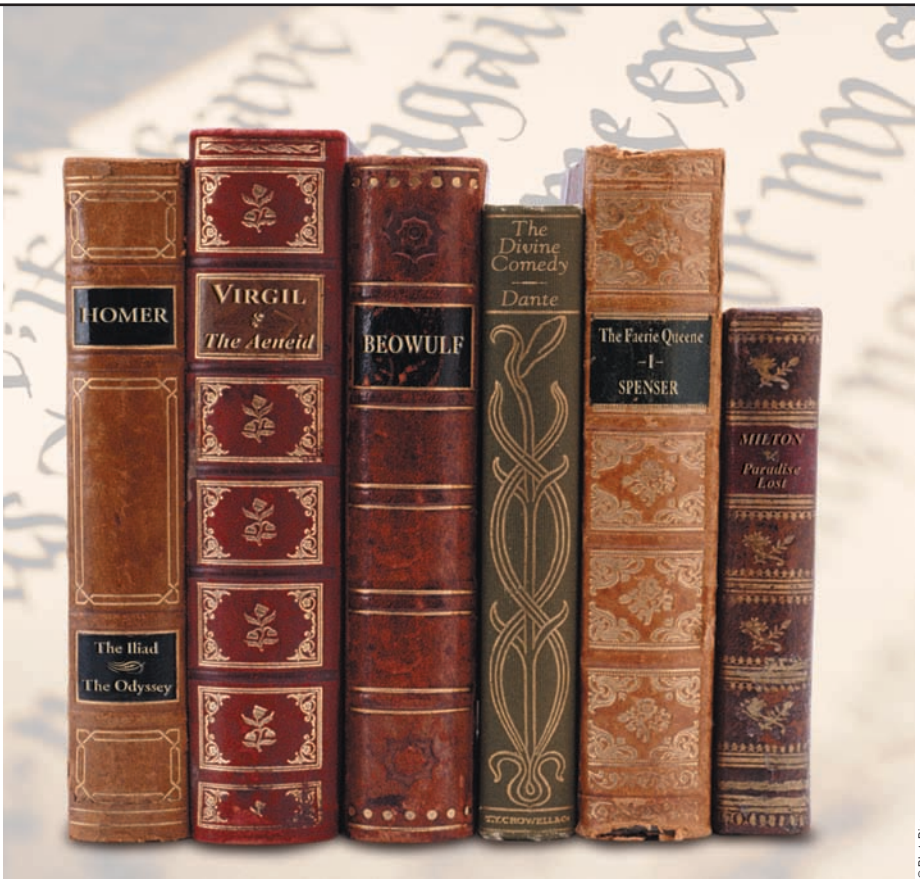
About Your Professor

Timothy B. Shutt

For nineteen years, Professor Timothy Baker Shutt has taught at Kenyon College, famed for splendid teaching, its literary tradition, and an unwavering commitment to the liberal arts. No teacher at Kenyon has ever been more often honored, both by the college and by students, for exceptional skills in the classroom and as a lecturer. Professor Shutt's courses in Kenyon's interdisciplinary Integrated Program in Humane Studies and in the Department of English are always heavily oversubscribed, and he lectures on Homer, Plato, Aristotle, the Bible, Greek historians, Virgil, and Dante every year to a packed house.

Shutt is a native of Ohio, raised in Michigan and schooled in Connecticut. During his high school years at the Hotchkiss School, he was honored as an All-American swimmer and devoted much of his time to drama. He majored in English as an undergraduate student at Yale ('72). After three years at St. Mark's School of Texas, where he taught English and History, and coached swimming, Shutt went on to graduate school in English, specializing in medieval literature and the history of ideas at the University of Virginia as a Du Pont Fellow. After earning his Ph.D. in 1984, Shutt spent two further years at Virginia as Mellon Post-Doctoral Research Fellow. He took a position at Kenyon in 1986, where he has taught happily ever since, deeply enjoying his contact with students and the peaceful life of the Ohio countryside.

Shutt is a jovial extrovert and a polymath—a born teacher and lecturer—interested in nearly everything and everybody. In the Integrated Program in Humane Studies, he teaches literature, philosophy, history, art history, religious studies, and, at times, the history of science. He has written on military history, baseball, and birding in addition to his academic studies, and gives regular talks at the Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon on migratory birds and on observational astronomy and the lore of the stars. He also works, when time permits, as a sports announcer for Kenyon football games, and for championship swimming meets nationwide, claiming longtime Detroit Tiger announcer Ernie Harwell as his inspiration. Shutt also travels regularly as a spokesperson for Kenyon, giving talks and lectures on behalf of the college from coast to coast. But his real vocation is reading and the classroom.



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Introduction

From the very outset in the West—from the time of Homer himself in about 750 BCE—the epic has been the most highly regarded of literary genres. It is rivaled only by tragedy, which arose a bit more than two centuries later, as the most respected, the most influential, and, from a slightly different vantage point, the most prestigious mode of addressing the human condition in literary terms. The major epics are the big boys, the works that, from the very outset, everyone had heard of and everyone knew, at least by reputation. They are the works that had the most profound and most enduring cultural influence. And they are very much with us still, some more than others, but all—or all the most successful ones—are more or less firmly enshrined in cultural memory. They are still read. They are still taught. They still gain imitators and admirers. The stories they tell still shape our imagination and aspirations.

Lecture 1: The Epic

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*.

What is an epic?

What differentiates an epic from other literary works? We might cite several characteristics that make an epic an epic, that work to define the genre. First, perhaps, is the very cultural centrality that the great epics have gained. Many are called, but few are chosen. To gain full epic status, a work must be *taken* as an epic, must be regarded long-term as worthy of epic admiration and regard. To achieve that, a work has to speak across the generations of things that remain important to us.

Half-teasing my students, I sometimes claim there are only three really big themes—love, death, and God. Love, or to elaborate at least a little, love and lust (what we might call “lovst,” that potent combination of the two that in practice is so difficult to disentangle), proves age after age to be a perennial, all-but-irresistible lure to human action and striving.

Epics address not only death, but how to confront death—how to maintain our integrity and selfhood in the knowledge that both, inevitably, will be destroyed, that what is nearest and dearest to us is finally and provably not ours to keep. If there is one virtue that every culture on record has admired—and there is, in fact, more than one—then that virtue is preeminently courage, or the ability to maintain integrity and selfhood while confronted by the manifest face of pain, death, and loss.

And finally, epics address God, or if not God Himself, then the place where we wish God was—or fear he might be. In short, epics address the ultimate shape of things. Are we going somewhere or not? Is there anything or anybody out there, or, to sanitize the phrase, does stuff just happen?

There is one final theme that epics address that rivals love, death, and God in power and influence. How should we live together? As Aristotle said, we are irremediably social creatures—not quite so social as bees and ants, but close enough to give them a run for it. And that too poses enduring problems. It leads us, of course, to questions of power: race, class, and gender—all but a holy trinity to a whole generation of recent critics—and more broadly to ethics and politics. How should we seek to live together, by what rules, stated or unstated, and for what ends? These questions too are addressed by the great epics—with answers of the deepest cultural influence and weight.

But which are the great epics?

The great and often undervalued nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold spoke of the “high seriousness” of epic, and for my money he was right. Epics do address big themes in influential ways, and that is a major part of what ensures their epic status. But there are a few other factors that con-

tribute to the mix. For one, epics tend to be large and long. This is, of course, in large part a function of the long and complicated stories that epics tend to tell. There are no epic *haiku*—seventeen syllables and three lines are just not enough for what an epic seeks to accomplish. The shortest epics are about three thousand lines long, and the longest ten times that and more—in some cases much more.

Epics are characteristically written in verse, and some have argued that they must be written in verse if they are indeed to be epics. This is perhaps a little surprising. When we set out to tell stories, we ordinarily tell them in prose; the novel and the short story are our favored narrative genres. Indeed, many people find verse annoying and an impediment to understanding, as if authors writing in verse could have (and probably should have) written in prose, and instead chose to use verse to prettify and complicate their tale—a sort of unnecessary and self-consciously “arty” showing off.

In the early days, though, when the first epics were written, things worked the other way around. The easy and obvious way to tell a story was in verse, in poetic form. This is because the earliest epics date from a time when the process of writing was a new and rare accomplishment. These epics generally seem to work from a long-standing tradition of oral storytelling in verse. It makes sense. In a culture without writing, you can't look anything up. There are no books and no libraries. You can only remember. And verse and poetry are much easier to remember than prose.

Despite this array of shared characteristics, all epics are not alike. In his *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis draws a sharp and valuable distinction between epics of two different sorts, which he terms “primary” epics and “secondary” epics. Primary epics are those that arise more or less directly from oral tradition, and arise in a culture at a time shortly after writing is introduced. Examples include the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*. Homer aside, such epics are characteristically anonymous, in part because oral tradition has played so large a part in their composition. Other examples include the Old French *Chanson de Roland* and the Spanish *El Cid*.

Secondary epics are very different indeed in the way in which they are composed. They are written—again, in verse—by a single author, carefully writing line after line in a process more like what we ordinarily think of as “writing a book.” Primary epics work from a remembered tradition of more or less aristocratic entertainment, of poets or bards in a banquet hall singing traditional tales in traditional terms—in real time and *ex tempore*. Secondary epics, by contrast, work with more or less constant and systematic recourse to the texts of primary epics, which are already out there, as likely as not, in front of would-be epic authors as they write.

The prototype here is Virgil's *Aeneid*, which was very consciously written—written all but line by line—as a mirror and answer to Homer, to both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Primary epics, in short, are something like folklore at its grandest. Secondary epics are self-conscious literary compositions—“inter-textualized,” as the saying goes, from the very outset. That is, they look not so much to what time and memory have revealed are important to us, but instead to previous epics in the hope of drawing upon them and in some

sense improving them. On the one hand, they honor the heroic past, and on the other, they bring it up to date so it speaks to us now in terms of our own aspirations and values. A secondary epic is, in that sense, a kind of “new testament,” a rethinking of existing tradition in terms of what at least purport to be new insights, new heroes, and new goals.

Barring a widespread cultural collapse, a culture has only one chance to come up with a primary epic—the time when writing first becomes prominent. Secondary epics, though, can be attempted at pretty much any time, and so they have been whenever ambitious poets, or more recently, ambitious novelists, have felt that they were up to the task and that a rethinking of the existing traditions was in order. So the list of secondary epics is longer, and we will be looking at a good many.

In the lectures to follow, we will focus on the epics that have proved most influential throughout the Western world, and more particularly in the English-speaking world. These include the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*, the Old English *Beowulf*, and then the works of Edmund Spenser and John Milton. We will then conclude with some reflections on how the epic impulse might find expression in our time.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How does a “primary” epic differ from a “secondary” epic?
2. How do the methods of an oral poet differ from those of a literate poet, a poet who writes poetry?

Suggested Reading

Lewis, C. S. *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Other Books of Interest

Barton, Simon. *World of El Cid: Chronicles of the Spanish Reconquest*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.

Burgess, Glyn Sheridan. *The Song of Roland*. New York, Penguin, 1990.

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick: Or, The Whale*. New York: Signet, 2001.

Sanders, Nancy K. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. New York: Penguin, 1972.

Lecture 2: Homer and the *Iliad*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Homer's *Iliad*, translated by A.T. Murray and William F. Wyatt.

The Original Epics

The Western literary tradition effectively begins with Homer. We have works that are older, to be sure—some from Egypt, some from the Middle East. Some parts of the Hebrew Bible are older. But we have no substantial Greek works that are older, and no Greek literary works that had anything like the effect of Homer. The Greeks did not have anything comparable to a sacred scripture in the sense that the Hebrews did, but the Homeric poems came a good deal closer than anything else, and so far as can be told, Greek education, to the extent that it involved literary works and skills at all, was for centuries focused on the Homeric poems to the virtual exclusion of all others.

When Greeks thought about who they were and how they should act, thought about what kind of world they lived in, they looked to the works of Homer before any others. It is revealing that the polis of Athens saw fit to subsidize “rhapsodes” publically to recite the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* at stated intervals so that all citizens could have access to them. They were that important. And even a cursory reading of later Greek writers will reveal that they quote Homer with an ease and familiarity that suggests the most intimate familiarity, very much the way pious Jews or Christians might quote the scriptures.

From the time of their appearance about 750 BCE, the Homeric poems appear to have stood very near the center of communal Greek life. In that sense the influence of Homer is incalculable, and incalculable all the more because virtually every epic since Homer's time—other “primary” epics, few as they are, being the sole apparent exceptions—has been composed with Homer directly or indirectly in mind. The Homeric poems are the prototypes, the original epics, and many would maintain, still the greatest of them.

The Greeks

What, then, was the Greek culture that saw their birth? It remains to some degree a vexed question as to who precisely the Greeks were and when exactly they arrived in their homeland. By about 2200 BCE, a more or less Greek “Minoan” culture had made its appearance on the island of Crete, where it thrived for the next thousand years or so. Later on in the period, more or less Greek cultures appear to have arisen on the Greek mainland as well, the so-called “Mycenaean” cultures, which on the basis of surviving inscriptions, accounts, and the like appear to have spoken a form of Greek.

Then, however, something catastrophic happened. No one seems to be precisely sure what. There were mighty volcanic eruptions in the Aegean certainly. Contemporary records in Egypt and elsewhere speak of the devastating incursions of “sea peoples.” Later Greek tradition spoke of “Dorian” invaders,

invaders from the north. But whatever the reason, the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures collapsed. What limited literacy there was at the time was lost, and Greece entered a dark age. Population declined, urban life, such as it was, declined almost to vanishing, and the richness and complexity of cultural life took on all fronts a heavy blow from which the Greeks took two or more centuries to recover. By about 800, though, things seem to have begun improving. Shortly thereafter, some unnamed genius invented the Greek alphabet, working on and improving Near Eastern models by adding characters for vowels as well as consonants. Shortly after that, by about 750, we have the Homeric poems.

Homer

In our last lecture, I mentioned C.S. Lewis' distinction between primary and secondary epics. Homer is the prototypical oral, primary epic poet. Shortly after the First World War, a young Harvard professor named Milman Parry revolutionized Homeric studies—and for that matter, the study of the epic—by recognizing Homer as an oral poet. Poets ordinarily strive for uniqueness and even novelty in their diction. Homer quite conspicuously does not. He not only repeats over and over stock phrases and epithets, such as “brilliant Achilles,” “Hector, breaker of horses,” “patient, long-suffering Odysseus,” “rosy-fingered dawn,” and the “wine-dark sea” (which have become stock phrases even in English), he also repeats whole lines. He repeats, or very nearly repeats, entire scenes, especially when they concern common, repetitive actions, like eating a meal or setting sail and going to sea. Parry wondered why.

The answer he came to was that Homer himself was, in essence, an oral poet, combining and recombining a series of traditional metrical stock phrases to tell traditional stories, and to tell them extempore, in real time. An oral poet, on this account of the matter, works from memory, but does not memorize. The shape and diction of a given tale are fluid, varying from telling to telling, but always composed by means of the metrical stock phrases, or “formulae,” that are the oral poet's stock in trade. The process is much like that of a traditional blues artist in our own time. A classical musician is expected to reproduce note for note what Mozart or Bach or Beethoven has written. A bluesman is not. In such a context, there is no definitive note-by-note version of the song to be played from, and the audience expects and appreciates virtuosity and variation within the framework of traditional themes. That is, in effect, what the blues are about. That is what, in much the same way, oral poetry was about. And that is the process at which Homer evidently excelled.

The scenario does much to explain what Homer intends by invoking the Muse. Oral poetry, like musical improvisation, is an emphatically real-time art. Oral artists know where they are going, but don't know, once they have started, exactly how they are going to get there. They need inspiration. They need “flow.” And that is where the Muse comes in. Any performance artist knows the necessity of her presence. It is not exactly “you” who plays or speaks—when things are going well in a very important sense, the performance comes from somewhere else, and your usual “you” is at best a happy overseer and spectator.

All this, though, inevitably raises real questions about authorship. Who exactly was Homer, and what exactly did he do in composing the works that have for so

long been attributed to him? What we have are clearly not themselves oral performances. They are written down and have existed in written form for nearly three thousand years. And almost equally clearly to a post-Parryian eye, at least, they are composed of oral formulae and themes. And they are, of course, vastly longer than any readily conceivable oral performance.

One answer to the question is simply to claim that there was no "Homer." Instead, the Homeric poems were stitched together from a series of smaller oral fragments and compositions. I myself find this answer implausible. For one thing, to the best of my knowledge, the voice of antiquity is unanimous on the point. There was a Homer. And for another, the poems demonstrate a deep-level unity that is very hard to think of as arising from anything other than a single overseeing intelligence.

But that raises other problems. In an oral culture, let us recall, one can only remember—one cannot look anything up, not in a library, not on-line, not anywhere. An oral culture's memory and range of knowledge resides entirely within the minds of its members. This means, of course, that in an oral culture memory is vastly more important than it is in a literate culture, and this effect takes a long time to wither, even in cultures where written or printed materials are present but expensive and scarce. But it also means that an oral culture, by the very nature of the case, is radically constricted in the amount of knowledge at its disposal. For both of these reasons, once literacy takes hold, it tends to spread. It is simply too powerful an instrument for information storage *not* to spread. And as it spreads, it more or less quickly brings about a deterioration in the high-cost memory and poetic skills that are so necessary to an oral culture. Poets like Homer do not long survive the introduction of writing.

So my own best guess as to what happened is this, and it is, of course, no more than a guess: Homer was very nearly the last—and the greatest—of the oral poets. As writing came to prominence in the Greek world, he saw possibilities that purely oral poetry did not allow for. The preservative power of writing allowed for composition on a scale that oral performance did not. And he took advantage of those possibilities. My guess is that he was not himself literate or easily literate. But he was in contact with people who were. I like to imagine children or grandchildren who were. And with their cooperation, he orally composed poems on a scale that had never before been attempted, poems that, performance by performance, his literate helpers dutifully transcribed. And that is how I imagine the works that we attribute to Homer were composed.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Marxian critics tend to argue that literature works to support the ruling class of whatever culture it speaks for. To what extent does the *Iliad* seem to support this idea?
2. What does Homer seem to admire about Achilles? About Agamemnon? About Helen? About Hector? About Priam?
3. In what sense does Homer seem to assume our knowledge of the broad outlines of the story that he tells before he begins to tell it to us? What effects does his assumption that in general we already know what is going on have upon the way in which he shapes his tale?
4. Many readers have felt that, on the whole, as they are depicted in the *Iliad*, the Trojans are more sympathetic characters than the Greeks. Why might this be so, and what might Homer in this way be suggesting about the world he depicts?
5. How seriously does Homer take the gods? What are we to make of their oversight of events? How do the Homeric gods differ from God as conceived in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition?

Suggested Reading

Homer. *Iliad*. Rev. 2 vols. Trans. A.T. Murray and William F. Wyatt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

- Evelyn-White, Hugh G. *Hesiod, Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homeric*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Havelock, Eric A. *The Muse Learns to Write*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988.
- . *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy*. New York: Taylor and Francis, 2002.
- Parry, Milman. *The Making of Homeric Verse*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Lecture 3: Homer and the *Iliad* (continued)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Homer's *Iliad*, translated by A.T. Murray and William F. Wyatt.

Homer's Focus in the *Iliad*

The *Iliad* is all but universally considered the older of the two Homeric poems, and it concerns a series of events taking place toward the end of the ten-year Trojan War. People tend to think of the *Iliad* as telling the whole Trojan story, but in fact, it doesn't. Instead, it assumes our knowledge. A series of other, later poets evidently filled in the gaps in what came to be called the "epic cycle." The only works that survive from the epic cycle are those attributed to Homer, but later critics summarized what the rest of the cycle contained, so we do know pretty much the whole story. And a great story it is—one of the greatest and most influential ever told.

For the most part it is familiar: the marriage of the sea-nymph Thetis and the mortal Peleus (which results in the birth of the great Achaian hero, Achilles); the exclusion from the wedding ceremony of the goddess Eris, or "strife"; the golden apple that the excluded Eris brings to the festivities, inscribed "to the fairest"; the judgment of Paris, son of Priam, King of Troy, of the goddesses who seek the apple: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite (who promises Paris the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife if he will but choose her); Paris's choice of Aphrodite, his subsequent abduction of Helen, and the war that follows—a war that concludes only with the ruse of the Trojan Horse and the destruction of Troy. Within this wide canvas, Homer chooses in the *Iliad* to focus only upon a series of events taking place in the ninth year of the ten-year war, beginning, as the saying goes, "*in medias res*," "in the middle of things," and implying rather than directly telling the full sweep of events contributing to his story.

Homer's own narrative begins with a dispute between the leader of the Greek host, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, brother of Menelaus—the king of Sparta and the aggrieved former husband of Helen—and the man who is far and away the greatest Greek warrior, Achilles. The dispute centers on the distribution of captured women as "prizes." Agamemnon has taken a woman named "Chryseis" (the name means something like "Goldie") whose father is a priest of Apollo. Agamemnon scornfully turns aside her father when he asks for Chryseis back. The result is a plague set upon the Greeks by Apollo himself. Achilles, and Achilles alone, has the courage to confront Agamemnon, and Agamemnon angrily agrees to give up Chryseis—and to take Achilles' prize, Briseis, to replace her. The furious Achilles withdraws from the Greek host and prays that the gods favor the Trojans so that Agamemnon might learn just what sort of man he has insulted. So things turn out—the Trojans do very well indeed and nearly succeed in setting fire to the Greek ships.

Time and Kleos

The preceding sequence of events, from a contemporary perspective, does little to make us admire either Achilles or Agamemnon. For one thing, the whole notion of taking women as “prizes” is obviously and deeply repellant—and we have to exercise a little historical imagination to see what is at stake in the dispute that Homer describes. What is at stake is essentially reputation, but in Homeric culture reputation means vastly more than it means in our own culture, and even in our own it means plenty. The aristocratic world of Homer is based upon what the Greeks called “*time*” and “*kleos*”—“honor” and “glory,” more or less—and “honor” and “glory” depended pretty much entirely on what other people thought.

We live in what anthropologists used to call a “guilt culture,” where we believe and encourage our children to believe that what finally counts is who you are inside. The Homeric Greeks didn’t think that way. They lived in a “shame culture.” You were who people thought you were. Thus, being disgraced was not something to get over. You really were injured by disgrace, made less by disgrace. And what you had to do was correct it. Hence the rage of both Achilles and Agamemnon, who have, in effect, both disgraced each other.

Arete

The underlying notion here, absolutely central to Homeric ethics, and for that matter, to Greek ethics for centuries to come, is the notion of “*arete*.” Arete is generally translated as “virtue,” but it is virtue of a particular kind, not the kindness, fellow-feeling, and compassion that we are inclined to associate with the term. Instead, arete means something more like “excellence,” like “being good at things”—indeed, like being surpassingly, amazingly “good at things.” And that, of course, is precisely what the semi-divine Achilles is.

Achilles himself is surpassingly good most notably at fighting—he is quite simply and unmistakably the best warrior alive—and skill in battle, skill in the crafts of Ares, the god of war, is the sort of excellence that arete originally and most notably celebrated. As time passed, though, arete came to refer to excellence more generally, and even in the *Iliad* one can show arete as a wise counselor or as a persuasive speaker as well as on the field of battle.

The reward of arete is time and kleos, honor and glory. The Greeks were so enamored of the whole package that very near the time that Homer was writing, they instituted the Olympic games as an arena in which arete could be displayed and time and kleos could be won. But there were sorts of honor and glory that did not depend so directly on personal character or personal achievement. Agamemnon, for instance, is entitled to honor and glory not so much because of his skills as warrior—though those skills are in fact considerable—but because of his social position as king of Mycenae and leader of the Greek host. Hence the friction and ill-will between Agamemnon and Achilles—they are honored, by and large, for different reasons, Agamemnon largely for his position in society, Achilles largely for his achievements, for who he is. And hence the anger of Achilles when he feels himself so sorely insulted, the anger of which Homer speaks in the very first words of the *Iliad*: “*Menin aeide thea*,” or, “Anger, sing goddess” (or more colloquially, in English, “Goddess, sing about anger”).

As we have seen, Achilles' anger leads him to withdraw from battle, waiting in his tent and hoping for the sort of striking Trojan success in battle that will make his absence felt. And as we have seen, it comes. Led by the mighty Hector, the Trojans are able to advance to the very edge of the Greek camp and begin to set fire to the Greek ships. Then, and only then, Achilles relents. But he relents in a very strange way. Rather than going out to fight himself, he allows his best friend and companion Patroclus to go out and fight while wearing the armor of Achilles so that, presumably, the Trojans will think that they suddenly face Achilles himself.

The fact that Achilles lets Patroclus go out to fight in his armor is important, more so than it might at first seem to be. Patroclus will be fighting, so to speak, in shoes that are too big for him, and if he lets his success go to his head, he may be found out, and in fact killed. So Achilles warns him. And so it happens. Patroclus, in Achilles' armor, does succeed in driving the Trojans from the Greek ships. But he is swept away by his success, and in the end Hector kills him and takes Achilles' armor too. This means, of course, that Hector has in effect become Achilles. He has to all appearances taken on the public identity of Achilles as the greatest warrior of all.

Achilles, meanwhile, has no armor at all, is enraged beyond measure, and is filled with inconsolable grief at the death of his friend. And now things get very interesting. Sometimes it helps to have a goddess for a mother. Thetis arranges to have Hephaestus, the god of the forge and the smith of the gods, forge a new set of divine armor for Achilles (meanwhile allowing Homer, who describes Achilles' new shield in particular detail, an occasion for suggesting in symbolic form what he takes human life to be like—an endless and finally pointless round of peace and war, it turns out).

So now, when Achilles goes to settle matters with Hector once and for all, he is confronting, in a sense, his former self: Hector in Achilles' lost armor. He has meanwhile been transformed into something superhuman, something or someone more than touched with the divine. The denouement is quick in coming. Achilles, of course, kills Hector, and then, still enraged, drags Hector's body around the walls of Troy, trying to vent his rage on Hector's corpse.

Beyond Time and Kleos

We have absolutely no doubt at this point who is king of arete. But is that all that matters? It certainly matters a lot, and any reading of the *Iliad* that suggests otherwise—and there are such readings—seems to me flawed from the outset. The blinding martial power of bright Achilles, the beauty of Helen, the eloquence of Odysseus, these are in some strong sense the divine made visible in human action and human form, and they are supposed to take our breath away. But is that all that is important? Arguably not. Arete turns out not to be everything.

The most famous scene in the *Iliad*, one of the most famous in all literature, takes place on the walls of Troy in book six. Hector has for the moment come in from the fighting. He meets with his wife, Andromache, and his infant son. It is a passage of great richness. Space prevents doing it full justice, but Hector shows a tenderness and concern for his family that suggest that there is much more in Homer's world than the relentless pursuit of time and kleos.

In a significant moment, Hector, still dressed for battle, reaches down to his son while wearing his helmet. As Homer puts it, the baby recoils, “screaming out at the sight of his own father, / terrified by the flashing bronze, the horse-hair crest.” Hector’s public, warrior face, in short, is terrifying even to his family—that is what war does—and the boy’s “loving father laughed,” quickly “removing the helmet from his head.” The pursuit of arete enforces its relentless, necessary cost. Hector hopes that his son will grow up to be like him, the protector of his city. But we know that will not happen. Hector will die facing Achilles, Andromache will be enslaved, and Hector’s son, still an infant, will be killed by the Greeks when Troy finally falls. As the shield of Achilles suggests, that is the sort of world we live in.

One other famous scene that does much to complicate the picture occurs at the very end of the *Iliad*. After Achilles has tried and tried again to desecrate the body of Hector, Hector’s father, Priam, makes a courageous night journey to the Greek camp under the discreet protection of the god Hermes. He meets with Achilles face to face to ask that Hector’s body be returned to him. We might expect Achilles to kill Priam on sight. But that is not what happens. Priam’s courage gains Achilles’ respect, but more than that, the sight of Priam arouses even in Achilles a sense of what the war has cost—what the war has cost Priam, what the war has cost him, what the war, and more broadly, the slow course of life itself, has cost everyone. They find themselves united by suffering. Achilles allows Priam to take Hector’s body and arranges a truce for a suitable burial.

The Gifts of the Gods

Does this mean, then, that the *Iliad* ends on a final note of reconciliation, celebrating not arete, but instead “*philia*,” fellow feeling and brotherly love? I think not. But fellow feeling and brotherly love certainly have their place. It may well be that as Zeus himself observes in book seventeen, there “is nothing more miserable than man among all things that breathe and move on earth.”

But love and fellow feeling offer their own measure of mitigation. And though the world of the *Iliad* is on one level a world of unrelieved despair, it is not a world of sadness. Not finally. Our lot is suffering and death, yes, but as C.S. Lewis wonderfully puts it, “the unwearying, unmoved, angelic speech of Homer” not only makes his world “endurable,” but suggests how it becomes so. I want to wind up here with my own favorite passage in the *Iliad*, which, I think, speaks to this point. Hector has been most justifiably berating his more or less worthless brother Paris, who besides embroiling Troy in the war that will lead to Troy’s destruction, has not been doing his share of the fighting, and is, at this precise moment, in his bedroom with the incomparable Helen. Paris admits the justice of Hector’s complaints. But then he says:

“Still, don’t fling in my face the lovely gifts of golden Aphrodite. Not to be tossed aside, the gifts of the gods, those glories ... whatever the gods give of their own free will—how could we ever choose them for ourselves?”

The gifts of the gods are not to be tossed aside—not the arete of Achilles, not Helen and her beauty, not even life itself. Or so Homer.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. To what extent is our own ethical vision like the vision expressed in the *Iliad*. Do we value the same things? As much as people do in the Homeric world?
2. Many critics have noticed a seeming paradox in the Homeric world. On one hand, the human situation he depicts is almost unimaginably grim, but on the other hand, Homer seems, despite all, to be resolutely and consistently cheerful. How are we to account for this effect, and what are we to make of the “bright despair” of Homer. Does his sensibility answer to anything in life as we ordinarily experience it? If things are awful, how can they be okay?

Suggested Reading

Homer. *Iliad*. Rev. 2 vols. Trans. A.T. Murray and William F. Wyatt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Apollodorus. *The Library of Greek Mythology*. Trans. Robin Hard. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Willcock, Malcolm, M. *Companion to The Iliad*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Lecture 4: Homer and the *Odyssey*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Homer's *Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald.

The *Iliad's* Wife

For my money, the *Odyssey* is, with the exception of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the finest literary work ever composed. Immensely shrewd, immensely subtle, it slyly answers and profoundly reconceives the vision of arete expressed in the *Iliad*. The language is Homeric, the formulae are Homeric, and the characters too are Homeric—but Homeric with an all-embracing difference in tone and key.

According to tradition, the *Odyssey* is a later work than the *Iliad*. In a sense, it presupposes the *Iliad*. One can readily conceive of the *Iliad* as the work of the poet's vigorous early middle age and of the *Odyssey* as the fruit of his hale and reflective later years. I, though, prefer another story that I propose not so much as a potential literal truth as instead a sort of suggestive metaphor.

The late nineteenth-century novelist, Samuel Butler, once suggested that the *Odyssey* could have been written by a woman, that it was, in effect, the "*Iliad's* wife." There is something to that, and the metaphorical vision that I propose takes that suggestion as its point of departure. Let us suppose that Homer, greatest and wisest of all oral poets, had an equally brilliant and much-beloved daughter or granddaughter. Let us suppose that she, unlike her father or grandfather, was easily literate and abreast of the times. Let us suppose, in fact, that it was she who served as Homer's scribe, who worked with him in exponentially expanding the range and scale of oral poetry in the *Iliad*, and in the process, lovingly instructed by the best of teachers, came to master the oral tradition in her own right. After the much-lamented death of her father or grandfather, already by universal acclaim the greatest poet who had ever lived, she wryly and slyly took it upon herself, in her own middle age, to continue the story, to celebrate, to extend, and lightly and lovingly to correct the poetic vision of her father or her grandfather—and her teacher.

I am not, of course, saying that is what happened. But what I would like to suggest is that the *Odyssey* does in fact read as though that is what happened. She knows the story and the tradition inside out. But she shows us things, and shows them repeatedly, from a woman's point of view. We do not walk the plains of windy Troy. Indeed, most of the places that we inhabit are either quite simply fantastic, the cave of the Cyclops and the realm of the dead, or more or less domestic and dominated by women—Queen Arete of Phaeacia and her daughter Nausicaa; the island of Calypso, where Odysseus languishes in exile for years; the island of Circe, even Sparta, clearly dominated by a Helen vastly shrewder than her rather doltish husband, Menelaus; and not least Ithaca itself, Odysseus' kingdom and home island, where Odysseus' wife Penelope, with the help of his old servant and nursemaid, Eurycleia, has held

well more than a hundred predatory and ill-governed suitors at bay for years. And presiding over all is Athena, Odysseus' patron, protector, and friend—the goddess of womanly wisdom, skill, and power, miraculously born from the head of Zeus, and in that sense a crystallization of divine intelligence and thought. This is a vision quite different in tone from the world of Diomedes and from the world we encounter in the *Iliad*.

The plot of the *Odyssey* is different too. We encounter not rage and war, certainly not as a keynote, but instead “*nostos*,” or “homecoming,” the reintegration of home and society that war disrupts and destroys. The *Odyssey* celebrates a reconceptualization and widening of the Homeric ideal. Arete, in the *Iliad*, still bears the marks of its conceptual origins in the crafts of Ares: prowess and excellence in battle. It is in precisely that sense that bright Achilles is the unrivaled best of the Greeks or Achaeans.

The *Odyssey*, too, celebrates martial prowess. Odysseus finally dispatches the suitors with a vigor and resolute thoroughness—vastly outnumbered as he is—that even Achilles would be proud to match. But he has to make use of other skills, other modes of excellence. He has, indeed, to make use of the suggestion and help of Penelope—to put himself in a position—on a dais, in a bolted banquet hall, armed with bow and arrows, and confronting men who find themselves unarmed and trapped—where he can put his martial prowess to decisive and lethal effect. The *Odyssey*, in short, celebrates interior excellence—mental excellence and moral excellence. As the *Odyssey* repeatedly reminds us, the achievement of that sort of excellence is not defined by age, class, or gender.

Arete in the *Odyssey*

The *Odyssey* extends the range of arete, which was celebrated in the *Iliad* as something achievable by warrior-kings. In the *Odyssey*, arete can be achieved, it seems, by anyone in any social position.

One of the heroes of the *Odyssey* is the virtuous swineherd, Eumaios. He is in fact a slave, though, so he tells us, a slave of originally aristocratic birth. Being a swineherd was not in Greece the absolute bottom-rung occupation that it is in, say, the parable of the prodigal son in Luke. The Greeks ate pork with enthusiasm. But still, it was low on the social scale. Yet Eumaios demonstrates a hospitality, a loyalty, a courage, a respect for the gods and custom, a careful and dutiful attention to his work, and a calm geniality that Homer (or “Homer 2”) finds wholly admirable. Homer signals approval by regularly addressing Eumaios as if he were present, in the vocative, “Oh my swineherd.” Homer thereby grammatically steps out of the story to express respect and regard.

Wholly admirable, too, is Penelope, the woman for whom Odysseus gave up immortality. So too is Eurykleia, the old nurse who with Penelope keeps the suitors at bay. So too, if perhaps not quite so persuasively, is Odysseus' son Telemachus (Telemachus is dutiful, but perhaps a bit insipid). And so too, in what is one of the most touching passages in the *Odyssey*, is Odysseus' old hunting dog, Argos. Neglected and abandoned to die on a dung-heap, too weak even to rise, Argos recognizes Odysseus even when Odysseus is in disguise. With his last breath, Argos does his best to greet his much-loved master, home at last after twenty years.

The callous and disrespectful treatment of Argos, in fact, is a small exemplification of what is wrong with the horde of suitors who have besieged Penelope on the assumption that Odysseus is dead, and in hopes not only of erotic satisfaction as Penelope's future bed-mate, but in hopes of controlling the kingdom of Ithaca as her consort. Unlike Odysseus and Eumaios, unlike Penelope and Eurycleia, unlike even Argos, the suitors do not show arete, though some of them have their virtues. Their fundamental failure is their violation of "*nomos*," or "custom": the way things are supposed to be and the way people are supposed to behave.

When Telemachus grows to an age when he is able to realize what is going on and is potentially able to take over as king, the suitors attempt to kill him. The suitors are the most prominent young men in and around Ithaca—prime candidates for arete as traditionally conceived. Their contempt for *nomos*, though, ensures that they do not achieve it. Odysseus cleans house with a vengeance when at last he returns and reveals himself. Instead of finding arete in the suitors, we find it in Ithaca among people whom it would not traditionally have been expected—Penelope, Eumaios, and even the faithful old dog, Argos.

The Greek Ideal

One final point remains to be made. In later antiquity, the *Odyssey* was often read in allegorical terms as a discussion of how one goes about achieving excellence and building a viable society. The *Odyssey*, in fact, divides neatly into halves, the first half concerning Odysseus' travels and the travels of Telemachus to find out what has happened to him, and the second half concerning events after Odysseus' return to Ithaca.

Interestingly, the parts of the tale that are best remembered—the Cyclops, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, the Lotos-Eaters, Circe, the realms of the dead—occupy only four books out of twenty-four, and Odysseus narrates these adventures himself. We have only his word for his marvelous adventures—in which all his shipmates die—and Odysseus, to put the case mildly, is not a man renowned for candor.

No matter, though. Over the course of those adventures, Odysseus demonstrates many virtues. He is able to overcome the desire for ease and rest, as in Lotos-land. He is able to keep his head when confronted by desires that would turn most men into animals, as on the island of Circe, whose potions transform men into beasts. He is able, through foresight, both to hear and to resist the song of the Sirens. He is able to cut his losses and to deceive when necessary, as in confronting the Lestrygonians and sailing past Scylla and Charybdis. Above all, perhaps, he is a man who can survive and prosper, when necessary, by simple, resourceful, long-suffering persistence.

All of these virtues make up the many-faceted, complete human being that came to comprise the Greek ideal, and Odysseus has occasion to draw upon nearly all of these virtues once he leaves the world of marvels and returns to confront the difficulties that beset his homeland of Ithaca.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is “nomos”? How do the suitors of Penelope violate nomos?
2. In what sense can Odysseus be considered an idealized self-portrait of the Greeks themselves?

Suggested Reading

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Brann, Eva. *Homeric Moments: Clues to Delight in Reading The Odyssey and The Iliad*. Annapolis: Paul Dry Books, 2002.

Finley, M.I. *The World of Odysseus*. New York: New York Review Books, 2002.

Martin, Thomas R. *Ancient Greece*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Plutarch. *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*. Trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert. New York: Penguin, 1960.

Lectures 5 & 6: The *Aeneid*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Virgil's *Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald.

Virgil's Invention

The *Aeneid* is in a certain sense *the* classic and *the* epic. Our very sense of what a "classic" is depends more upon the *Aeneid* than on any other work. From the time Caesar Augustus countermanded Virgil's deathbed instructions that his incomplete manuscript be burned, there has been no work in Western culture, the Bible aside, that has been more often read, more often taught, and possibly, more often taken to heart.

The *Aeneid* was a classic from the very outset, even in Virgil's conception, and so it has remained for every generation since Virgil's time. It has never fallen from favor, never been lost, never been ignored. Schoolchildren learning Latin have read about Dido, Aeneas, and Turnus from the time of St. Augustine. As C.S. Lewis observes, the "epic subject"—what epics are supposed to be about, how epics work—is in some strong sense "Virgil's invention."

All this is in a sense surprising, not to say a paradox, since from the time of Homer to the present the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have often, if not generally, been considered greater poems than the *Aeneid*. How then did Virgil rather than Homer come to be the author of the prototypical epic and even of the prototypical "classic." Shouldn't it be the other way around? In a way, yes, but there are complications.

First of all, from about 500, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, until shortly before 1500, virtually no one in western Europe could read Greek. And there were no translations available. The result was that while educated readers (painfully few that there were for much of that time) had ordinarily heard of Homer, virtually no one could read him. There was no accessible text to read. Things were different in the Byzantine Empire and the Greek east, of course, but in those years contacts were limited, often very limited indeed, and often unfriendly as well. Virtually everyone in the West who could read, by contrast, could read Latin—for most of the period there was very little else to be read—and virtually everyone who could read Latin had read at least a little Virgil.

Second, a literate poet, as opposed to an oral poet, seeking to write an epic after Virgil found himself very much in Virgil's situation, confronted by an existing tradition that must in some sense be respected, that must in some sense form a model, but which, if there is to be a new epic, must be altered and answered as well. That is, of course, what Virgil himself did with Homer. And it is what later literate poets did with Virgil. Homer, by contrast, was not answering or working from any existing written tradition. Oral tradition, yes. But oral tradition did not present itself in the guise of long and elaborate fixed

works. Instead, it presented itself as remembered tales and traditions and poetic formulae and conventions. Later oral epics—and there were some—worked in the same way. But they did not work from Homer. Instead, they worked from their own cultural traditions and poetic conventions, as we will see when we discuss *Beowulf* a bit later on.

The Context in Which Virgil Writes

Before we take a closer look at Virgil's relation to Homer, however, we will need to turn to the historical and cultural context in which Virgil wrote. Virgil was born in 70 BC (or BCE) in Mantua, in what was then the Roman province of Cisalpine Gaul and is now northern Italy. He was born in a time of trouble. Over the course of the last centuries before Virgil's birth, the power of the Roman Republic had grown enormously, first to encompass all of Italy, and then, over the course of the long and bitterly contested Punic Wars against the North African city of Carthage, to encompass most of the Western Mediterranean basin—Sicily in the first instance and ultimately what we now think of as southern France, Spain, Portugal, and most of western North Africa as well.

The Punic Wars lasted, on and off, for more than a century, and under the leadership of the great commander Hannibal, Carthage at one point very nearly succeeded in overcoming Rome once and for all. But in the end, Rome prevailed. In the meantime, Rome turned its energies eastward. In a series of campaigns, Rome gradually gained control of Greece and ultimately of much of the territory conquered by Alexander (the Great) of Macedon and since held by his successors—the last of them none other than Cleopatra of Ptolemaic Egypt.

As more and more of the Mediterranean world fell to Rome, however, the institutions of the Roman Republic began to buckle from the strain—the mixed-government oligarchy that served for a central Italian city-state proved less successful in governing what became increasingly a world empire. From about a generation before Virgil's birth to his middle age, Rome was embroiled in an ongoing series of immensely destructive civil wars. The civil wars were made more destructive by the very military virtues that had made the Roman legions so formidable.

By the time of the civil wars, the legions generally had little difficulty in overcoming non-Roman opponents. But during the civil wars, they fought among themselves as one side after another took control, exiled or executed enemy leaders, confiscated land to reward their troops, and generally, though not by design, did more or less all that they could to make simple, peaceful life a happy memory.

That is the context in which Virgil writes. Indeed, his own family had suffered directly from the disruptions of civil strife. And it gives to Virgil's work a distinctive thematic flavor. For Virgil loved discipline and order as perhaps only a person reared in a time of trouble can love them. We do not ordinarily think of discipline and order as poetic subjects—our own post-romantic sensibilities hearken to a different muse. But to Virgil, they most assuredly were, and much of the *Aeneid* is devoted to celebrating them.

Refounding Rome

When at last the civil wars came to an end, one claimant for supreme power was left standing: Octavian. Soon to be known as Caesar Augustus, Octavian would prove one of the most capable rulers of all time and would refashion Rome, in a sense, in his own image.

Over the course of his long imperium, he gradually transformed Rome into what we recognize as the empire. He was deeply and sincerely committed to traditional Roman virtues, and it is those traditional virtues that Virgil celebrates in the *Aeneid*. That is the vantage point from which he reconceptualizes Homer. In celebrating Aeneas as founder of Rome, Virgil more or less covertly but unmistakably celebrates Augustus as refounder of Rome. There is a sense, indeed, in which the real hero of the *Aeneid* is powerfully, though implicitly, Augustus himself.

Roman Virtues

What, then, are the traditional Roman virtues that Virgil celebrates? After conquering the Greeks, the Romans freely, indeed cheerfully, conceded the superiority of Greek culture in many respects. But there were, even so, lots of things that the Romans did better—most prominently, they ruled better and they fought better. Their disposition was altogether more practical.

The ethic of arete made the Greeks, on the whole, relentlessly competitive and individualistic. The Roman ethos was profoundly different—at its best, deeply concerned with the common good. Achilles fights for Achilles, Odysseus just wants to get home, but Aeneas is a man with a mission, and his mission is to found Rome.

The characteristic Roman virtues, then, were in large part the virtues of the Roman legions: discipline, determination, self-control, careful organization, patience, cooperation, and relentless, ruthless competence.

Virgil's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*

Virgil works very consciously and directly from Homer. Books I to VI of the *Aeneid* are, in effect, Virgil's *Odyssey*, but with several significant differences. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus makes his way home from the Greek victory at Troy after he and his fellow Greek warriors have destroyed the city and left it in ruins. In books I to VI of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas, the greatest surviving Trojan warrior, leads a band of Trojan refugees to a new home in Italy, in Latium—in fact, in Rome itself, though Rome at this time is yet to be.

The second half of the *Aeneid*, books VII to XII, are in effect Virgil's *Iliad*, and chronicle the war that Aeneas is forced to fight to ensure his Roman legacy. He does not seek war. Aeneas hopes to settle in Italy peacefully, and many of the Latins have no objections. But it is not to be. When the time comes and necessity forces him, Aeneas fights hard and effectively, as the Romans characteristically did. He is fighting, though—and Virgil is at pains to make the point unmistakable—not to destroy a city, but to found one, and a city that to Virgil at least is unlike any other in its devotion to law, to good government, and finally to the wider good.

“Pius Aeneas”

Aeneas is a man on a mission, and in a sense his reputation has suffered for it. Compared with Achilles or Odysseus, Aeneas seems a bit plodding and colorless. His characteristic epithet is “pius Aeneas,” which doesn’t have quite the martial ring of “man-killing Achilles.” To be sure, Virgil’s “pius” does not exactly mean “pious” in our own sense. “Pius” to Virgil means something more like “respectful” or “devoted to duty,” and devotion to duty is in fact the hallmark of Aeneas’ character. He is devoted to the gods, but he is also respectful and devoted in general—devoted to his family, devoted to his mission and his country, devoted to the people he leads, devoted above all to his duty, and generally benevolent as he can be in his interactions with everyone he meets.

In this sense Virgil corrects—and corrects in distinctly Roman terms—what he perceives as the flaws and weaknesses in the Greek conception of heroism and right behavior. In the Roman legions individual heroics were discouraged. The point was not to achieve isolated and spectacular feats of arms—which is precisely the point in the *Iliad*. The point was to work together as a deadly, responsive, and well-trained unit.

A Pervasive Melancholy

Virgil’s central story in the *Aeneid*, then, is a story of triumph—the triumph of Aeneas, and, by implication, the triumph of Augustus and of Rome. Some critics have doubted, though, that Virgil is as unmixedly enthusiastic about what is termed the “Augustan settlement” as he appears at first glance to be. And such critics have evidence to work with. I would myself interpret that evidence differently than they do—I do think that Virgil wholeheartedly celebrates Augustus and his work. But even so, the evidence remains. Triumphant as Virgil’s narrative is, he never forgets what the triumphs of Aeneas and Augustus cost, and the triumphant course of Aeneas’ journeys and battles takes place within a context of deep and pervasive melancholy.

In part this melancholy derives from Roman religion itself, which entails more than the Romans simply taking over and renaming the traditional Greek gods for their own benefit. At the heart of traditional Roman religion were the “lares” and “penates,” household gods and ancestor spirits whose duty it was to oversee and to protect the fortunes of the family. The Romans likewise saw the world as full of relatively small-scale local spirits, which they termed “*genius loci*.” And the Romans did not appropriate only Greek gods. They were respectful of the gods of pretty much every region they encountered.

Virgil’s fundamental vision assumes a divine order at work in the world with real but limited control of earthly events. There was indeed divine order in the world, but that order was incomplete; some things the gods controlled, but other things more or less just happened.

Virgil crystallizes this sense of things in a beautiful and moving image in book III of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas is seeking guidance about how to proceed when his journey is completed. Helenus, a seer, the leader of another band of Trojan refugees, encourages Aeneas to consult the sibyl at Cumae, but he adds a warning:

*You'll see a spellbound prophetess, who sings
In her deep cave of destinies, confiding
Symbols and words to leaves. Whatever verse
She writes, the virgin puts each leaf in order
Back in the cave; unshuffled they remain;
But when a faint breeze through a door ajar
Comes in to stir and scatter the light leaves,
She never cares to catch them as they flutter
Or restore them, or to join the verses;
Visitors, unenlightened, turn away
And hate the Sibyl's shrine. (3. 441–52)*

There is, in other words, an over-arching order at work in the world, a final coherence in the way things work. But it remains out of human reach, and despite our efforts, we can, at best, come to know it only in part. Indeed, our efforts to come to know it are likely to make things more confusing rather than less. And more—the Sibyl's leaves powerfully evoke something very much like the modern concept of “entropy,” that is, the universal tendency for disorder to increase. Order takes effort, and the very structure of things in some sense works against it. That is why, as he says at the very start of the *Aeneid*, it was “so hard and huge” a task “to found the Roman people” (“*tantae molis erat Romanem condere gentem*”) (1.33).

The Ivory Gates

That sense of the fundamental recalcitrance of the world, that sense of all the inert forces that we must tirelessly work against if we are to accomplish something worthwhile, leads Virgil to make two startling gestures at the end of both the Odyssean first half and Iliadic second half of the *Aeneid*. In book VI, the Cumaean Sibyl leads Aeneas on a journey to the underworld, where he meets the shade or spirit of his father Anchises.

Anchises outlines for Aeneas the future mission and glory of Rome: “To pacify, to impose the rule of law, / To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.” But those ringing words are not the end of book VI. The end of book VI oddly undercuts them:

*There are two gates of Sleep, one said to be
Of horn, whereby the true shades pass with ease,
The other all white ivory agleam
Without a flaw, and yet false dreams are sent
Through this one by the ghosts to the upper world.
Anchises now, his last instructions given,
Took son and Sibyl there and let them go
By the Ivory Gate. (6. 893–98)*

One interpretation of this passage is that Virgil is deliberately invalidating the fine words Anchises has just spoken. Augustus more or less made Virgil write the *Aeneid*, but poetic inspiration is free, and Virgil is here deliberately critiquing the ideals he has celebrated under duress.

That is not the way I read it, though. Virgil had, I think, too acute a sense of what disorder costs to think that Augustus' program was at the deepest level a mistake. But by the same token, he knew too what that program cost, and

knew as well that no program, however worthy, can succeed completely or for all time. That is, I take it, the meaning of Aeneas' departure through the ivory gates.

Tears for Things

Virgil makes an analogous gesture at the very end of the *Aeneid*. Leading the resistance against the Trojans has been the Latin hero Turnus, whom Virgil is at pains to make a largely sympathetic and admirable character. In the end, though, Aeneas defeats him, and then violates one of the rules laid out by Anchises. He most emphatically does not spare Turnus, but instead kills him, defeated and suppliant though he is.

The very last words in the *Aeneid* describe the result: "Then all the body slackened in death's chill, / And with a groan for that indignity / His spirit fled into the gloom below" (12. 951–52). End of story, as for every human story.

Once again, all that Aeneas seeks is worth seeking. But things are messy, and no human achievement can be utterly clean or lasting. For, as Virgil's most famous statement of all puts it, "*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*" (1.462). This is a notoriously difficult line to translate. Latin is, especially in Virgil's hands, a far more compact language than English, saying and implying a great deal in few words and little space. And in fact no translation known to me gives the full resonance of the Latin. Here is a literal rendering: "there are tears for things, and mortal things touch the mind."

Spelling out the implications, though, we get something a little different, more like this: "built into the very structure of things is an unavoidable sadness and loss, and the mortality of things, the inevitable limitedness of things, touches the heart and shapes all that we do and all that we can do."

That sense is the constant counterweight to the triumphal story that Virgil tells, and it is their conjunction that shapes the *Aeneid* all through. The cost of Rome's birth is the destruction of Troy, and book II, in which Virgil describes Troy's final night, is harrowing. The cost of Rome's birth is Aeneas' final rejection and abandonment of Queen Dido of Carthage, who has treated Aeneas and his followers with consistent generosity and kindness and has indeed become Aeneas' lover. Aeneas himself feels the loss, but he has to fulfill his mission, and his loss is nothing to Dido's, who commits suicide in despair and swears eternal enmity between Rome and Carthage.

So is it all worth it? Yes and no. Yes, the foundation of Rome and all the effort and discipline it takes are unquestionably, most emphatically, worth it. But no, Rome and all that Rome at her best represents are not and cannot be permanent achievements. The cost of even the level of achievement available to us is sharp, severe, and ongoing. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*, and that is that.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. In what sense does Virgil seek to “correct” and reconceptualize the Homeric poems in Roman terms? In what ways is Aeneas a different kind of epic hero than Achilles or Odysseus?
2. In what sense can Caesar Augustus be considered the unstated or “off-stage” hero of the *Aeneid*? What similarities might be drawn between Aeneas and Augustus? Does Virgil really celebrate Rome and Augustus, or does he critique them? To what extent? What does he see as the limits of their achievement?
3. Is Virgil’s view of things finally optimistic or pessimistic? Or some combination of the two?

Suggested Reading

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage, 1981.

Other Books of Interest

Heinze, Richard. *Virgil’s Epic Technique*. Trans. H. Harvey and F. Robertson. Bristol, UK: Bristol Classical Press, 1993.

Martindale, Charles. *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Lecture 7: *Beowulf*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*, translated by Howell D. Chickering.

A Dark, Cold World

Now we come to *Beowulf*, a work very different from the *Aeneid*. *Beowulf* is written very much from outside the boundaries of the imperial world of balance and order that Virgil celebrated.

The world of *Beowulf* is different. It is a dark world. It is a cold world. It is a world from which even the distant memory of empire, and all that empire represented, seems long since to have fled. *Beowulf*'s people, so it seems, have had some contact with Roman stonework—roads and walls, foundations and the like from the last, far northern outposts of empire. The skills that built them are incomprehensible—“*enta geweorc*,” the poet calls them, “the work of giants,” and leaves it at that—post-apocalyptic reminders of a brighter and more sophisticated world so profoundly lost that its physical remains seem superhuman, like the work of a different kind of being.

Beowulf is a primary epic. In that sense, it is a closer analogue to the works of Homer than to those of Virgil. Like the works of Homer, it stems more or less directly from oral tradition. It draws, though less pervasively than Homer, on the same sort of oral formulae that are the stock in trade of the oral poet or bard.

The Anglo-Saxons, and all the old Germanic tribes, in fact, had only the most rudimentary sort of writing, if indeed that, before contact with Christian missionaries and Christianity. In effect, Latin and writing came to the Anglo-Saxons as part of a single cultural package. That allowed, among other things, for the written, poetic preservation of Germanic heroic legend, though the legends themselves were far older, stretching far back into the prehistory of the Germanic north. It is those legends, or some of them, that *Beowulf* chronicles.

Some have argued that *Beowulf* represents a monastic, Christian distortion of what was originally an unvarnishedly pagan tale, but my own reading is rather different. I would argue that *Beowulf* is instead a regretful—and deeply respectful—commemoration and rethinking of the recent pagan past.

Bede's Sparrow

The Venerable Bede, writing in the island monastery of Lindisfarne on the North Sea coast in northern England several generations after the event, tells a revealing tale that is, I think, deeply relevant to *Beowulf*. A missionary has made his pitch to a pagan king, and the king, good Anglo-Saxon lord that he is, asks his band of retainers what they think. An old retainer answers, comparing their present life to that of a sparrow. A winter storm is raging outside, and the sparrow finds its way into a mead hall, where a

glorious feast is in progress. Inside, all is warm and all is bright. But then at last the sparrow departs into the dark winter wilds again. That, says the old retainer, is what our life is like. It is bright for a while—a very brief while—but we simply know nothing about what comes before and might come after. If Christianity offers something better than that uncertain winter world, he concludes, we should give it a try.

That is, in effect, the vision of *Beowulf*, and indeed, the plotline of *Beowulf*. Things are bad. Things are good for a while, and then things are bad again. That's the way of the world. That's "wyrd," to use the Anglo-Saxon word (our own word "weird" stems from it). "Wyrd" is generally translated as "fate," but more broadly, "wyrd" is "the way things are."

The Greatest Monster of All

The poem begins with a thematic key signature—a short, introductory tale about the foundation of the Danish ruling house. The tale stands more or less apart from the central narrative, but nonetheless suggests the central concerns of the poem as a whole. The Danes, kingless and in trouble, see a baby in a basket, adorned with riches, unexplainedly afloat in the gray sea. He becomes a great leader, Scyld Scefing by name, and makes of the Danes a great nation (there is doubtless some echo of Moses here). But, as all of us do, he dies, and the grieving Danes make for him a splendid ship burial, and finally push the ship out to sea—from a gray nowhere to a gray nowhere, with a few bright years in between. It is Bede's sparrow once again, and a precursor to the career of Beowulf as well.

The scene then shifts to Scyld's descendent Hrothgar, likewise a great king, who decides to build for himself and his people the most glorious mead hall in the world. Hrothgar calls it Heorot, and the poet describes its building in terms that recall the Creation itself. But in the world of *Beowulf*, creation and order and light, all good things, seem to generate an answering disorder and darkness. The very splendor of Heorot and the happiness of the people within it generate an inevitable response—fierce, murderous envy from the "sceaðu-gegne," the "shadow-goer," Grendel.

Grendel is, for my money, the greatest monster of all time, admirably characterized and terrifying. He becomes, as the poet puts it, making use of characteristic Anglo-Saxon understatement, a very bad guest. Uninvited, Grendel takes to crashing the mead-hall party, eating fifteen or so Danes at a pop and taking some home to devour later.

Hrothgar is none too happy about the situation, but there is nothing he can do. The warriors who decide to fight Grendel get eaten, and soon enough no one is game to try. For twelve years, Grendel rules the night. Then, and only then, we meet Beowulf.

Beowulf decides to help Hrothgar, because Hrothgar was a friend to Beowulf's exiled father. After a truly epic battle, Beowulf overcomes Grendel, fighting without weapons. He tears out Grendel's arm and fastens it as a trophy to the roof of Heorot. Hrothgar, understandably enough, is delighted. But there is something he neglected to mention. There are two in the Grendel family.

A Mother's Rage

Grendel's mother has not been nearly as troublesome as Grendel, but after her son is killed, she takes revenge and kills Hrothgar's most trusted counselor. Beowulf's services are needed again.

This time the fight is harder. Hrothgar's men lead Beowulf and his own followers to the Grendel family lair, an underwater cave opening beneath a memorably haunted lake.

Beowulf dives in. Those on the bankside wait and wait. The water froths with blood. Hrothgar's men eventually give up and go home. Beowulf's men remain mourning. And then Beowulf emerges, Grendel's massive head in hand.

Grendel's mother, as it turns out, almost succeeded in killing him, but, as we are told, the grace of God and his own strength save him, and he takes Grendel's head as a trophy. It takes four of his followers to carry it.

The Goodness of Beowulf

Now we find out how good Beowulf really is. Hrothgar is an old man, and his wife Wealhtheow is much younger. They have two young sons. In his enthusiasm for Beowulf's achievements, Hrothgar begins to talk about what a fine king Beowulf would be. That worries Wealhtheow, and she is all the more worried because Hrothgar has a young, grown nephew who she fears will take over the throne after Hrothgar dies. Beowulf turns out to be no threat.

He is not that kind of man. But Wealhtheow's fears are otherwise justified. When Hrothgar dies, his nephew does indeed take over. This is a pattern that repeats itself throughout the tale. The poet's direct focus is on Beowulf's triumphs. But off-stage, the events that he alludes to are almost uniformly disastrous. It is as if only Beowulf's presence can hold disaster at bay—light is surrounded by darkness in space as well as in time.

When Beowulf returns home to Geatland, he finds himself in the situation of Hrothgar's nephew. His uncle Hygelac is not much older than Beowulf himself and has a young wife and a young son. Beowulf's first act on returning is to give to Hygelac and his wife the treasure that a grateful Hrothgar has bestowed on him. He is a loyal thane or retainer, a loyal follower of his king. And Hygelac rewards him. But Hygelac doesn't have Beowulf's good judgment and soon enough embroils himself in quarrels that cost his life (real quarrels, evidently—there is historical record of Hygelac, though not of Beowulf himself). Hygelac's wife offers Beowulf the throne. But he will not take it. He instead serves as a loyal regent for Hygelac's son until the son too is killed. Then, and only then, does Beowulf take the throne himself. The point is clear—Beowulf is not only a hero of all but supernatural strength, he is a dutiful, decent, and loyal man, as the precisely contrary example of Hrothgar's nephew reveals.

Beowulf the King

Beowulf's record as king is at least arguably more mixed. We are told that he rules well for "fifty winters" until he is himself as old as Hrothgar. But then trouble intervenes. The final section of the poem concerns Beowulf's last battle—with a dragon. (This was the most popular part of the poem, evidently, and the pages where it begins are so worn that some of the lines are illegible.)

The dragon has been sleeping for centuries in his barrow, guarding his treasure, as Germanic dragons do. But a banished slave who wants to make amends with his master enters the barrow and steals a cup as peace offering. The dragon is furious and ravages the countryside.

Beowulf decides, as he did when he fought Grendel, to take on the dragon alone—though this time he decides to use weapons and to use a special more or less fireproof shield. Has Beowulf at last given way to pride, to “*oferhygd*,” as the Anglo-Saxons called it?

Shouldn't he have invited his followers to help him? Some have thought so, J.R.R. Tolkien among them, who saw in Beowulf's decision to take on the dragon alone a sort of critique of the ethos of heroism.

When the fight with the dragon starts going badly, almost all of his followers, nearby and watching, flee in terror. Only one, Wiglaf, comes to help him, and together they at last succeed in subduing the dragon—at the cost of Beowulf's life. But the story is over for the Geats. Word of their cowardice will get out, and there are plenty of enemies waiting for the chance to invade and destroy them. That, we are to understand, is what will happen. Before that, though, the Geats give Beowulf a splendid funeral, and the poem closes with the following tribute:

*They said that he was, of the kings in this world,
the kindest to his men, the most courteous man,
the best to his people, and most eager for fame. (3180–82)*

The question, though, arises, with regard to the last phrase, “most eager for fame,” or in the original Anglo-Saxon “*lof-geornost*.” Is it a good thing to yearn for fame? The answer is not entirely clear. On one hand, deserved fame—for prowess, for courage, and for loyalty—is in the old Germanic vision the best thing a person can strive for. On the other, striving for fame is not a Christian virtue. It is rather, as Milton puts it, “the last infirmity of a noble mind.”

My own sense here is that the poet's moral criticism of Beowulf is muted. Beowulf is all the Geats think that he is. The criticism is instead ruefully cultural. In the pagan world that the poem describes, there is nothing better to strive for. Not so in the world of the poet. Beowulf does the best he can, and when he dies, we are told that his soul departs to seek “the doom of the just,” or judgment of those who “held fast to the truth.” The same phrase is used in the Anglo-Saxon poetic retelling of the tale of Abraham, so we have to conclude that Beowulf has done as well as his situation allowed for. There are, though, in *Beowulf*, various passages that seem to associate Beowulf with Christ, and that, I think, is the wider point.

Beowulf can keep the forces of darkness at bay, can overcome Grendel, can even fight the dragon to a fatal draw. But when he is gone, it's over. He can only save his people for so long. The “new teaching” of Christianity, so the poet believed, offered something better.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. To what extent are we to admire Beowulf? What, specifically, are we to admire?
2. Why does the poet directly depict Beowulf fighting monsters rather than people? What does the nature of the monsters suggest about the nature of what Beowulf is up against? Is he fighting symbolically against different things when he takes on Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon? If so, what might those things be?
3. Why do we have to wait so long before meeting Beowulf himself? What is the point of beginning the poem not with a story of Beowulf, but with the story of Scyld Scefing?
4. Is *Beowulf* a crude or unsophisticated poem? To what extent and in what ways?
5. What is the evidence for thinking of *Beowulf* as a "primary" epic?
6. To what degree, and on what grounds, does it make sense to think of *Beowulf* as a Christian reconceptualization of the heroic, pagan past?
7. To what extent is Beowulf a Christ figure, and what is the point of making him a Christ figure?

Suggested Reading

Chickering, Howell D., trans. *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*. Garden City, NJ: Anchor, 1977.

Other Books of Interest

Chambers, R.W. *Beowulf: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. London: Cambridge University Press, 1959.

Lecture 8: Dante and *The Divine Comedy*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, translated by John D. Sinclair.

Why a comedy?

The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri is, for my money, the greatest single literary work ever composed. You could argue that the works of Homer or Shakespeare, taken as a whole, surpass it. Goethe and Virgil have their partisans, as do the great works of other authors (though not many). But the *Commedia*, I think, surpasses them all in range, depth, daring, comprehensiveness, insight, and sheer poetic skill. The *Commedia*, by the way, is the original name of Dante's poem. The adjective "divine" was added later in deference to its subject and to its surpassing literary merit.

Why is the *Commedia*, a work perhaps best remembered for its depictions of hell, considered a "comedy"? Surely there is nothing terribly funny about the idea of eternal punishment and eternal loss.

Hell is not what the *Commedia* is about. It is, in fact, very nearly the antithesis of what the *Commedia* is about. The *Commedia* is about the final destiny of humanity in this world and in the next. Purgatory and Paradise follow the Inferno, and the poem concludes with the beatific vision, in the very presence of God Himself. That is the full, triumphant pattern of which the Inferno is a part.

Another reason, though less important, for thinking of the *Commedia* as a comedy is its language. Tragedies are customarily written in relatively exalted language about relatively exalted people, comedies in less exalted language and about less exalted people. Dante chose to write his *Commedia* in the vernacular, not in Latin, which had, of course, been the language of Virgil.

There was no precedent for writing a work as long and ambitious, as clearly meant for the ages as the *Commedia*, in the vernacular (or more precisely, in Tuscan). I think, for deeply thematic reasons, Dante chose to write in the vernacular above all for the sake of immediacy. Latin was a vastly more widespread language than Tuscan, but it was a language of learning—it was really no one's native tongue. Tuscan most emphatically was. Dante chose to write in a language that in itself suggested that his thematic concerns were not to be separated from us by a veil of epic dignity. Dante's themes are grand, but part of their importance is their inescapable universality. They address issues we must confront every day of our lives.

Dante's Themes

What are the themes of the *Commedia*? On one level, Dante is doing precisely what his mentor Virgil did. He takes an existing epic tradition—in this case, primarily Virgil himself—and reconceives it in service of his thematic ends.

But what are these ends? What is Dante doing in the *Commedia*? The full realization of the divine presence—in thought, in apprehension, and in life and beyond—is in a sense what the *Commedia* is about. That is, for Dante, the full expression of human potentiality, and it is, of course, what the souls in the Inferno have lost.

The *Commedia* is on many levels an allegory of salvation, an examination of how humans can fulfill their intrinsic and God-given capacity for bliss. On the most literal level, the *Commedia* chronicles the journey of a character named “Dante” from a “dark wood” through the Inferno, through Purgatory, through the heavens, and into the presence of God himself. On this level, it recalls other fantastic voyages: the travels of Odysseus and the underworld journey of Aeneas. But the *Commedia* is also Dante’s spiritual autobiography, a symbolic account of his own real-life regeneration. It is reminiscent, in a sense, of the *Confessions of St. Augustine*.

On a more sweeping level, the *Commedia* evokes the whole of Christian history—from creation to fall to redemption to final judgment. For just that reason, it evokes the salvation not just of Dante, but of every human soul, including the soul of the reader. This is, in a sense, Dante at his most daring. He seeks not only to describe the process of spiritual regeneration, but to evoke it so that the reader and Dante undergo a parallel transformation.

The Beatific Vision

The story begins as Dante finds himself in a dark wood on the night of Maundy Thursday—a parallel to Jesus’ dark night in the Garden of Gethsemane. He enters the Inferno at sundown on Good Friday, the time Jesus was entombed and, according to the Creed, the time Jesus “descended into hell.” Dante enters Purgatory at dawn on Easter morning (according to the gospels, the time of Jesus’ resurrection). Dante’s central point is clear enough—the process of salvation in his Christian universe is an imitation of Christ, itself made possible by the passion and resurrection events that Dante’s own journey parallels.

But how does Dante gain salvation and, at last, the beatific vision? The answer, in a word, is Beatrice—Beatrice Portinari, whom Dante met and loved as a child and to whom, in a sense, he remained faithful as long as he lived.

This is, on the face of things, very odd. Certainly Christian theology of virtually any stripe does not routinely attribute such religious potency to love affairs—even to love affairs as chaste and idealized as Dante’s love for Beatrice evidently was. What leads Dante to make such an eccentric, indeed, such an astonishing assertion?

Dante tells in the *Vita Nuova*, which made Dante famous before he was thirty, that he saw her for the first time when he was nine years old. It was that encounter with Beatrice Portinari, so Dante tells us, that inaugurated his “new life.”

Dante does not hold back in describing the moment: “She appeared dressed in the most noble of colours, a subdued and decorous crimson,” and at that moment, Dante’s “vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble.” Dante tells us, “Here is god stronger than I,

who shall come to rule over me” (VN 2). Dante claims that Beatrice has the power to transform “vile hearts” and to turn them to thoughts of good (VN 19). She is, for him, a walking manifestation of grace. Unfortunately for Dante, Beatrice was beyond his social reach. She married Simone de’ Bardi, member of a family even more financially prominent than Dante’s own, and died at the age of twenty-five after not quite three years of marriage.

Dante met her when he was nine, and this to him was no accident. In chapter 29 of the *Vita Nuova*, he makes the astonishing claim that Beatrice herself “was a nine, or a miracle, whose root, namely of the miracle, is the miraculous Trinity itself.” Three threes, or three squared, is nine, and for Dante, Beatrice is an ongoing revelation of the power of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This all seems more than a bit far-fetched, but Dante is serious, and the figure of Beatrice comes to serve for him a very important theological function. For Dante, all that exists is an expression of divine thought. In Dante’s world, it is entirely fitting that another human being should reveal God.

Beatrice serves as a revelation to Dante. I think that Dante employs her as an expression of the felt presence of God. Beatrice represents to Dante efficacious personal revelation, not revelation in the abstract. It is that personal revelation, so Dante tells us, that brings him at last to God and to the heaven beyond space and time. At the end of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante tells us that Beatrice appeared to him in “a miraculous vision,” and he resolved to “write about her in a more worthy fashion,” indeed “to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman” (42). He kept his promise, as we shall see.

Defining Events

This brings us very close to the beginning of the *Commedia*. We need only to consider one last set of events to set the stage. After concluding the *Vita Nuova*, though his literary interests continued unabated, Dante embarked on a political career.

The Holy Roman Empire, which dated back to the time of Charlemagne (c. 800), was in theory the revived Western Empire of Rome. Dante devoutly believed that it had been divinely appointed to rule over affairs on earth and that the competing political claims of the papacy compromised the Church’s spiritual mission. By Dante’s time, the power base of the Holy Roman Empire was in what is now Germany, but Dante remained hopeful that the Empire would be able to assert what he considered its rightful power in Italy.

In 1300 and again in 1301, Dante went to Rome on missions to negotiate with Pope Boniface VIII. In his absence, Dante was accused of corruption in office, exiled in absentia, and then condemned in absentia to death by burning. He never returned to Florence again.

That is why the *Commedia* begins with Dante in “a dark wood where the straight way was lost.” He is thirty-five years old, “in middle of the journey of our life” (Inf. 1.1–3). It is springtime of 1300 (or arguably 1301). Dante’s life has fallen to pieces, and he stands on the edge of despair.

It is very near the vernal equinox, traditionally March 25, and thus a most propitious time—the time when God created the world, as Dante tells us

(1.37-40). Besides that, it is the traditional date of Annunciation (nine months to the day before Christmas) and hence of the Incarnation, and indeed, the traditional date of the Crucifixion as well. The *Commedia*, after all, is an Easter poem.

The *Commedia* Begins

Dante, more or less under his own power, attempts to climb a nearby sunlit hill, “the delectable mountain which is the beginning and cause of all happiness” (1.77–78). The mountain is a figure, among other things, for a happy earthly life. But he can’t do it. Three beasts prevent him: a leopard, a lion, and as Dante calls her, a “lupa,” a female wolf. It is the lupa that Dante cannot overcome.

The beasts are generally considered to represent personal failings: the leopard lustfulness or something like it and the lion fierceness and violence. The lupa, though, is different. She is often explained as greed or avarice, but the lupa is a loaded image, recalling the mother wolf who nursed the legendary founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. On that basis, I think she represents the corruption of Rome—whether the overambitious papacy, the ineffective empire, or both, it is hard to say. In any case, Dante’s efforts fail, and as dusk falls, he finds himself defeated, ready for another night in the woods or worse.

But he encounters a helper, “one whose voice seemed weak from long silence” (1.63), a voice crying in the wilderness. It turns out to be Virgil, who represents, on one level, Virgil, and on another, Dante’s own reason, to which, he implies, he has not been attending.

Virgil tells Dante that he has to take “another road” (1.91). He is just not going to be able to make it up the sunlit hill under his own power. Instead, he must go through hell, through purgatory, and beyond. Willpower, it seems, is not enough. Grace, understanding, and repentance are needed. But Dante, understandably, is hesitant. He is not sure he is up to undertaking an otherworldly journey.

Here we see one of the shrewdest, subtlest, and without question, most staggeringly daring moments in the *Commedia*. Who am I to go on such a journey? Dante asks. Who “grants it? I am not Aeneas; I am not Paul?” Dante seemingly bespeaks his modesty. Aeneas made an underworld journey, but Aeneas was also, according to Virgil, in effect the founder of Rome. Paul, according to 2 Corinthians, was taken up into the heavens, but Paul was the apostle to the gentiles, one of the founders of the Church. Who is Dante to merit such favor?

Virgil replies that Dante is stricken with “*viltate*” (2.45)—cowardice or meanness of spirit. But he should be confident. Virgil has come to him at the behest of Beatrice, who came to Virgil at the behest of Dante’s patron saint, Lucy, who came at the behest of none other than the Virgin Mary. In other words, Virgil comes on behalf a female trinity—Mary, or grace; Lucy, or illumination; and Beatrice, or revelation.

Dante has been chosen by heaven for his role. Dante’s seeming modesty sets the stage for a claim that is staggering in its ambition. Dante implies that

by means of the *Commedia*, and by something close to divine appointment, he is in some sense to refound Rome and to cleanse and revivify the Church.

In conclusion, Dante thought he was writing a work that would have the power to transform and reinvigorate lives, just as his own had been transformed—a work that could become to its readers a sort of Beatrice in its own right.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are the implications of Dante's claim that his journey to the other-world is inspired by Mary, St. Lucy, and Beatrice? In what sense does he claim to be like Aeneas and St. Paul?
2. What is the theological importance of Beatrice? What role does she play in Dante's allegory?
3. In what senses do Dante's aims in the *Commedia* differ from the aims of Homer, and Virgil, and the *Beowulf* poet? Do those differences make the *Commedia* a fundamentally different sort of poem?
4. Why does Dante choose to write in his native Tuscan dialect rather than in Latin?

Suggested Reading

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (3 vols, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*). Trans. John D. Sinclair. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939.

Other Books of Interest

Hollander, Robert. *Dante: A Life in Works*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

Jacoff, Rachel, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Tillyard, E.M.W. *The English Epic and Its Background*. New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1976.

Lecture 9: *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, translated by John D. Sinclair.

The Inferno

Dante's *Inferno* is probably the most famous and most often read portion of the *Commedia*, but in several significant respects it tends to confound expectations. We expect an inferno to be gruesome and fiery, and at times the *Inferno* is both, but neither fire nor gruesomeness is one of its essential characteristics. Virgil himself, in fact, makes the essential characteristic of Dante's *Inferno* clear. Hell is the place of "the woeful people who have lost the good of intellect" (3.17–18). We are, in Dante's world, made for bliss, for the fullest possible understanding and illumination. That is what the damned souls have lost.

Each of the realms that Dante depicts—hell, purgatory, heaven, and the heaven of heavens, which, as Dante tells us, "has no other where but the divine mind" (Par. 27.109–10)—works in effect as a moralized, allegorical landscape. The shape of these realms in some sense mirrors the spiritual condition of those within them.

Dante envisions hell as an inverted cone, extending under the earth and going all the way to the earth's core. Thus, as one sinks lower, one is more closely confined. Dante's hell is divided into three main sections, reflecting three major sorts of sinfulness. The relatively wide upper level is devoted to sins of "incontinence," sins that are, in effect, a sort of failure of self-control. Deeper down are the "violent," which for Dante concerns the conscious violation of God's will. Deepest and most closely confined of all are the fraudulent and the traitors. These are those who have not only chosen not to do God's will, but have chosen to make use of the human capacity for reason and intellect as a weapon to harm and deceive other people.

The Seven Deadly Sins

By Dante's day, the traditional seven deadly sins were well established in the work of priests and confessors. They run, from least damaging to most, in the following traditional order: lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, anger, envy, and pride. Dante seems to have begun the *Inferno* with the plan to visit each of these sins.

Before we enter the land of lust, though, Dante introduces two significant departures from tradition, and both are thematically important. The first people he encounters when he enters hell are not, as we might expect, those who have fallen victim to lust. They are those who have stood for nothing. Leading the pack is a nameless someone whom Dante designates as he "who from cowardice [the same failing of which Dante accused himself when he was reluctant to undertake his journey] made the great refusal" (3.59–60).

THE NINE CIRCLES OF HELL

First Circle: Limbo

The Virtuous Heathen (Plato, Socrates, Hebrews)Canto IV

Second Circle: Minos

The Lustful (Paolo and Francesca of Rimini)Canto V

Third Circle

The Gluttonous (Ciaccio)Canto VI

Fourth Circle

The Avaricious and the ProdigalCanto VII

Fifth Circle: The Styx

The Wrathful (Filippo Argenti)Canto VIII

Sixth Circle: The Furies, the Angel, The Plan of Hell

Heretics (Epicurus, Farinata)Canto IX-XI

Seventh Circle: The Minotaur, The Burning Sand

Violent toward Others (Atilla, Rinieri)Canto XII

Violent toward Self (Piero delle Vigne)Canto XIII

Violent toward GodCanto XIV

Violent toward Nature (The Sodomites)Canto XV-XVI

Violent toward Art (Geryon, the Usurers)Canto XVII

Eighth Circle: The Five Florentines and the Serpents

Fraudulent, Seducers and Panders,
Flatterers (Alessio Interminei)Canto XVIII

Simoniacs (Pope Nicholas III)Canto XIX

DivinersCanto XX

BarratorsCanto XXI-XXII

HypocritesCanto XXIII

ThievesCanto XXIV-XXVII

False Counselors (Ulysses)Canto XXVI-XXVIII

Makers of DiscordCanto XXVIII

Personators, Alchemists, SchimaticsCanto XXIX-XXX

Ninth Circle: Giants

Treacherous to KinCanto XXXI

Treacherous to Country or CauseCanto XXXII

Treacherous to Guests

(Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri of Pisa)Canto XXXIII

Treacherous to Lords and Benefactors

(Brutus, Judas)Canto XXXIV

Commentators differ as to whom Dante has in mind here, but I find entirely persuasive the notion that the “great refuser” is Pope Celestine V, the pope who immediately preceded Boniface VIII, the pope at the time of the *Commedia*, and the Pope who helped to engineer the *coup d'état* that resulted in Dante's exile. According to long-standing rumor, Boniface persuaded Celestine to resign in his favor, at least purportedly so that Celestine could retire to a fully contemplative life. Celestine was indeed beatified and declared a saint for his commitment to holiness, but Dante clearly saw things differently. The fact, if so it is, that the first damned sinner we meet in hell is a sainted pope is, to put it mildly, revealing. Dante's contempt for what he thinks of as such dereliction of duty is measureless. The uncommitted are nameless because they deserve no names. According to Virgil, “Pity and justice alike despise them,” and his advice to Dante is “look thou and pass” (3.50–51).

Dante's second departure from tradition concerns “limbo,” a sort of quasi-hellish nowhere developed by theologians to account for the fate of unbaptized infants. Dante's innovation is to extend limbo to what are traditionally called “virtuous pagans,” that is, people who were not Hebrews (and hence among God's chosen), who nevertheless did the best they could according to their religious and moral knowledge. Dante's revision, I suppose, derives from his notion that everyone has, finally, enough grace if they choose but to make use of it (or in the case of the virtuous pagans, nearly enough). In limbo, Dante encounters Socrates, Plato, and a whole host of classical worthies who reside in an area very much like the Elysian fields depicted by classical tradition. As Virgil puts it, they are “only so far afflicted that without hope” they “live in desire” (4.42).

Dante then begins to work in more conventional terms, taking us to the circles devoted to lust, gluttony, and avarice. In each, the punishment undergone by the condemned souls confined there is in some sense an expression or externalization of the disposition that brought them to hell. The lustful are blown around by high winds as they were swept away by passion. The gluttonous wallow in muck, and the avaricious and prodigal, those who misused earthly goods, are rolling the Sisyphean weight of their earthly obsessions.

Dante then departs from pattern a bit by placing anger next. Tradition would allot sloth the next position, but Dante evidently thinks of anger as coming in two sorts, the less culpable of which, as we encounter it, is another sort of loss of control. One can be swept away by anger as surely as by lust, or even by a consistently glum and sullen disposition. That is what Dante has in mind, as opposed to anger hardened to a settled and malicious intent to do ill.

A New Direction

Then, quite radically, Dante breaks the pattern, and we no longer work through the deadly sins *per se*. Early commentators evidently thought that Dante started the *Commedia* and then broke off for a while at the end of canto 7. In the interim, some have claimed, his early hopes for a return from exile were disappointed, and he reconceived his project. In any case, canto 8 begins, “Io dico, sequitando,” that is, “I say, continuing,” which does indeed suggest a break, and what follows certainly suggests that Dante is to some degree at least embarking in a new direction.

We arrive at the walls of the City of Dis, “Dis” being a Roman name for the god of the underworld. Dante and Virgil are refused admittance and taunted by the fallen angels who man the walls. At last, an angel dispatched from heaven forces the demonic guardians of the city to admit the travelers. Once inside, they find themselves not in the land of sloth, where we might expect them to be, but rather in a circle devoted to heresy.

Dante has in mind two heretical beliefs: first, simple atheism, the notion that there is no God, and second, the notion that there is no afterlife. Very few explicitly supported such ideas in Dante’s day, but that is not Dante’s point. His point is that once you have decided with full consciousness to do ill, to disobey God, then you have in practical terms opted for atheism, as have all the souls below this level.

Dante then encounters a series of folks who have in one sense or another been “violent” against God and his works. That is, they have with full consciousness chosen sin. We encounter one final moment of striking transition farther down, where Dante moves to the realm of the violent to Malbolge, the “evil pockets,” or the “bad bags,” the realm of the fraudulent, those who use reason as a weapon. This transition takes place by design at the very center of the *Inferno*, canto 17. The point here, as I take it, is that at the center of the Inferno, as at the “center” of evil, and indeed, of fraud, is nothing—just a void, an emptiness, non-being.

At the end of Malbolge, we enter a realm called Cocytus, the realm of traitors, cold and dark. Then, at the center of it all, we encounter Satan himself, a winged, three-faced fallen archangel—a demonic parody of the Trinity—whose three mouths endlessly chew on the men whom Dante considered the three worst traitors of all time: Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, and Cassius and Brutus, the betrayers of Julius Caesar (the founder of the Roman empire, as Dante thinks of him).

It is worth noting that as Dante descends into the Inferno, the reactions of Dante the character to the various souls that he meets often suggest a certain tension between the degree of wrongdoing implied by their placement within hell and Dante’s personal assessment. As we have already seen, Dante is especially contemptuous of financial sinners. To other souls, he is much more sympathetic. His reactions suggest that some “false gods” are better than others.

Notable Encounters

In canto 5, Dante encounters Francesca of Rimini and her lover Paolo in the circle of lust. Dante is hardly departing from tradition in suggesting that lust, or “lovst,” is the least damaging and diminishing of deadly sins, but after encountering Paolo and Francesca, he swoons in sympathy, partly because, as the passage suggests, he himself has been guilty of lust, and partly because, as she begins her account, Francesca paraphrases the opening line of one of Dante’s poems in the *Vita Nuova*—“Love and the gracious heart are but one thing” (20). The implication is that Dante’s words may have in some sense contributed to the lovers’ demise. Just as Dante hopes that the *Commedia* may help to bring at least some readers to salvation, so he recognizes that other writings—even other writings of his own—can have the opposite effect.

In canto 26, Dante encounters Ulysses (or Odysseus, in Greek) in one of the most far-reaching and celebrated moments in the entire *Commedia*. Here Dante confronts what was to him, I do not doubt, the most seductive temptation of all and the most attractive and compelling of false gods. Ulysses appears with his silent companion Diomedes, a distinguished fellow Greek warrior at Troy, in the circle of the “false counselors,” far, far down in the Malbolge. The putative reason for their placement there is the various subterfuges employed against Troy, the Trojan horse the most prominent among them. But again, the thematic burden of the passage lies elsewhere.

So far as can be told, Dante makes up, utterly without classical precedent, an account of Ulysses’ last days. After returning to Ithaca at last, Ulysses grew bored and persuaded his remaining companions (in the *Odyssey*, there aren’t any, but Dante had never read the *Odyssey*) to embark on one final journey to the ends of the world, as he puts it, in pursuit “of virtue and knowledge” (26.120). Ulysses and his men venture outside the strait of Gibraltar into uncharted seas, making their way around the bulge of West Africa, ever southward, until at last they cross the equator, see new southern stars, and make it within sight of Mt. Purgatory itself. There God sends a storm that sinks Ulysses’ ship with all hands.

Ulysses’ quest is in some respects not unlike Dante’s quest at the beginning of the *Inferno* when he tries to climb the “sunlit hill.” The question at issue is how close you can get to salvation under your own power, by self-discipline, intelligence, and daring. The answer is that one can get pretty darn close, but not, in the end, quite close enough. Hence the tragedy of Ulysses, and Dante suggests, a tragedy it is.

A particularly poignant encounter takes place in canto 13 when Dante meets with the suicide, Piero delle Vigne, who had been the trusted counselor of the last really effective Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II. Piero was unjustly accused, imprisoned, and blinded. While awaiting execution, he beat his brains out against the walls of his cell, or so the story goes. Dante affirms unequivocally that Piero was innocent, and his sympathy suggests a certain measure of personal identification. Dante too has been falsely accused and condemned to death. But Dante, through the mediation of Mary, Beatrice, Virgil, and the rest, resisted the temptation to suicide. Piero’s soul is now enclosed in a tree because he rejected his body by destroying it. Dante, by contrast, walks.

Out of the Inferno

As noted above, Dante resists the temptation to glamorize evil. The very end of the *Inferno* is, I suspect, a willed diminuendo, a bit of a disappointment, and designedly so. The emotional climax, such as it is, comes the canto before, in canto 33, when Dante encounters the shades of Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri of Pisa. This too, I think, is by design. We pass over the worst of evil before we know it. Be that as it may, Ugolino and Ruggieri are a terrifying sight, the grisliest image in the poem to my way of thinking.

They are both locked in ice and locked together, only their heads above the surface. When Dante sees them, Ugolino is determinedly gnawing at the back of Ruggieri’s head, in effect eating his brainstem. In response to Dante’s

horrified questioning, Ugolino wipes his mouth on Ruggieri's hair and explains why he does what he does. Both Ugolino and Ruggieri are traitors, but what Dante does not know, and what Ugolino wants to tell him, is "how cruel was my death" (20). Ruggieri, according to Dante, captured Ugolino, locked him in a tower, and there slowly starved him to death with his four young sons (actually two sons and two grandsons). Ugolino survives longest, mourning the slow death of his children, and then, as he laconically puts it, "fasting had more power than grief" (75). The implication seems to be that at last he ate his sons' corpses, as he now eats at the brain that devised his punishment.

This last passage, in its concluding laconic aside, echoes the conclusion of Francesca's narrative far higher in hell in the circle of lust. The adulterous lovers are bound eternally by love, as Ugolino and Ruggieri are bound by hate. The moral distance between them marks, in effect, the moral anatomy of hell. An image of Ugolino and Ruggieri works in other ways to suggest Dante's conception of the nature of evil. It is mind-destroying—hell is, after all, the realm of those who lost the good of intellect. It is fundamentally self-contradictory and self-consuming, as seen in Ugolino's tirelessly gnawing at Ruggieri's head. Paolo and Francesca, had their desires found full consummation, would have produced children. Ugolino, unwillingly, eats them. The contrast is sharp.

When at last Dante and Virgil meet Satan himself, they have literally to climb down his matted flanks to escape the Inferno. Halfway down, Virgil, who is leading, in effect turns around so he is climbing in the direction that before he was descending. Dante follows, but is puzzled. Virgil explains that they have passed the center of the earth, and what was down is now up and vice versa. With that gesture, turning his back on Satan, as it were, Dante enters the hemisphere of Purgatory and begins to climb toward the stars.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What does Dante mean in suggesting that the souls confined in Hell have lost the good of intellect?
2. Why do Dante and Virgil have to await angelic intervention to enter the City of Dis?
3. Why does Dante think of sins like lust as less serious than sins of violence and fraud?
4. Why doesn't Dante succeed in climbing to the "sunlit hill" in canto 1?
5. What does Virgil represent in the *Commedia*? Why Virgil rather than some other figure?
6. Why is Dante especially critical of financial sins?
7. In what sense does the imagined shape of the Inferno suggest the varying character of the souls that are confined there? In what sense does that shape recall Dante's conception of what sinfulness does to people?

Suggested Reading

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*. Trans. John D. Sinclair. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939.

Other Books of Interest

Jacoff, Rachel, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Lecture 10: *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Dante Alighieri's *Purgatorio*, translated by John D. Sinclair.

The Shores of Purgatory

Dante's climb from the center of the earth to the shores of Purgatory proper takes a full day, and when he and Virgil at last emerge from the earth, it is just before dawn on Easter morning. They find themselves on a beach, a clear blue sky above them, the sun about to rise. Dante understandably feels a sense of profound relief.

The blue of the sky, "the oriental sapphire," is delightful to Dante after his infernal journey, but it also is a token of Mary, "full of grace," the initiator of his journey to the heavens. As he ascends to Purgatory on Easter morning, the overvaulting sky is a testimony to divine grace and illumination.

All things considered, Dante's situation is about as propitious as he can make it, and well it should be, as he is now about to embark on the process that will bring him to salvation. There are, so to speak, only two possible grades in Dante's universe—pass or fail—and everyone who attains even Purgatory has been saved.

In the *Purgatorio*, as in the *Inferno*, Dante presents an allegorical landscape that evokes the spiritual condition of those to be found there. The shape of Purgatory, perhaps unsurprisingly, is the precise inverse of the shape of hell. The *Inferno* is a hollow cone pointing downwards. Purgatory is a cone-shaped mountain pointing up. As the shape of the *Inferno* testifies to ever-growing constriction of being, to ever-growing evil, so the shape of Purgatory testifies to ever-growing freedom, goodness, and light.

Before he begins the ascent of Purgatory proper, however, Dante encounters a series of shades who for one reason or another have to wait for a time outside the boundaries of Purgatory itself. Here he makes some of his most striking thematic points. In Purgatory, a realm of the redeemed, Virgil cannot guide Dante as he did in the *Inferno*, and they work together to find the way. They have many helpers, though, because a point that Dante makes tirelessly is that the realms of the redeemed, Paradise and Purgatory alike, are unlike hell. They are communities where each spirit is delighted to help all others.

Ante-Purgatory

In Ante-Purgatory, Dante encounters Manfred, a deliberate counterpart to the putatively sainted Pope Celestine, he who "made the great refusal." Manfred led the Ghibelline cause until he was decisively defeated and killed at the battle of Benevento in 1266. Manfred died fighting against Guelf, effectively papal, forces. He died excommunicated, accused by his enemies of all sorts of spectacular sins, not least among them incest. His remains were denied burial in hallowed ground. Yet he is in Purgatory among the redeemed.

His redemption surprises even Manfred himself. According to Dante, at the battle of Benevento, after Manfred had endured “two mortal strokes,” he gave himself up “with tears to Him who freely pardons.” By Manfred’s own confession, his sins were “horrible,” but “the infinite goodness has arms so wide that it receives whoever turns to it” (3.118-23). Manfred’s repentance, though late, was sincere. Dante could hardly make his political point more clearly—the uncommitted Pope Celestine suffers in hell despite his putative sanctity, and the notorious and excommunicated imperial claimant Manfred resides in Purgatory, on his way to heaven.

Before Dante is ready to ascend from Ante-Purgatory to Purgatory itself, he spends a night in the so-called “Valley of the Princes,” where he encounters the shades of many recent rulers of his time. At night, when the princes and the other souls in Ante-Purgatory rest, angels come to protect those confined there from the incursions of serpents. The serpents themselves are an obvious echo of the serpent tempter of Eden. The serpents represent an unconscious disposition toward sinfulness. The Church taught that wayward thoughts or desires were in themselves not sinful, but despite that, they can be very troublesome. We would not commit bad deeds were we not tempted by bad thoughts and desires. That is what the angels are there to take care of. Part of the purgation undergone by the shades in purgatory is a wholly grace-driven and unconscious purgation of wayward impulses.

Purgatory

After his night in the Valley of the Princes, Dante comes in canto 9 to the gate of Purgatory itself. The entrance, echoing scripture, is narrow, a needle’s eye, and Dante mounts three steps, representing the three phases in the process of repentance—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—before he comes to the Dantean equivalent of the pearly gates. There he finds that an angel, not the pope and not the Church, holds the keys to the kingdom.

He thereupon enters into the realm of active purgation. Dante arranges Purgatory by ascending terraces devoted to the seven deadly sins. The order, once again, is pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. As in the *Inferno*, the penances undergone by the redeemed shades either mirror or answer the sinful dispositions that they work to overcome.

In the terrace of envy—at the very center of the *Commedia*—Dante discusses its antidote, active goodwill or charity, which is the keynote of the redeemed life both in Purgatory and in Paradise. Dante’s discussion of charitable love and of the community to which it gives rise occupies the place in the *Purgatorio* that the empty gulf of fraud occupies in the *Inferno*. The centrality of the discussion is entirely intentional. In a powerful sense, charity is what the redeemed life is about.

Dante claims to have little trouble with envy. He is, understandably enough, a good deal more worried about pride. But his greatest difficulties come with lust, the purgation of which is fire. Here, uniquely in the *Purgatorio*, Dante fears he cannot go on. Virgil tries to persuade him to go through, but he balks, as he tells us, “strongly imagining bodies I once saw burned (27.17–18)—as well he might, considering the fact that he himself lay under sentence of death by burning. Only Virgil’s assurance that the only way to

Beatrice is through the fire persuades Dante to enter, and even then the fire burns like boiling glass (27.49–51).

The purgation of lust promises an annihilation of the very self—so closely in Dante’s view is our sexuality entwined with our selfhood. That is why lust is the least of sins, and that is why it is “the last wound of all” (25.139).

The Earthly Paradise

Once past the fires of lust, Dante is free at last to enter the earthly paradise, Eden itself, the ancestral homeland of Adam and Eve. This is the “sunlit hill” that Dante originally sought to climb, and after taking Virgil’s “other road,” he has climbed it. The fact that Dante so clearly distinguishes the earthly and the celestial paradise is interesting and of far-reaching importance in its own right. Dante believed that the divine plan called for a happy life on earth and a happy life beyond. The earthly paradise represents human happiness on earth, and in one of the most touching moments in the *Commedia*, when Dante achieves it, he pays tribute to the yearnings of classical antiquity in general and Virgil in particular. Once arrived in the earthly paradise, Virgil receives a validation of himself and his culture—those “who in old times sang of the age of gold and of its happy state perhaps dreamed on Parnassus of this place” (28.139–41). The earthly paradise, in short, lies within the purview of human reason and of the thinkers of pagan antiquity. It is a common human heritage and a focus of human yearning.

Virgil’s last words to Dante come just a bit before when, their journey completed, he tells Dante that his will is entirely healed and entirely good—“free, upright and whole is thy will,” and it would be “a fault not act on its bidding.” Therefore, says Virgil, “over thyself I crown and mitre thee.” Dante’s redeemed soul and redeemed will have no further need of government by either empire or papacy—he is and should be his own guide.

Shortly thereafter, Virgil disappears. My students always mourn his loss, and I suspect that Dante did too. Nevertheless, by shepherding Dante to the earthly paradise, he has taken him as far as he can. Reason can take you only so far—beyond lies revelation and religious experience, something very like mystical illumination.

Our last vision of Virgil comes as he and Dante are dumfounded by the pageant of revelation. A series of figures of almost unendurable brightness representing the books of the Hebrew Bible appear, and the parade concludes with a matching series of figures representing all the books of the Christian Bible, save the gospels. Between the two is a cart drawn by a griffin, half eagle and half lion, which represents the divine and human natures of Christ. The cart itself represents the Church. There are four figures representing the gospels, four figures representing the four cardinal virtues, and three more representing the Christian theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

In the center of the cart stands Beatrice, which makes for an astonishing configuration. All of the elements of revelation as ordinarily conceived are conspicuously present, scripture and Church, and the virtues with them, and even a figure representing at least the theological conception of Christ. And what stands at the center? Beatrice, who calls Dante by name. For Dante, the perfection of earthly life clearly leads to life in the world beyond.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is it easier to climb Dante's Mt. Purgatory the higher one gets? What is Dante suggesting about the moral life?
2. Why can't the souls in Purgatory climb at night?
3. What is the point of Dante's providing examples of virtue on each terrace from the life of the Virgin Mary, from antiquity, and from the Hebrew Bible?
4. To what sins does Dante implicitly claim a particular susceptibility?
5. How is the pagan Virgil able to attain the earthly paradise? What are we to make of his success in attaining it? And why does he disappear when Beatrice arrives?
6. In what sense is the redeemed life a community for Dante—in both Purgatory and Paradise alike—while Hell is not?

Suggested Reading

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio*. Trans. John D. Sinclair. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939.

Other Books of Interest

Jacoff, Rachel, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Lecture 11: *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Dante Alighieri's *Paradiso*, translated by John D. Sinclair.

Expressing the Inexpressible

Now we come to what is in my view the greatest portion of the greatest literary work ever composed, the farthest north of human literary achievement. In the *Paradiso*, Dante sets himself a task, if otherwise attempted, never nearly otherwise so well fulfilled. He seeks not to describe heaven, but to evoke it, to evoke at last even the vision of God Himself. I cannot say he succeeds at every moment, but he does not fail, and the sheer magnitude of his fulfilled audacity compels admiration.

He begins the *Paradiso* far beyond the realm of ordinary human experience, and for thirty-three cantos, he uses all the resources of his literary art to say in words what cannot be said. He makes telling use, fully recognizing the difficulties that he faces, of what is called the “inexpressibility trope,” that is, the literary device of describing or evoking the indescribable not by attempting to describe it, but by describing how far one’s abilities to describe it necessarily fall short of the mark. You wouldn’t think that such a tactic would work, but in Dante’s hands, it does, time and time again.

Dante sets himself the task of providing us with a sequenced series of crescendoes, each surpassing the last, and by and large, against all reasonable expectation, he succeeds. It is an unparalleled achievement.

The *Paradiso* begins with Dante and Beatrice standing in the earthly realm, the eyes of Beatrice on the heavens, the eyes of Dante on hers (she represents, after all, revelation). Suddenly Dante finds himself transported to the spheres beyond the earth, not even cognizant of the moment when he left, so fixed was his gaze. This is in itself an allegorically loaded configuration, and Dante explains, in one of my favorite lines, simply by stating that the “inborn and perpetual thirst for the godlike kingdom bore us away” (2.19–20). They soon enough find themselves in the sphere of the moon.

Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatory* are in large part his own invention. The same is not true of his heavens. Here Dante works in a different mode, drawing upon the best science of his day. Dante’s heavens are effectively those of the best contemporary astronomy, for unlike the *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, the heavens are visible to mortal eyes, everywhere and every cloudless night. Dante’s point is clear. What he is describing is real—real as the skies above us. Dante and Beatrice rise successively through the planetary spheres of Ptolemy, from earth to the moon, to Mercury, to Venus, then to the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, then to the sphere of the stars, and finally to the Aristotelian “prime mover” or “crystalline” (because it contained no planets or stars and hence

was invisible), and to the “empyrean beyond.” All this, save perhaps the empyrean, is in full accord with the science of the day, in which, as in virtually every other branch of contemporary learning, Dante was well versed.

Dante, of course, puts the various planetary spheres to thematic use. Like the levels in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, they mark gradations in the shades whom he encounters. As Dante makes his way through the spheres, he unmistakably and explicitly connects what are for him the four outer planets with the four cardinal virtues. The Sun, the sphere of theologians, is connected with wisdom, in this guise the knowledge of God gained through theology. The sphere of Mars, traditionally the god of war, is connected with the martial virtue of fortitude, exemplified in this case by martyrs and by warriors for the faith. The sphere of Jupiter, king of the gods, Dante associates with justice and with just rulers. The sphere of Saturn he associates with temperance, and with the monastic fruit of temperance, mystical contemplation.

All four spheres, then, commemorate one of the cardinal virtues in its heavenly perfection. The three lower spheres, at least seemingly, represent fortitude, justice, and temperance in less perfected guise. The moon is devoted to those who have given way under pressure in their monastic vows. They are redeemed, but in some sense, they have failed in fortitude. An utterly resolute will, Dante suggests, would have resisted the pressure to which they succumbed. The sphere of Mercury is devoted to those who, indeed, pursued justice, but not so much for the sake of justice itself as for the sake of fame. And the sphere of Venus, unsurprisingly, is devoted to those redeemed souls who gave way too much to “lovst.” In that sense, they failed in impulse control, in temperance. (In Dante’s universe, remember, and in Christian theology generally, heaven is not for those without sin, but those who repented.) That leaves wisdom unaccounted for, but perhaps the flawed or incomplete version of wisdom is to be found in the earthly paradise itself—accessible to unaided reason, as Virgil’s success in guiding Dante reveals—where Dante’s journey to the spheres begins. The earthly paradise represents the perfection of earthly wisdom and earthly virtue. Theologians, though, address themselves to divine wisdom.

When he reaches the sphere of the stars, Dante changes the pattern and undergoes an examination on the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. These, however, at least arguably, continue the pattern. Faith knows what even theological wisdom cannot know, trusting the evidence of things unseen; hope is the motive force behind fortitude; and charity is love beyond the claims of justice.

In the crystalline, and in the empyrean beyond, Dante moves beyond even contemplation to direct vision of the heavenly city and even of God himself, in the heaven that is not in space and time at all, but rather the divine mind. As he rises, Dante spirals through imperfect wisdom, fortitude, justice, and temperance, through the same virtues in perfected guise, and then, or so one might argue, through the analogous theological virtues that transcend them. The allegory works on all levels, as for Dante, so for salvation history, so for any other soul, so—or so he presumably hopes—for you.

Virtuous Pagans

Before he achieves his final vision, though, Dante is at pains to answer a question that has bedeviled him since he began working on the *Commedia*. What about the virtuous pagans? Dante confronts the question directly in the sphere of Jupiter and of justice, where he gives three successive answers to the question.

Answer one is that, as created beings, we just do not have the capacity to fathom the depths of divine justice. Answer two is that what justice means, what good in general means, is conformity with God's will. Hence, God's will is justice by definition. Answer three involves Rhiphaeus, whom Virgil characterizes as the most justice-loving of all Trojans and the most committed to equity. But "*dis aliter visum*," "to the gods it seemed otherwise." The implication is that the gods do not finally care about personal virtue. Sometimes good people die, and that's that. Dante answers differently. According to Dante, Rhiphaeus' love of justice was rewarded with grace, and he became a believer centuries before Christ. Dante does not in so many words say that the virtuous pagans are at last saved by their virtue. But in the tale of Rhiphaeus, that seems to be what he implies, and the happy conclusion of the canto suggests that in that implication he found joy and peace.

The World Beyond

The most astonishing moment in the *Paradiso*, though, and for that matter, in the *Commedia*, from my perspective at least, takes place a few cantos later—to be precise, in canto 27. Between lines 99 and 100, Dante moves from time to eternity, from the world to the world beyond, in effect, into the realm "*che non ha altro dove che la mente divina*," "which has no other 'where' than the divine mind" (27.109-10). When he does, he finds something that profoundly puzzles him. Dante sees a concentric series of angelic circles, circles composed of numberless angels, rotating around a central point, infinitely small and infinitely bright. Beatrice tells him, "*Da quel punto dipende il cielo e tutta la natura*," "from that point hang (or depend) the heavens and all nature" (28.41–42).

The point, in short, represents God, and the angelic circles the heavenly spheres, but with this significant difference: In the physical world, God is on the outside and the earth, and ultimately Satan, at the center. In the spiritual world, this is precisely inverted. God is at the center. The earth—and of course, Satan—is at the margins. Dante has at the boundary between time and eternity effectively turned the cosmos inside out.

In a sense, so Dante implies, the process of conversion, even of beatification itself, precisely parallels this inversion, this conversion, from an earth-centered, even Satan-centered vision, to a God-centered vision. As Dante suggests at the boundaries of Dis in the *Inferno*, that reason in and of itself cannot finally answer religious doubt, so here he suggests that the physical counterpart to God's centrality in the spiritual realm is his marginality, even his absence as such, in the world of space and time. I do not know if that is what Dante means to suggest here, but that is what the configuration suggests, and it is a rich and suggestive conception, whether Dante meant for us to consider it or not.

Dante's moment of vision here likewise reconfigures the course of his own spiritual journey, and reverses its direction and character. All along he thought that he was spiraling out to the margins, and all along he was in fact spiraling in, closer and closer to the center. From this vantage point the whole course of his life takes a different character.

The Final Vision

Dante's final vision is almost chillingly ambitious, and I am not sure that at the very end it works quite as well as he hoped. But he sets it up beautifully with the most evocative and effective of his many expressions of incapacity for the task he has set himself. He writes, "Like him that sees in a dream and after the dream the passion wrought by it remains and the rest returns not to his mind, such am I; for my vision almost wholly fades, and still drops within my heart the sweetness that was born of it. Thus the snow loses its imprint in the sun; thus in the wind on the light leaves the Sibyl's oracle was lost" (33.58–66).

The clause is Dante's final, loving farewell to Virgil. Virgil wrote, you will recall, of the Sibyl's cave, where his prophecies were written on leaves that the very act of consulting disarrayed, an emblem of the entropic nature of Virgil's universe. Dante speaks of the loss of his own vision—and I do not doubt that it was a real vision—in analogous terms. But then he retracts them. As he stares transfixed at the "Infinite Goodness," the "Eternal Light," he says, "In its depth I saw that it contained, bound by love in one volume, that which is scattered in leaves through the universe." "I think," he continues, "I saw the universal form of this complex, because in telling of it I feel my joy expand" (33.81, 83, 85–7, 91–2). Dante here again, as in speaking of Rhiphaeus, answers Virgil's gentle cosmic pessimism. The Sibyl's leaves aren't finally scattered after all. The world is coherent, and God does rule.

At the very conclusion, Dante seeks to understand, to see, in some sense, to touch the Incarnation. He compares his wish to a geometer's seeking "to square the circle," to find a square and circle of identical area. To this day the task is impossible—pi is not a rational number. And in one final disavowal of capacity, Dante claims that his wish beyond expectation was fulfilled. "My own wings," he tells us, "were not sufficient for that, had not my mind been smitten by a flash wherein came its wish" (33.139–41)—and tells us no more about it other than to say that "now my desire and will, like a wheel that spins with even motion, were revolved by the Love that moves the sun and other stars" (33.143–45). And there, in fulfillment and harmony beyond all worlds, Dante's *Commedia* ends.

"Cio ch'io vedeva mi sembiava un riso de l'universo."

~Dante (*Paradiso* 27.4–5)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. In what sense is Dante's cosmos "theomorphic" or "God-shaped" throughout, and what does this imply about the process of revelation as Dante conceives it?
2. What does Dante mean when he says that the true heaven, the Empyrean, has "no other where than the divine mind"?
3. What does Dante suggest about the process of salvation in telling the story of Virgil's Rhiphaeus?
4. How, if the redeemed souls in Dante's Paradise are unequal (and they are), can they all be fully blessed and fully satisfied?
5. What is "the inexpressibility trope," and how does Dante employ it in the *Paradiso*?
6. How does each redeemed soul in Paradise contribute to the blessedness of all other souls?

Suggested Reading

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Lecture 12:
The Renaissance Epic and
The Faerie Queene: Book I

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Edmund Spenser's *Edmund Spenser's Poetry: The Faerie Queene*, edited by Hugh Maclean and Anne Lake Prescott.

Themes and Background

To move from Dante's *Commedia* to Sir Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is in many respects to move to a different world. It is not only that Spenser is English and Dante is Florentine, nor is it only that Dante is, albeit to some degree eccentrically, Catholic, and Spenser is resolutely Protestant. Nor is it only that Spenser writes more than two and half centuries after Dante, in Renaissance Elizabethan England rather than late-medieval Italy. All of these factors contribute to the difference, of course, but more wide-ranging and deep-rooted than either is a fundamental difference in sensibility that is hard to pin down but impossible to mistake. Both Spenser and Dante are devoutly Christian, in their own ways, and the theme of *Book I* at least of *The Faerie Queene* is similar in many respects to that of the *Commedia*.

Spenser terms it the "Legend of Holinesse," and like the *Commedia*, its theme is in the largest sense salvation. But they are very different works even so. Where Dante's lines are luminous, effortless, and fluid, Spenser's are deft, often homely, and light—often playful in a way that Dante is not. There is, despite its all-encompassing breadth and variety, a unity of focus in the *Commedia* that expresses itself in theme, form, verse, and every aspect of organization: echoing endwords, initial acrostics, numerological patterning, and mythological and scriptural references.

Spenser works in a different mode. His models are different. In his dedicatory letter to "the Right noble, and Valorous, Sir Walter Raleigh, knight," Spenser explicitly cites his debt to the Italian epic, to Ariosto and Tasso. They, particularly Ariosto, wrote epics deeply influenced by the episodic tradition of romance. Spenser does not attempt a straightforward, linear narrative. Indeed, he values variety and what the old rhetoricians would have termed "copia": inventiveness and fecundity of imagination (not to put too fine a point on it, simple length for its own sake). He seeks to edify, but he also seeks to entertain in a sense that Dante does not.

We are considering only a bit less than a sixth of what Spenser completed of *The Faerie Queene*, and he completed only a quarter or so of what he envisioned. Even so, *Book I* of *The Faerie Queene* is far longer than, say, *Beowulf*.

Spenser wrote, of course, in vexed and unstable times. The simmering religious discontents, the ecclesiastical corruption that so troubled Dante, had by Spenser's day exploded into two generations of religious dispute and religious war between Protestants and Catholics—war all the more relentless and brutal because it was fought for the highest stakes, not just for advantage, not even just for political ideology, but for absolute justice and absolute rectitude, for the salvation of souls.

The Structure of *The Faerie Queene*

Spenser's hero in the "Legend of Holinesse" is the "Red Crosse" knight, who turns out to be "Saint George of mery England, the signe of victoree" (1.10.61). He envisions his central figure as "king Arthure" before "he was king," as a person "perfected in the twelve private morall vertues," benevolently intervening in the adventures of a series of knights who exemplify those virtues.

Spenser lived to complete a bit more than half of this plan. Afterwards, so he tells Raleigh, Spenser hoped to write about Arthur "after that hee came to be king," this time addressing himself not to "morall vertues" but to "politicke vertues" all "clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall devises." Arthur is throughout to be a devoted servant of "Gloriana." Hence the title, *The Faerie Queene*, by which, Spenser writes, "I mean glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our sovaine the Queene" (LTR).

Spenser's general idea, then, is to celebrate the full fruition, as he sees it, of private and public virtue in England, represented by Arthur, under the beneficent, Protestant rule of Elizabeth I. His method throughout, so he tells us, is to be "a continued Allegory, or darke conceit" (LTR).

Book I

To Book I, then. Spenser begins it with a sort of epigraph. "The Patron of true Holinesse, / Foule Errour doth defeate: / Hypocrisie him to entrappe, / Doth to his home entreat." Redcrosse, St. George to be, in the "whole armor of God," sets off with Una to free her parents. But soon enough, they find themselves in the wood of Errour (effectively Catholicism), whom Redcrosse proves, with some difficulty, able to slay. But then they meet with Catholicism in another guise, Archimago, the arch-magician and master of deceptive images. Archimago persuades Redcrosse to abandon Una, an allegorical rendering not only of the reign of Mary, I suppose, but also of the original corruption, from a Protestant perspective, of the pure church of the apostles.

Thereafter, Redcrosse and Una go their separate ways. Redcrosse takes up with Duessa—"to be double," "duplicity"—who bills herself as "Fidessa," "to be faithful," the truth faith. Redcrosse, in short, abandons the one true church and falls victim to Catholic deception. Soon enough he has to confront the machinations of what my great Spenserian teacher James Nohrnberg used to call the "loy-boys," the brothers Sans foy, Sans loy, and Sans joy (faithlessness, lawlessness, and joylessness), the results of his separation from Una.

Una leads Redcrosse to the House of Pride, whose ruler is Lucifera. There, Spenser provides us with one of his great set pieces, a ceremonial parade by the seven deadly sins, all mounted on appropriate beasts. Spenser is very near his best in portraying the deadly sins, and, in the *Mutabilitie cantos*, the parading seasons and months.

Redcrosse, in any case, proves able to escape the House of Pride, only to fall victim to the blandishments of Fidessa, his shield laid aside, "Poured out in loosnesse on the grassy ground" (1.7.7). The result of his dalliance is *Orgoglio*, the giant of pride, who captures Redcrosse and imprisons him.

Una, meanwhile, has undergone a parallel series of adventures, all loaded with allegorical meaning, and at last meets up with Arthur himself. In large part because of the perfection of his faith—his shield of faith is made of diamond—Arthur proves able to overcome Orgoglio and free the withered Redcrosse, now languishing in Orgoglio's dungeons.

Orgoglio, in any case, is entirely outgunned, Duessa revealed for what she is, and the freed Redcrosse, reunited with Una, seems well on the way to full recovery. But he is afflicted with guilt for abandoning the true faith, and soon enough he encounters Despair. Redcrosse's sins are too great to be forgiven, or so, in any case, he imagines. And Despair does nothing to disabuse him of the notion. According to Despair, Redcrosse is in so deep he can never get out, and the longer he goes on, the worse it will get. "The lenger life, I wote the greater sin, / The greater sin, the greater punishment" (1.9.43). "Death is the end of woes: die soone, O faires sonne" (1.9.47).

Redcrosse is nearly persuaded, but Una saves him, reminding him of God's infinite mercy, and she leads him off for rehabilitation to the House of Holinesse, the allegorical counterpart to the House of Pride, where Redcrosse is purified and cured.

Then and only then is Redcrosse able to take on the dragon, and a wonderful dragon it is. When Redcrosse approaches to challenge him, the dragon comes "bounding on the bruséd grass, / As for great joyance of his newcome guest" (1.11.15), clearly eager for the fight, "Halfe flying and halfe footing in his hast" (1.9.8). The battle takes three days, paralleling the time between the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and Redcrosse is able to triumph only because of the good effects of a "springing well" (1.9.29) and the "Balme" from a "goodly tree" (1.9.48,46), which are the allegorical counterparts of the two sacraments recognized as scriptural in Protestant belief, baptism and communion.

Redcrosse frees Una's parents and at last is betrothed to her, to live with her beyond time in bliss. And so the Legend of Holinesse concludes in a sort of anticipatory triumph. In the "*Mutabilitie Cantos*," though, Spenser calls that triumph indeed—all such triumphs—into question.

The question that Spenser raises in the "*Mutabilitie Cantos*" is the question that so bedeviled Virgil. What is the scope of any human achievement, or even of any divine achievement? Is there, in fact, a divine order at work? Is human life, the universe itself, finally coherent, or is the final reality only change itself?

As Spenser puts it in the epigraph to the fragmentary "Legend of Constancie," "Proud Change (not pleased in mortall things, / beneath the Moone to raigne) / Pretends, as well of Gods, as Men, / To be the Sovereaine." The last word, in short, is entropy. "Mutabilitie" is ruler of all.

Or is she? That is the question of "the hardy Titanesse" (7.6.33) and Spenser's question as well. Mutabilitie summons a trial in which she can argue her case for universal sovereignty, and Nature herself is appointed as judge. The seasons, the months, and the hours demonstrate Mutabilitie's case. Change is seemingly at work everywhere and always. But Nature's answer is worth quoting in full, since it reveals, as I take it, something very close to Spenser's final vision. Weighing the evidence, Nature concludes:

*I well consider all that ye have sayd,
And find that all things steadfastnes doe hate
And changéd be: yet being rightly wayd
They are not changéd from their first estate;
But by their change their being doe dilate:
And turning to themselves at length againe,
Do worke their owne perfection so by fate:
Then over them Change doth not rule and raigne;
But they rainge over change, and doe their states maintaine. (7.7.58)*

Divine order, in short, is four-dimensional. It works in time as well as in space, and the gradual transitions of things as they develop are not manifestations of disorder or entropy, but rather the way in which order reveals itself in space and time. And there Spenser leaves the matter.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How, in the Mutabilitie cantos, does Nature answer Mutabilitie's claim that events on earth are finally entropic, that the fundamental reality is change itself? (A claim, by the way, that would have made grim sense to the *Beowulf* poet.)
2. How does Archimago separate Redcrosse and Una, and what historical events does Spenser have in mind in separating them?
3. Why is Arthur's diamond shield able to undo all evil spells? What does the shield represent, and what is Spenser's point?
4. Why is Spenser at pains to make Redcrosse English?

Suggested Reading

Spenser, Sir Edmund. *Edmund Spenser's Poetry: The Faerie Queene*. Eds, Hugh Maclean and Anne Lake Prescott. 3rd ed. New York: W.W Norton, 1993.

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Lecture 13: *Paradise Lost*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, edited by William D. Madsen.

Justifying the Ways of God to Man

Perhaps the last successful attempt at creating an epic is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, published near the end of Milton's life in 1667 and in slightly revised form in 1674, the year of Milton's death. And even *Paradise Lost* does not, perhaps, enjoy quite the veneration that it once did. In the early and mid-twentieth century, Milton's reputation suffered from the criticism of T.S. Eliot, who thought that Milton's influence on other poets was almost invariably harmful. Milton proved easily able to weather that patch of critical rough sailing, but even so, I am not certain that *Paradise Lost* enjoys quite the near-canonical status it once did, when Milton's account of the War in Heaven and the Fall enjoyed something not too far removed from scriptural authority.

For that, of course, is Milton's great theme. As he puts the matter himself in the memorable opening lines of his work, he seeks to write

*Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose moral taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat. (1.1–5)*

He calls for inspiration from that "Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top" of Sinai inspired Moses (1.6), and "chiefly thou O Spirit, that does prefer / Before all temples th'upright heart and pure" (1.17–18).

Milton calls for divine inspiration in addressing his theme, and for centuries, many readers seem to have felt his call was answered, as he sought to "assert Eternal Providence / And justify the ways of God to men" (1.25-6). Not only does Milton seek a new vision of human heroism, he also seeks to explain why the Fall occurred, to explain how an omnipotent and loving God could have allowed it to happen, and why a loving God allows evil in His world.

A New Heroism

He is, then, like Dante and Spenser before him, quite deliberately reworking the epic tradition in Christian terms, proposing a revised, Christian vision of what heroism might mean. And again, like Dante and Spenser, because he is writing a Christian epic, all human history is, in a sense, his theme. But even within that Christian context, Milton conceives heroism in new terms.

Spenser's Redcrosse fought for virtue and justice in "deare remembrance of his dying Lord" (FQ 1.1.2). But he fought. Adam and Eve do nothing of the kind, and Milton explicitly rejects the notion of military heroism that had been, by and large, an epic mainstay since the time of Homer himself. The heroism that Milton celebrates is a heroism of obedience and deference, of

long-suffering hopefulness, which is quite different from what Spenser proposes and different, too, in its flavor and emphasis, from what the visionary Dante proposes. It is a heroism, as Milton suggests from the very outset, of “th’upright heart and pure.”

Milton’s Universe

As Milton’s vision of heroism differs from that of his predecessors, so too does the imagined space in which his epic takes place. Milton’s universe differs most strikingly, in fact, from the universe of Dante. For Dante, the physical cosmos was indeed a mode of revelation. Not so for Milton, or not so in the same sense or to nearly the same degree.

Outside of Dante’s cosmic orb is the divine mind—in all but tactile terms, the universe is divine thought. Beyond Milton’s cosmic orb, by contrast, lies most immediately chaos—“chaos blust’ring round, inclement sky,” “dark, waste, and wild, under the frown of Night” (3.426,424). The cosmic orb hangs, as Milton depicts it, from a golden chain extended to heaven, a stairway or ladder that scales “by steps of gold to heaven gate” (3.541), and after the Fall is connected to hell, far from earth and farther from heaven, by a “ridge of pendant rock / Over the vexed abyss” (10.313–14), a bridge constructed by Sin and Death, following Satan’s original path to the cosmos, “a passage broad, / Smooth, easy, inoffensive down to hell” (10.304–5).

The stairway to heaven, the “pontifical” road to hell (10.313), are clearly literary and metaphorical in a sense in which the arrangement of Dante’s cosmos is not. They are not meant to reflect physical fact.

In Milton’s day, there was pervasive doubt as to whether reason had the capacity to understand God at all, still less to understand Him on the basis of inferences drawn from the natural world. Was there even such a thing as divine thought, as the Platonic forms that had made an ascent from the world to God possible? Many thought not, and had thought not since the time of William of Ockham, who was hard at work formulating his anti-Platonic answers to such questions even as Dante finished the *Paradiso*.

Under such conditions, Beatrice vanished in the mode in which Dante had found her. Revelation was no longer everywhere. “Sola scriptura,” “scripture alone,” had been a Protestant rallying cry since the outset of the Reformation. God has, in effect, vouched for scripture, for His revealed word. A theology based in large part on tradition or in large part on nature is simply a prideful instance of human presumption.

Milton suggests as much himself when he has Adam inquire of the “affable Archangel,” Raphael, whether the earth moves round the sun or the sun round the earth. Raphael replies,

*“Be lowly wise:
Think only what concerns thee and thy being;
Dream not of other worlds,” for “heav’n is for thee too high
To know what passes there”* (8.173–5,172–3).

From the Shadow of Personal Disaster

There is a kind of defensiveness in Milton’s portrayal, not only because of religious disputes, but because of growing doubts as to whether religious convic-

tion was based on any reality at all. These doubts were for the most part only obliquely expressed—figures like Machiavelli, Francis Bacon, and Thomas Hobbes were careful, in a persecuting age, to hint rather than to state. But in the Enlightenment, they would come to full articulate flower. And high Western culture has been predominantly and resolutely secular ever since.

Milton saw it coming, I think, and that as much as anything else lay behind his emphasis on faith and obedience. This emphasis, his rejection of martial heroism, reflects other historical pressures as well. He lived at a time when religious and political differences in England broke out in civil war and revolution.

The English Revolution was a more bitter and costly affair than is often realized. Milton worked tirelessly as a propagandist, and when in 1660 the revolution failed, he found himself very much a *persona non grata* with the new regime. So much so, in fact, that for a time his life was in danger and some of his writings were publically burned. Like Dante, Milton undertook his great work in the shadow of personal disaster, his fondest political hopes utterly shattered.

The Son

He had no great faith in the power of military and governmental action to change things fundamentally. It is no accident that the only even quasi-military figures to appear in *Paradise Lost* are rebel angels. Milton looked for virtue elsewhere.

He finds it, above all, in the not-yet-incarnate Son, but his focus so far as human behavior is concerned is on the repentant Adam and Eve. To Adam the angel Michael explains the future course of human history, prophesying Christ's redemptive mission, and a time when the final judgment has taken place, when "the earth / Shall all be Paradise, far happier place / Than this of Eden, and far happier days," (12.463-65). Adam is ecstatic: "O goodness infinite, goodness immense! / That all this good of evil shall produce" (12.469–70). Milton's justification of "the ways of God to men," is completed in the assertion that by virtue of the redemption, humans are ultimately to be better off than they would have been had the Fall never taken place. Adam concludes,

*"Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best,
And love with fear the only God, to walk
As in his presence, ever to observe
His providence, and on him sole depend."* (12.561–65)

Michael concurs:

*"Only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,
Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,
By name to come called charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far."* (12.581–87)

There Milton chooses to rest his case.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How does Milton's cosmos differ from Dante's? Why?
2. Some readers have thought that Milton's real hero in *Paradise Lost* is Satan. Why might one think so? Is the claim plausible?

Suggested Reading

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Ed. William G. Madsen. New York: Random House, 1969.

Other Books of Interest

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Lecture 14: *Paradise Lost and Later*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

Where have the epics gone?

So why was *Paradise Lost* the last successful attempt at epic, or the last generally accepted attempt at epic? More than three centuries have elapsed since Milton composed his final lines, and writers and poets, surely, are as ambitious as they ever were. So why no more epics?

This is not an easy question to answer, though many partial answers might be given. By their very nature, epics presuppose belief. At heart they are narrative celebrations of virtue, of what deserves to be celebrated. They do not necessarily presuppose strong religious belief, but you have to believe in something, and believe in it seriously and hard.

Epics: Then and Now

Homer believes in arete. He expands its scope and explores its limits. Virgil believes in the mission of Rome. No, it cannot achieve all that it promises, and yes, it is costly, and yes, all human achievements are finally temporary. But the mission of Rome remains what it is—something worth living for and something worth dying for.

Likewise in *Beowulf*. If Grendel doesn't get you, the Swedes or the Frisians will. But *Beowulf* is still *Beowulf*, and his strength and courage and integrity remain for us to admire. His *lof* continues glorious, as long as there are people to remember him.

The case with Dante and Spenser and Virgil is even more straightforward. God and godly behavior are admirable by definition. What happens, though, in a world in which whole-hearted belief has become difficult? What happens in a world whose predominant intellectual mode is irony? Then epic becomes very difficult. And the post-enlightenment West is precisely such a world. We find ourselves made very uncomfortable by absolute commitments to a particular vision of virtue; we find ourselves relativists by inclination as well as through hard experience. One reason for the Enlightenment—and for religious skepticism with it—was disgust at religious warfare. Sometimes you can believe things too hard.

In one way, this sense of things seems to have started even by the time of Dante. Virgil and Homer and the *Beowulf* poet, despite the miraculous in their stories, tell tales that for the most part take place in the past, but on earth. For the most part the subsequent epics don't. They take place in other worlds, or in the case of Spenser, imaginary worlds, quite literally in "Faerie land." Milton is a partial exception. Much of *Paradise Lost* takes place in Eden. But Eden is not a place you can visit. All of the later epics that we have considered, in short, locate their action somewhere else, in a world beyond day-to-day life.

This is not to say that Dante, Spenser, and Milton are not serious in what they are about. They could hardly be more serious (Spenser on occasion excepted). But the most effective way to say the serious things that they have in mind is to displace them, to place them in what, as we experience it, is an interior world, a world of thought and vision and imagination that illumines our own world but does not directly reflect it.

To the extent that the epic impulse finds reflection in our own time, so I would argue, it tends to work in the same way. It tends to work in what we characteristically term “fantasy” novels or “fantasy” films. And there is clearly a huge appetite for them. The clearest examples are the various *Star Wars* films and *The Lord of the Rings*. These satisfy our hunger for epic celebration of virtue, but by explicitly locating their action in fantastic, fictional locales, they simultaneously satisfy our sense of irony, our sense that epic celebration and epic conviction are not wholly appropriate located even imaginatively in something closer to the here and now. And so, in a sense, we don’t quite take them seriously, or don’t, by and large, take them quite as seriously as we would like to. That is, in part, what the dismissive designation of “fantasy” films and novels testifies to—our sense that epic fulfillment, that epic celebration and epic clarity, are themselves a sort of fantasy.

Epic and Irony

As I think of the matter, I find myself genuinely puzzled as to how deep-rooted that sense is. On the one hand, we do think of such works as fantastic. But on the other, if sales and receipts tell a true story, there is virtually nothing we want more. A cultural paradox. None of this is to suggest that authors have not attempted more or less straightforwardly epic themes in other ways. Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* is a telling instance of the epic impulse in the very act of redefinition. Don Quixote’s aspirations are almost entirely admirable. But the world in which he finds himself is so little suited to their expression that he is generally taken as mad. Epic and irony working in tandem.

Alexander Pope, writing a century later, when the Enlightenment was well under way, in *The Rape of the Lock* engages epic convention almost only through irony and through burlesque, and continues in a different context in *The Dunciad*. His aims, though, are far more satirical than epic in any usual sense, and indeed, one of his satirical targets is epic pretension in and of itself.

Herman Melville, in *Moby Dick*, writes a quasi-realistic epic of religious rebellion and doubt, in a work which, despite its orotundity and occasional excess, probably comes as close to succeeding in its epic aspirations as the fundamentally ironic nature of its questioning allows.

Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* might in another sense come closer. Twain’s narrative strategy is, of course, brilliant, and is the key to his success. Huck Finn is the prototypical ironic narrator. He is a good-hearted naif, which allows Twain indirectly to celebrate his virtues—virtues that on my reading at least are never seriously called into doubt. Huck is often deceived as to what is going on, but his moral instincts are always right, and I think that Twain stands behind them foursquare.

Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and above all, certainly in terms of self-conscious engagement with the epic tradition, James Joyce's *Ulysses*—all are wonderful novels that to varying degrees take the tradition head-on, and all to some degree reconceive it. But never without irony. Much of the burden of *War and Peace* is to suggest that personal agency is an illusion. The great currents of history move us as they will. Jay Gatsby's dreams, though vast, are flawed, and so, by implication, are the dreams of the culture that he represents. And Leopold Bloom is and must be, so far as traditional epic heroism is concerned, if not perhaps a hero of another kind, a much diminished Ulysses. That is in part the point.

And so, for the present at least, it seems as if we can fulfill our epic yearnings only by displacing them, by situating them in other worlds and other times. And yet, and yet, the yearnings themselves seem to remain.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why have there been no universally accepted epics written since Milton's time? Do we have any reason to expect new epics? If so, what form might they take?
2. What factors might make it difficult to write an epic in our own time?

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