

A New Level of Dante's Hell for Malignant Narcissists  
10/20

I came up with what I thought would be a great assignment for the students reading Dante this Spring in my "Magic, Religion, and Art" class at Pratt Institute: a write-your-own section of the Divine Comedy. I asked them to invent a new level of Hell, Purgatory or Heaven, imagining who the inhabitants would be (whether historical figures or people from their own lives) and why they were being punished or rewarded, all from the point of view of a visiting narrator being led by a tour guide of their choice.

I thought my students could really sink their teeth into this assignment, but I must not have prepared them well enough. It made most of them uncomfortable, reluctant to play God and set themselves up in judgment. On one hand, I found that admirable, but mostly I was shocked: were they really such relativists that they'd quail at sending even the most evil dudes to hell or putting their beloved exemplars on pedestals? How come everybody's complaining about "cancel culture" when I couldn't seem to get most of my students to even fantasize about condemning war criminals?

I told them a couple of stories, starting with the murder of Filipina climate activist Gloria Capitan, shot to death in 2016 by men on motorcycles-- at the behest of local coal bosses-- while she was singing karaoke with her grandson. When you hear this, and when you see a photo of her face shining with light and love, don't you feel unbearable sadness and anger wash over you, and a thirst for justice? Doesn't imagining a different world mean honoring her and condemning the bosses who had her killed? The Divine Comedy is a way of expressing the aspiration that "the triumphing of the wicked is short" and that "the arc of history is long but it bends towards justice." Don't you know that *we're the ones who have to bend it?*

I had already tried-- and failed, apparently-- to get them interested in the theological challenges of inventing Hells and Heavens. We had talked about how those in Hell are still trying to spin their stories in their own favor when they talk with Dante, and how this self-justification is the extent to which they remain defined by their sins-- or as you might prefer to see it, psychologically stuck in their pathology, unable to learn or get any leverage on their stuckness. *This is why Hell is eternal--* or in psychological terms, how people remain twisted and stuck in their own lives. You can fully reject Hell as a form of afterlife punishment by some external power and still understand it as a self-sustaining vicious circle; you can reject the Hell of theological fantasy and still accept it as hard-nosed psychological realism. Even if you don't believe in evil-- or if you believe that being subjected to evil can turn people to the dark side but that all people remain redeemable-- wouldn't there still have to be a convulsive, durational, rehabilitative process to get them there-- i.e., Purgatory?

Other kinds of operational questions turn out to have social or political stakes. How do you even punish a malignant narcissist? He is always writing himself into hero and victim scenarios, and he seems to thrive on positive and negative attention. Not only has he "turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns when they all did tricks" for him, he loves the frowns best of all because they testify to his power to compel even the reluctant to service him.

I thought of one of God's exhortations to Job: "Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place. Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret." The point here seems to be that *non-recognition* is how the proud and wicked are to get their come-uppance, as the passage repeats for emphasis: they are to be brought down into the dust (making them indistinguishable), their faces bound (and thus unrecognizable; a practice applied to convicted criminals) and hidden in secret-- an ingenious way of negating even those who thrive on negative attention. This is what is meant by being *ghosted*-- condemned to flit about unrecognizable-- forever unseen, unheard, and alone-- among the living, who are busy with their all-consuming melodramas. One can begin to imagine how to construct a level of Hell on these principles.

It is a harsh punishment, but here's the thing: I have a feeling it's at the core of someone like Donald Trump's psyche anyway. Recognition is precisely what sons crave and chronically don't get from withholding fathers, and Trump's father seems to have been cold and bullying in the extreme, and Trump the product of a poisonous combination of extreme abjection with extreme entitlement. Of course bullying never *succeeds*. Bullies never become affirmed and secure through their bullying but remain perpetually insecure somewhere in the middle of a dog-eat-dog foodchain: the vicious cycle of toxic masculinity. *There's your DIY Hell*. Same with recognition: those who already have it keep getting more, while those who don't are condemned to never getting enough. An old friend told me that this is how gay men endear themselves to straight men, who crave recognition but are mostly unwilling or unable to give it to each other.

All of which is to say, Trump is already in Hell, more than any of my feeble revenge fantasies could contrive. It's hard to imagine another life, another psyche I would less like to inhabit.

These ruminations led me into thinking about how I would complete the assignment, and I found myself imagining my guide leading us into a rocky ravine,

not unlike the valley of the shadow of death into which I strayed  
at the beginning of my journey, and as flickering shadows began  
to darken around us, I looked up and saw, maybe fifty feet above,

people walking along the ravine's edge on either side, passing by  
in couples and small groups, a never-ending pilgrimage, gay and sunlit.  
Though no sound of them reached us in the dark ravine below,

and clearly they could neither see nor hear us, we watched as one would scroll  
through Facebook or sit transfixed before a pantomime. One group went by  
engaged in passionate conversation, another group of children in high spirits,

still another dominated by someone's earnest speechifying,  
a couple of young lovers hand-in-hand, oblivious of all else,  
a huddled group of men in black, mumbling plots and plans.

My guide, seeing how rapt I was by that stream of animated vignettes,  
placed his hand on my shoulder and said, *those are the living*-- see

how lit by laughter and by love they look, how busy with intrigues!

As a homeless beggar on a winter night might through a window glimpse  
a glittering party, so the living looked to us, as we walked alone  
and yet beset with shadows in that rocky, god-forsaken trench--

for, though nothing grew in the barren rock of the ravine, shadows  
danced around us as if a leafy canopy above were being buffeted  
by gusty winds, and as I looked, the shadows grew more substantial

until I discerned, among them, here an anxious face, there a flailing leg,  
and soon I realized the very air around us swarmed with beings,  
passing through us and each other. At our feet the shadows slouched

catatonic in depression; we walked through them as through a black swamp,  
but in the air above us, they became more and more frantic-- reaching arms  
and clutching hands-- and in the flash of faces: terror, longing, and despair.

My guide pointed me to look upon a rough-hewn monolith that rose up  
from the ravine's floor almost to the height of the pathways of the living  
on either side above. It seemed to be a kind of statue carved so crudely

it might be a person, a phallus, an obelisk, or only a geological feature  
eroded by water and wind, so that seeing it out of the corner of your eye,  
you might imagine it was gazing at you with stern disapproval,

but when you turned to look, you found only the stoniest indifference.  
Its base was sunk in the dark swamp, and waves of shadows surged  
up its sides, clambering over each other and pulling each other down

as they tried to reach the top, shouting angrily and plaintively pleading  
and longingly reaching to the pilgrims passing by on either side,  
who would never see nor hear, then sinking back into the swamp below.

As we walked, I began to feel the materiality of the beings at our feet,  
as if we slogged through molasses, until I tripped and stumbled  
on one of the sad creatures, who lay in our path like a beached whale.

Slowly he raised his head and I shuddered to find no light, no life  
in those reptilian eyes. His face was like that of the rocky monolith,  
stamped with stern disapproval, contempt, or altogether empty.

Struck with horror at this abject thing, I clutched the arm of my guide,  
when suddenly I recognized the creature as the petty tyrant  
whose every passing thought had been tweeted out to millions,

whose vengeful whims were enacted every day by proclamation  
and hundreds of thousands made to suffer and die for his petulant defiances.  
Thinking of those dark days and how they ate at us who lived through them,

I felt something in me healed to see their perpetrator brought low by divine  
justice.

As I breathed deeply in this feeling, I heard a rumbling sound coming from him  
that began to resolve into a stream of inchoate words, and the words into phrases.

As an inept artist sketches a form with short and shaky lines,  
or a cloud of insects swarms around what might be cow or pig,  
his jumbled phrases rose and fell, continually changing direction:

*the way a liar talks--* first an angry tirade, then, in the next moment,  
a rhodomontade of boasts, then scorn and insults, then bitter lamentations.  
In talking, the creature began to rouse itself, and its bulk was convulsed

as if by electric shocks, first crawling, like a slime mold, then a bag of cats,  
and finally with the other shadows began clambering up the rocky monolith,  
desperate, like them, to be seen or heard by the living passing by on either side.

Then it was I knew, that even at the pinnacle of earthly power, this hell  
had been his psychic reality, and he had begun to make the world his hell.  
And then the sublimity of that divine justice, true and righteous altogether,

that had so healed and lifted me, seemed to overwhelm my understanding  
and I trembled and faltered-- but again my guide put his hand on my shoulder  
saying, *we've stayed too long; come, let us leave this savage, unrelenting place.*