

Salvation as Individuation in Dante's Divine Comedy

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Introduction

As Dante travels through Hell in the first book of the *Divine Comedy*, guided by Virgil as a witness to the eternal torment of the damned, this ancient Roman philosopher urges him, "There is a longer stair that must be climbed. / It's not enough to leave these souls behind. / If you take my meaning, let it be of use" [1, *Inferno* XXIV.55–57]. Dante instructs the reader, "O you who have sound intellects, / consider the teaching that is hidden / behind the veil of these strange verses" [1, *Inf.* IX.61–63]. My name is Megan Clement; I'm with the English department and my mentor is Professor Charles Altieri. Today I am presenting "Salvation as Individuation in Dante's *Divine Comedy*."

My thesis project was initially inspired by a parallel between the works of Dante and Jacques Lacan. The mirror is an instrumental metaphor in both of their conceptual frameworks, but in opposite ways. While for Dante, the mirror is a tool of God, used to propagate the light which illuminates the universe, for Lacan the mirror is the monster that splits a man's identity and alienates him from the rest of the world. In investigating this inverse parallel, I found what I am about to present.

Today I will argue that salvation, as narrated by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, holds a striking parallel with the process of individuation as defined by Carl Jung, and illustrates a mending of the split self as described by Lacan. I will justify this claim by outlining three parallels in Dante's works—one from each book in the trilogy—with the ideas of Jung and Lacan. First, in *The Inferno*, Dante's journey through Hell begins with his recognition of his personal split and ends with an illustration of a process Jung calls regression. Next, in *Purgatorio*, the souls that populate this middle realm reveal Dante's recognition of his unconscious shadow, which Jung also describes. Finally, when Dante reaches the highest point in Heaven in *Paradiso*, his split self is deconstructed, temporarily mended, in the presence of God.

I spent this summer reading Dante's *Divine Comedy*, along with an anthology of Jung's work, and Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage...". I approached these psychoanalytical texts with the same methodology that I approach literary texts. Close readings of all three works have revealed a strong link between Dante's centuries-old text and the twentieth-century works of Jung and Lacan.

My reading of Dante is largely informed by Jung's and Lacan's conceptions of the self and how it is formed. I will describe Lacan's theory throughout the paper, but to understand Jung's ideology, it will be helpful to define a key term, individuation. In his own words, "the problem of individuation...[is that] the psyche consists of two incongruous halves which should together form a whole" [6, p. 224]. Jung focuses on the division between what he calls the inner world and the outer world, and the thinking and feeling functions. But the divisions within an individual are countless. To become individuated is to reconcile these dualities, and according to Jung, this is "the most successful adaptation to the universal conditions of existence" [6, p. 195]. So how is one supposed to reconcile these dualities? Jung says, "knowledge of the symbols is indispensable, for it is in them that the union of conscious and unconscious contents is consummated" [6, p. 226]. For me, this more than justifies the application of this theory to a fictional work. In doing this, we will see how Dante's symbolic conception of his journey to salvation has a lot in common with the way Jung and Lacan envision psychic progress.

The Inferno: The Split

The story opens just before Dante enters Hell. He begins, "Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost" [1, *Inf.* I.1-3]. In the opening lines, Dante's diction already suggests a duality within himself. He says "our life," describing himself in the plural as if he has two halves that are here acquainted for the first time. Here, Lacan's understanding of the development of the self will be useful in defining the significance of this meeting. Lacan asserts that one begins to form an identity, or sense of self, the moment one recognizes one's image in the mirror in what he calls the "mirror stage." This matters because "this form [your reflection] situates the agency of the ego...in a fictional direction" [5, p. 1286]. In other words, an individual relies on something outside of himself-his reflection-as the basis for the identity that is supposedly within himself, that is himself. In this way, the self is revealed to be a flawed construction that is split both literally and logically, between the inner world and the outer world, between myself and yourself. Now, for Lacan, this condition is universal and can only be cured when one "resolve[s]...his discordance with his own reality" [5, p. 1286]. This is another way to explain "the problem of individuation"—resolving one's "discordance with reality" is analogous to combining the incongruous halves of the psyche. This is Dante's mission as he travels through the afterlife: he has recognized that he is split, and now he must embark on a journey to become whole.

Dante and Virgil continue down a spiral path through Hell, descending

through circles that are divided according to the nature of the sins committed by those condemned there. When they get to the bottom of Hell—the absolute center of the universe, according to Dante’s map—they encounter a frozen lake full of souls eternally stuck in place. Now we must pause this narrative again to consider how Jung’s ideas fit in. Before one can begin to progress along the path towards individuation, it is necessary first to regress. Jung explains, “valuable seeds lie in the unconscious contents activated by regression” [6, p. 62]. The term regression implies an activation, or an awakening, of “the elements of that other function which was excluded by the conscious attitude” [6, p. 62–63]. To regress is to descend into the realm of the personal unconscious, incorporating into the personality what was once repressed, shunned as opposite or simply unacknowledged and ignored—this is what Jung calls the shadow. The souls in Hell—referred to in the Italian as shadows—stuck as they are, are doomed never to progress. Dante, however, under Virgil’s instruction, begins to climb up the Devil’s giant body. When they get halfway up, to Dante’s surprise and confusion, everything flips over, and for a moment he fears that they are going back to Hell. Virgil reassures him that it is “by such rungs as these /.../ must we depart from so much evil” [1, *Inf.* XXXIV.82, 84]. In other words, it is only through direct contact with the source of all evil that they can escape. As they climb, they flip over because they’ve passed the center of gravity. Dante and Virgil have been descending through Dante’s first work, but at the end they begin travelling upwards towards Purgatory. The trajectory of this journey, requiring the ultimate descent before allowing for ascension, parallels Jung’s conception of regression as a precursor to progression. In this way, Dante’s journey through the underworld seems to parallel the beginning of an ideal individual’s journey to individuation.

Fig. 1



Purgatorio: Shadows

Upon escaping Hell, Dante and Virgil arrive at the foot of the mountain of Purgatory, the middle realm through which Dante will travel. Because it is a place of transition, between Hell and Heaven, it lacks clear definition. It is a mysterious middle ground. Even though Dante is progressing upwards as he climbs, symbolically, he is regressing into his subconscious. Purgatory is Dante’s personal unconscious. This assertion is supported by the fact that only here does Dante dream; he never sleeps while going through Heaven or Hell, but here he sleeps and dreams three times, and he meets a figure from his dreams at the

top of the mountain. For this reason, it makes sense to assert that the shadows that Dante interacts with coincide with Jung's conception of the shadow as the repressed contents of the unconscious. According to Jung, "the shadow coincides with the 'personal' unconscious...the shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly" [6, p. 221]. Your shadow is everything about yourself that you'd like to ignore. Jung asserts that a person has to accept his shadow as a part of his personality in order to become individuated.

Fig. 2



Soon after their arrival in Purgatory, Dante sees that he's the only one with a shadow. As the only living person in Purgatory, only he has a body, so only he casts a shadow. This makes sense if we remember that this is Dante's personal unconscious. This entire vision is mediated through his eyes, so of course he's the only one with a shadow. And all of the other shadows are projections of his own.

Virgil explains to Dante the nature of this biased yet unavoidable way of understanding the world: "From real forms your perception draws / an image it unfolds within you" [1, *Purgatorio* XVIII.22–23]. In other words, from the inherently limited human perspective, other people can only be understood in mediation through one's own viewpoint. Everything that you see in others, everything you know—even about the people that you love—is mediated through you and so severely limited by you. So, Dante's journey through

Purgatory parallels a part of the process of adaptation in which an individual recognizes his own shadow, and acknowledges that in order to hide from his shadow, he has projected it onto others. More simply, Dante's mission in Purgatory is to recognize the mediated nature of his point of view, and to realize that all of these shadows are projections of his own.

Back in Purgatory, Dante unexpectedly meets an old friend of his who had died, and in his excitement he reaches out to hug him: "Three times I clasped my hands behind him / only to find them clasped to my own chest" [1, *Purg.* II.80–81]. In trying to embrace his friend, he only manages to embrace himself. This moment of failed embrace illustrates the moment in which Dante becomes painfully aware of the pathetically limited access he has to others. The reader knows it is a difficult thing for Dante to accept, because he doesn't want to stop

trying. But after Dante tries and fails three times, “Gently he requested that I stop. / Then I knew him.” [1, *Purg.* II.85–86]. In requesting that Dante give up, his friend is telling Dante to stop trying to possess him. Believing that we know anyone completely is an effort to keep them contained. By taking a step back, Dante calmly acknowledges his friend as other, and begins to learn to be able to love without needing this illusion of containment—true love, or kinship, is a kind of separate oneness.

After recognizing and accepting his severely limited view of others, Dante’s final lesson in Purgatory is to recognize his skewed vision of himself. As Dante walks through Purgatory, the shadows always stop to look at him, often taking a step back in reverence as they wonder how or why he is there. The shadows treat Dante with awe and respect. If we keep in mind the idea that this is Dante’s personal vision, the reverence of others for Dante is revealed instead to be Dante’s own pride. He is proud of himself for making it this far on a difficult journey.

Later on, an interaction that Virgil has with another shadow (or shade) serves as a lesson to teach Dante to check his pride. The two encounter a former writer about half way up the slope who explains that he admired Virgil as his inspiration during his life as a writer. However, at first he doesn’t realize that he is speaking with Virgil. When they reveal to him that he is face to face with the man he most admires, the soul begins to kneel down, “stooping to embrace [the] teacher’s feet” [1, *Purg.* XXI.130]. However, Virgil stops him, reminding him, “you are a shade and you behold a shade.” [1, *Purg.* XXI.132]. This is the final lesson that Dante has to learn—he has to humble himself in order to truly realize what it means to have a shadow, and to be a shadow. As Jung put it, “If you imagine someone who is brave enough to withdraw all these projections, then you get an individual who is conscious of a considerable shadow” [6, p. 242–243]. Dante’s shadow is emphasized in size and length—his shadow is great, and grows larger as he travels up. Though it takes a substantial amount of bravery and honesty to recognize one’s self as one’s shadow, this recognition is actually a great burden, if you remember what the shadow is composed of. The withdrawal of pride may be the final step in recognizing one’s shadow, the repressed contents of one’s personality that one would like to ignore—these are things that no one can be proud of. If pride remains, so does the illusion.

Paradiso: Union

Dante reaches the Empyrean, the highest point in Heaven, at the end of the *Paradiso*, the final work in the trilogy. Here he earns the rare privilege to be in the presence of God while he is still living. Yet the poem ends before he describes much about this experience. Rather than describing God, he focuses on the changes in his own state while he is in God’s presence. Contrary to some reader’s expectations, this actually makes perfect sense—just because you’ve recognized the limits of your viewpoint does not mean you are actually liberated from it. Instead of describing God, Dante says, “O how scant is speech, too weak

to frame my thoughts. / Compared to what I still recall my words are faint" [1, *Paradiso* XXXIII.121–122]. He explains that he cannot describe what he saw because language is inadequate to do so. This failure of language marks a step backwards in the Lacanian framework of the development of the self. The third and final stage in this development is marked by the learning of language; when one learns to name one's self, I, one gains subjectivity, rendering everyone else objects (or projections). In losing language, Dante has begun to experience self-deconstruction.

Now recall that in the middle stage, the mirror stage, one constructs the idea of the self based on a reflected image. As Dante continues to describe his experience, he addresses God: "O eternal Light, abiding in yourself alone... and knowing, loving, and smiling on yourself! / That circling which, thus conceived, appeared in you as light's reflection / once my eyes had gazed on it a while, seemed, /.../ to be painted with our likeness" [1, *Par.* XXXIII.124–129, 131]. In other words, God knows only Himself because God is the entire universe. This circling which Dante describes draws a picture in which the entire universe is God's mirror. However, there is no one point where God's image is reflected back on him as separate. It is a continuous, circular process of reflection.

Upon realizing that God is the universe, and that everything in the universe is His reflection, Dante understands that he must be able to see himself in God. "I tried to see how the image fit the circle /.../ But my wings had not sufficed for that /.../ Here my exalted vision lost its power" [1, *Par.* XXXIII.138, 140, 143]. As soon as he realizes this, he loses the ability to see. Imagine your vision being flooded with a light so bright that you can't see anything. As Dante wrote, "this is the result / of perfect vision" [1, *Par.* V.5–6]. In this way, he continues to descend through the Lacanian stages of development. Having lost vision and language, he is no longer mediated from his surroundings. For the brief period that he is in God's presence, he is at one with the universe.

Fig. 3



Conclusion

This work is not merely a fanciful imagining of what it would be like to travel through the afterlife without having first to die; it is an expression of one idea

that continues to manifest itself through time and across disciplines. The parallel between Dante's use of Christian symbolism and the psychoanalytical symbols used to construct the self reveals a simple fact: that these writers are, as my mentor Professor Altieri said, participating in the same mythology. It seems that the same symbols which construct the meaning of God also construct the self; as I continue researching this year, I intend to pursue the implications of this.

References

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