

INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue, the American journal *Dante Studies* republished an essay by the writer and scholar, Claudio Giunta, about why we continue to read Dante. The essay had appeared in an Italian literary review in 2009, but was originally delivered as a lesson in an Italian high school, or *liceo*. In that sense, it was a kind of rallying talk to students who would be reading Dante that year, whether they liked it or not. Outside of Italy, Dante is not generally required reading either at high school or university, but continues to be read nonetheless. Giunta posits that, apart from its form – 100 cantos and 14,233 verses in ingenious triple rhyme – what could most potentially put off the contemporary reader from such a text would be its cultural distance from us, in particular its ideology or, in other words, its religious faith. Our present secular society has “gone beyond” that ideology. The *Commedia* has ceased “to be true.”

It is interesting to think how the same problem of a *difference* in religious faith or ideology is never brought in as a reason why classical, pagan texts might be now illegible. On the contrary, they might be thought to be *more* legible, as yet uninfected by the contagion of Christianity that modern Western society has now – to grant Giunta’s claim – superseded. The *Divine Comedy* bothers us not because it is old (Homer is older), and not because the religious assumptions that prevailed when it was written

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are now widely contested, rejected, or simply not shared by a more pluralistic, larger, global world. It bothers us because it remains close to us. Its ideology, its religion, and its faith still haunt even the secular. Since secularism is a phenomenon of the West, many of us are still inescapably inhabiting a world of Christian roots, evident in many of our assumptions and convictions, even those that reject Christianity. This is the thesis of Tom Holland in his recent book, *Dominion*.²

One of the very many uncanny things about Dante is that he seems to anticipate this very problem: the skeptical stance one wants to take toward old books, even and especially those passed on to us as “great.” Dante, the author, chooses Virgil, the author, as his guide – portrayed as the one who actually goes to meet him on the impassable slope just beyond the dark wood. But Virgil, to the chagrin and even outrage of many a reader of Dante, is damned. This is not because Dante had to heel to the dictates of the Church, since he finds a way to save a number of other pagans or supposed pagans (Cato, Statius, Trajan, Ripheus, Rahab). Virgil is damned in the hell of which Dante is the maker; it is the modern poet’s ultimate judgment on his ancient predecessor. Virgil is damned not because of the medieval poet’s unfortunate lack of intellectual freedom to save whom he would save, because we see that he does do that rather spectacularly, but because of his fundamental conviction, similar to our own, that modernity is right while antiquity had it wrong. Just as we have outgrown the medieval worldview, so too Virgil is coralled with the “innocents,” those who just did not know better, in an infernal limbo of Dante’s invention.³

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Dante's invention is to have adults in limbo after the harrowing of hell on Holy Saturday, when Christ descended to the underworld in order to liberate the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Old Testament who believed in the Messiah to come. Because Christ comes at a specific moment in history, they could not be saved before, and yet they could not be damned. Hence, limbo. But Dante uses this ecclesiastical solution to a theological problem to create a space for another category of people: non-Christian greats, including heroes, warriors, philosophers, poets, pagans and Muslims, women and men, people worthy of honor. Yet they are still in the underworld; they have no access to salvation, to God, or to heaven, in which they did not believe. Virgil tells us that these people did not sin, but their merits are not enough because they did not have baptism, which is the door to the faith that *you* – you, Dante, you moderns – believe. He also admits that it is not purely an accident of time: if they were before Christianity, they still did not worship God as is due. “And I myself,” Virgil says, “am one of these.” This is what Virgil says when the two poets visit limbo, but in his initial introduction he defines himself chronologically by the regimes under which he was born and lived (*sub Iulio* and *sotto 'l buono Augusto*) in the time of the “false and lying gods.”⁴

There is no religious equivalence. One God is true; the others are false. Virgil does not say he *believed* in the false and lying gods; they simply featured in the religion of the time. They constituted a regime under which he lived. He does say that he was remiss in worshiping God (in the singular) as is due, which suggests he had a good idea that those mythical gods – or maybe all gods – were

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and are simply a lie, requiring certain superstitious rituals and professions of allegiance. Later, reconsidering his state in the context of purgatory he will explain that he “lost Heaven” for no other fault than for not having faith.⁵ Yet Virgil himself will rebuke Dante for *his* lack of belief in a book, Virgil’s own book, the *Aeneid*, and in particular in an episode that is patently marvelous and frankly fictional: a fabulous occurrence one could only have seen in a poet’s verses.⁶ At another point in the *Inferno* Virgil will contradict an account of the origins of his native city of Mantua given in the *Aeneid*, and admonish Dante to disregard any other version than the one he gives as a character in Dante’s poem. Dante responds that this speech he has just heard is so certain and so gains his trust and belief, literally, his “faith,” that all other accounts will be to him as spent coals, which would include, presumably, indications given in the *Aeneid* itself, which contradict it.⁷ Most remarkably of all, we will meet another reader of the *Aeneid*, the poet Statius, who was healed of his particular vice and converted to Christianity through a fairly obvious misreading of Virgil.⁸ Thus, while we tend to think of faith as something religious, Dante shows us that it is also literary: how we believe what we read or what value we accord it. This is dramatized in the story of Francesca falling for “such a great lover” about whom she was reading in a book, but completely missing the lover than whom there is none greater, who loved her first.

The question of what we believe and the consequences of believing it are dramatized by the act of reading itself. How we live depends on how we read our circumstances. To say that we believe what we read is to say that we

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think the story we are reading is true. Books that we continue to read, despite their obvious fictions and their outdated or superseded assumptions, must be, for us, in some sense, true – although the sense in which they are true for us is also to some extent elusive and changing depending on what we can see from where we stand at the moment. This is what I mean by “believing” in Dante. This response of the reader to the fiction, this question of belief, is I think written right into the poem and is one of its major themes. We can see it in the acclaimed addresses to the reader throughout the poem where the poet both swears to the truth and invokes a bond of trust.⁹

Dante’s immense arrogation to himself of the authority to judge who should end up where in the afterlife is at bottom the reason the truth-value of the *Commedia* has been such a topic of discussion. Teodolinda Barolini argued that “the *Commedia* makes narrative believers of us all” and accused certain of us of reading it as fundamentalist Christians do the Bible; Dante in effect “commands belief.”¹⁰ Albert Ascoli sees this peculiarity of Dante as his “quest for special standing, for authority in a general sense” and Dante himself defined authority as something or someone “worthy of faith.”¹¹ Despite my title, *Believing in Dante*, I aim not to show how Dante gets us to believe everything he proposes, but how he gets us to see that whatever it is we believe is what determines our story. The “moral” of a story, which comes only at its end, is equivalent to a judgment upon it. Where one decides such a story would end up in the afterlife is to pronounce one’s own judgment. This is true of all stories we tell ourselves. They all entail a judgment and they all entail belief.¹²

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Historians identify the Reformation as the period when unbelief became possible. The Protestant insistence on “faith alone” raised the stakes for belief to such an extent that it opened an oppositional space of not believing, or believing differently, or constant questioning of what exactly it was that one believed. George Hoffman has described it as “seeing one’s own mind as a sort of experimental space, an inscrutable cognitive frontier in which the status of belief presented itself as a constant problem, and the experience of faith seemed to require a constant effort of will.”¹³ In *The Birth of Modern Belief* Ethan Shagan argues that “between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment, successive revolutions in religious knowledge refashioned what it meant to believe.” What characterizes modern belief, he says, is the general acceptance that people’s beliefs, however different one from another, are in fact beliefs. This “distinctively modern space of belief” is set in contrast with the “old certainties” that had dissolved. Shagan shows that the possibility of unbelief, or the possibility of measuring a historical decline in belief, depends very much on what is meant by “a believer,” a *fidelis*, in pre-modern times. Modernity has long been set in opposition to a so-called age of belief. Before the Reformation, to believe was to adhere to a dogma, to obey the dicta of the authorities, to be “humble vessels who accept God’s truth from authorized sources.”¹⁴

In a closed and largely homogeneous society where “Christians” could be used almost synonymously with “people,” self-described unbelievers did not form a demographic group. As we will see in Chapter 2, there were nonetheless many stories in circulation about people,

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even “respectable” or “important” people, who did not believe in and mocked the tenets of, the official religion. Granted, these records are preserved mostly as accusations garnered against enemies. But a visit to Dante’s underworld shows just how many ways it was possible not really to believe. This is not like the scrupulosity of the Reformation thinkers who feared the “atheist within”; rather it is an exposé of how we can be seduced by stories other than the grand narrative to which the *Divine Comedy* subscribes.¹⁵ Even the medieval Dante was able to contemplate faith not just in terms of a dogma to be obeyed but in the context of an intimate and even painful self-interrogation of what it is we believe when we do what we do. In so far as Dante is inviting (rather than “commanding”) his readers to believe something, that “something” would be that story of which he is, precisely, *not* the maker. To believe there is truth in what he recounts is to believe there is something external to and independent of the representation he weaves, but to which that representation points.¹⁶

We are told that the damned have lost the “good of the intellect.” In his philosophical treatise, the *Banquet*, Dante quoted Aristotle as saying that the good of the intellect is truth.¹⁷ The damned have thus lost the truth. Or, to put it another way: what they believed was not true. The commentaries will also tell us that the good of the intellect is God. God is the good of the intellect perhaps in the sense that God is the point of having an intellect, what having an intellect is good *for*; the ultimate reality we want to know and insatiably seek. God is the truth. The truth is God. The damned have lost God. This means that, just like the non-Christians in limbo, none of

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the damned really believed in God. Or, to put it another way, as is easily seen in the case of Francesca: it was not God that they saw in the story they were reading. What they believed in was not God or, in other words, was not the truth. To know the truth is to grasp the meaning of things; it is to see the value in facts. To put it in literary terms, it is to read “for the plot.”¹⁸

The plot and architecture of Dante’s worldview is both familiar and forgotten; in many ways it is the water in which we swim without necessarily being aware of it.¹⁹ Like the ancient poet whom Dante’s protagonist encounters in the dark wood, the culture of the *Divine Comedy* can seem “hoarse from a long silence.” Dante does not lay out his system in the form of a treatise or an encyclopedia, but rather as a story, the story of “our life”: his and ours and of many other individuals encountered over the course of the journey. The motivating force of the journey is the desire to know, a desire that for Dante’s Ulysses was an ardor, in which he still burns, to follow “virtue and knowledge.” The phrase, “good of the intellect,” like “virtue and knowledge,” puts together a question of value and the apparently neutral question of reality. What good is it to know anything at all? What is knowledge actually good for? The divide between facts and what value we attribute to them cannot really be brooked by knowledge, or reason, or logic. As discussed in Chapter 4, David Hume set up a guillotine between what is and what we ought to do. He thought that what we consider morally good is simply what we arbitrarily prefer, what seems pleasing to us. In that sense, it is irrational. For Dante, it is God that makes it possible to see the value of things; and God is known by faith, not reason.

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We are inclined to bracket off Dante's faith as something inaccessible to those of us who do not happen to be Christian. Even Catholics find at times that Dante diverges uncomfortably from what they are now taught. Dante's religion is, after all, medieval; it is therefore something that we may or may not share to some degree, but that we just have to assume or grant and get on with the story. Yet what belief *is* and how it permeates every aspect of our existence, whether it's the Christian faith or some other set of propositions we hold to be true, is one of the main things that this poem – which is, after all, a fiction and therefore something on some level untrue – is constantly interrogating. Faith is crucial to everyday life, communication, living with others and with ourselves. The *Inferno* explores the absence and rupture of faith, trust, and belief, as we will see particularly among the heretics and the suicides; hell is the yawning emptiness that opens up in the breach.

A lot can be lost in the centuries that divide Dante from us. It was a question of twentieth-century scholarship as to whether it was possible to read Dante in a purely secular way, apart from his medieval Christianity, to read him as poet of the secular world, as Erich Auerbach proposed.²⁰ It seemed like an innovation when American critics – also influenced by Auerbach – began to delve into theological details that some Italian thinkers, most notably Benedetto Croce, had thought better left aside in the pure appreciation of poetry.²¹ It is Dante himself who insists on some kind of radical separation between the jurisdiction of the Church and the secular affairs of worldly rulers, and this might suggest we could set aside the religious dogma that decorates or dictates features

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of what can be appreciated independently of it as poetry, as if what the poetry *meant* or was aiming at could be irrelevant. More than that, a recent trend in criticism and scholarship is dedicated to investigating Dante's theology *as* poetry. As Vittorio Montemaggi puts it, "underlying Dante's work is not only a theological understanding of the value of narrative and poetry, but also a theological understanding of language itself."² Even in the very choice of language and its use, it is theology all the way down.

Dante's God is the end of his journey, the motivator and subject of his poetry. The God of the *Divine Comedy* is to be identified with the God of the Bible, no doubt, and with the incarnate Christ of the New Testament, but also with Aristotle's first mover, who moves everything by being desired, and not with Virgil's "false and lying gods." But what (and who) God is, is in some sense the whole question, as well as the object of the quest. To claim that morality or justice is to do God's will, for example, is to state a tautology. It does not decide for us what the right thing to do is. To want what God wants is to want what we actually have, to desire what is. God's will is reality, but we can still disagree and debate what that reality is. These six chapters are an attempt to translate, in other words to make sense of, a worldview that posits God to a worldview that might not. They zero in on some of the hard bits, the ones that especially do not seem to make sense to us here now. Each of the chapters begins with an issue that rankles, either in contemporary reception of Dante, or as a philosophical question entertained even in the popular press. Yet they were questions also for his immediate readers, who might be