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Puppets of Dante's Commedia / Loose pages in the wind



Casa Fernando Pessoa

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Dante & Puppets

The *Commedia* can be read in many ways. Dante himself suggests four: as the literal account of a journey, as an allegory of the soul's ascent, as moral instruction, and as an analogy of Scriptural teachings. These readings and many others occur simultaneously as we accompany Dante in his chronicle of events and characters and ideas that will continue to haunt us long after the last line. But like Dante seeing the perfect friezes sculpted by the hand of God in Purgatory, we feel that nothing we can say or do can adequately respond to the perfection of the poem. The critics who have annotated its every detail, the poets who have recast his words into their own tongues, the artists who have attempted to mirror it on canvas, in film, music, even architecture, have never succeeded in fully comprehending the *Commedia*. A small speck of his universe may be fleetingly caught but the vast complex totality always escapes even the best of its readers.

An attempt to portray several of the characters of the *Commedia* in the form of puppets may seem a peculiar gesture. Puppetry is one of the minor arts, like embroidery or bottle-playing, but it is an ancient one going back to at least the fifth century BCE in Greece. I began making puppets in my adolescence and kept practicing the craft in secret. After reading the *Commedia* daily for almost two decades, I thought I could offer the poem this modest tribute from one of its countless readers.

Alberto Manguel

Commedia

Begun probably while Dante was still in Florence but written mainly during his long exile, the *Commedia*, so called because it has a happy ending, was finished not long before Dante's death in 1321. The *Commedia* (called *Divine* by Boccaccio) is the detailed chronicle of Dante's visit to the three realms of the Otherworld, Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, a spiritual quest in which Dante encounters dozens of characters — historical and fictional — and which in the end will lead him to be ready to receive the final vision of the Godhead.

INFERNO

Hell is a conic abyss below earth, created when Lucifer fell from the Heavens after his defeat, causing the lands of the Southern hemisphere to draw northwards in horror. It consists of a vestibule and nine concentric circles. In each circle a different sin is everlastingly punished through devices that are the consequences of the committed sins themselves. The Gate of Hell proclaims that it was created by God Himself through His perfect Justice, Wisdom and Love.

INFERNO SUPERIORE

1. Dante

Born in Florence in 1265, Dante Alighieri died in Ravenna in 1321, in unjust exile from the beloved city of his birth. His *Commedia* is a journey of spiritual learning through the three realms of the Otherworld, and one of the greatest works of world literature.



2. Lonza

The Panther is said to symbolize the temptations of flesh in youth.

3. Leone

The Lion is thought to stand for the temptation of pride and theearthly ambitions in adulthood.

4. Lupa

The She-Wolf whose hunger is never satiated incarnates greed or avarice, sins associated with old age.

5. Virgilio

Roman poet from the first century BCE, author of the *Aeneid*. Virgil is summoned by Beatrice to guide Dante through the first two realms. Dante calls him «honour and light of all other poets».



6. Indecisi

The Undecided are souls who never chose to act either for good or for evil. Hell rejects them and Heaven does not want them, therefore they will run around forever, bitten by insects, in a space between worlds.

7. Caronte

Charon is the demon boatman who ferries the condemned souls across the Acheron, the river that marks the entrance to Hell.

8. Omero

Homer was «The Supreme Poet», according to Dante, though in the Middle Ages his *Odyssey* and *Iliad* were known only by reputation. He is condemned to the Noble Castle of the First Circle with the other great pagan poets, including Virgil, for no other fault than that of having lived before the coming of Christ.



9. Minos

Minos is the Judge of Hell who attributes a place to each condemned soul by wrapping his tail around himself a number of times equal to that of the circle to which the souls are destined according to their principal sin.

10. Francesca

Francesca da Rimini married the crippled Giovanni Malatesta. She fell in love with Giovanni's younger brother Paolo after reading together of the love of Lancelot and Guinevere. Both were killed by Giovanni and now swirl about eternally in the Circle of the Lustful.



11. Paolo

Like Francesca, Paolo is condemned to the Second Circle for «subjecting reason to desire».

12. Cerbero

Cerberus is the three--headed dog with human features who guards the entrance to the Circle of Gluttony.



13. Ciacco

A Florentine glutton condemned to the Third Circle, sitting «like a beast in his own filth». Nothing is known of him, but Dante presumably had met him in Florence.

14. Pluto

Not Pluto, a god of the Greek Underworld, but Plutus, god of wealth, who guards the Fourth Circle where Avarice and Prodigality are punished.

15. Avari/ Prodighi

In the Fourth Circle, the sins of avarice and reckless spending are equally punished. Many of the avaricious souls seen here are clergymen.



16. Flegias

Phlegyas is the ferryman who takes Dante and Virgil across the Styx up to the Gates of the City of Dis. Like Charon earlier, Phlegyas rails against Dante's presence and Virgil must convince him to take Dante across.

17. Filippo Argenti

A «wild Florentine spirit» who shoed his horse with silver, hence his name «Argenti», and is punished in the Ring of the Wrathful by being submerged in the marshy waters of the Styx.

INFERNO INFERIORE

18. Le Furie

The Furies are three sisters, Alecto, Tisiphone and Megaera, bloodstained and coiffed with snakes, who exact retribution from those guilty of wrong-doing, and guard the Gates of the City of Dis.

19.
Farinata

Farinata degli Uberti was the aristocratic head of the Ghibelline Party in Florence, opposed to Dante's Guelphs. His haughty soul is punished in the Circle of the Heretics.

20.
Minotauro

Son of Queen Pasiphae and a bull, the Minotaur guards the entrance to the Seventh Circle where the souls of the violent are punished.



21.
Nesso il Centauro

One of the three Centaurs watching over the violent against their neighbours, shooting them with arrows when they raise their heads from the boiling bloody waters of River Phlegethon.

22. Arpie/ Suicidi

The Harpy is a creature half-bird, half-woman who with her sisters nests in the trees into which the souls of the suicides have entered, and painfully plucks at their branches.

23.
Brunetto Latini

A great Florentine scholar, Dante's beloved teacher, author of the encyclopaedic *Li Livres dou Tresor*, punished among the sinners against Nature in the desert of burning sands.



24.
Gerione

Geryon is the three-bodied monster of Fraud, with the face of an honest man, the body of a hairy beast and the tail of a scorpion.

25. Ciappo Ubriachi

A Florentine banker punished in the Ring of the Usurers where souls are forced to sit in the burning sand with their money bags round their necks, pestered by stinging insects.

26. Jason

Leader of the Argonauts, he built the world's very first ship in order to seek the Golden Fleece. On the voyage, Jason seduced and abandoned Hypsipyle, Queen of Lemnos. He is punished in the Ring of Seducers and Pimps.

27. Thaide

Thais was an Athenian courtesan of the fourth century BCE, punished as a flatterer by being immersed in excrement.



28. Nicolò III

Pope Nicholas III is punished in the Eighth Circle among the Simoniacs, those who buy and sell ecclesiastical offices.

29. Tiresia

The soul of the blind seer Tiresias is punished with other magicians and diviners in the Fourth Ring of the Eighth Circle.

30. Malacoda

The malicious comic devil who leads the twelve demons guarding the Fifth Ring of the Eighth Circle. His name means «evil tail».



31. Frate Gomita

Brother Gomita was the deputy of Nino de' Visconti of Sardinia who accepted bribes to free wealthy prisoners. Dante calls him «a vessel of every fraud.»

32. Caifa

Caiaphas was a high priest of Jerusalem who argued that it was better for Jesus to die than for an entire nation to be lost. He is punished, naked and crucified, lying on the ground of the Sixth Ring of the Eighth Circle, while other condemned hypocrites walk over him.

33. Vanni Fucci

A leader of the Black Guelphs, punished for thievery in the Seventh Ring of the Eighth Circle. He is devoured by a snake and then turns into a snake himself to repeat the punishment endlessly.

34. Ulisse

Ulysses, the hero of the *Odyssey*, is punished among the fraudulent counselors of the Eighth Ring of the Eighth Circle. He tells Dante of a last voyage he undertook to the Southern hemisphere, where he and his men are punished for their «mad flight» by being swallowed by a whirlpool.



35. Bertram dal Bornio

Bertran de Born was an aristocratic poet who instigated a rift between King Henry II of England and his sons. He is punished as a sower of schism in the Ninth Ring of the Eighth Circle by having to carry his own severed head «like a lantern».

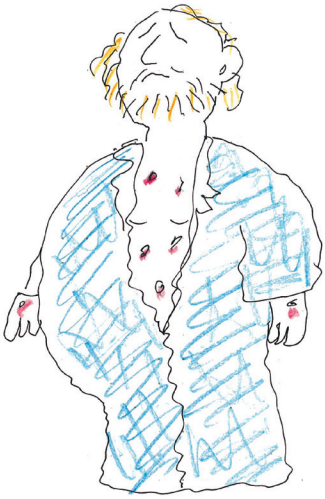
36. Gianni Schicchi

He disguised himself as the dead Buoso Donati to dictate his will in favour of Buoso's nephew, while bequeathing to himself the dead man's prize mare. For the sin of falsifying another, he is condemned to bite and be bitten by his fellow souls throughout eternity.



37.
Maestro Adamo

A counterfeiter of coins punished with a bloating distemper in the Tenth Ring of the Eighth Circle.



38.
Nembrotto

Nimrod «the great hunter» was the instigator of the building of the Tower of Babel. He appears as one of guardians of the entrance to the Ninth Circle, that of the traitors.

39.
Bocca Degli Abbati

Noble Guelph from Florence who betrayed his party by severing the hand of the Guelph standardbearer in a battle against the Ghibellines. He is condemned to suffer in the Ninth Circle, trapped for his treachery in the ice.

40.
Ugolino & Ruggiero

Ugolino was a Tuscan nobleman lured by Archbishop Ruggieri to Pisa. There he was walled alive in a tower with his two sons and two grandsons, and left to die of hunger. In the Ninth Circle, Ugolino is condemned to gnaw for all eternity on the head of the Archbishop.

41.
Lucifero

Lucifer (or Satan) is the Angel once beautiful but now hideous, who rebelled against God. Defeated, he was thrust down to Earth and is trapped in the frozen centre of the world. Lucifer has six wings and three faces, and holds in his maws the souls of Brutus, Cassius and Judas.



PURGATORIO

Mount Purgatory is at the opposite end of the world from Hell, rising from the uttermost southern sea. Saved sinners arrive at its shores to undertake their process of purgation, which can take many centuries.
The Ante-Purgatory consists of two terraces for the excommunicated and late repentant souls. Purgatory proper consists of seven cornices, one for each sin to be purged.
At the very top sits the Garden of Eden that preserves its primordial beauty.

PURGATORIO ANTE & BASSO

42.
Catone

Cato of Utica was a Roman whose Stoic principles forbade him to submit to the will of Julius Caesar. He committed suicide in 46 BCE. He is the guardian of Purgatory and sternly welcomes the souls arriving at its beach.

43.
Casella

A Floretine musician with a beautiful voice, and friend of Dante's youth, whom Dante meets as Casella disembarks on the shores of Mount Purgatory.



44.
Manfredi

The handsome Manfred was the illegitimate son of the Emperor Frederick II. He led a violent checkered life but Dante thought him worthy of becoming Emperor and grants his soul, as a late repentant, access to Purgatory among the excommunicate.

45.
Belacqua

The nickname of a musical instrument maker from Florence, famous for his indolence. Because of his laziness, he is biding his time in the Ante-Purgatory.



46. Buonconte da Montefeltro

A prominent *condottiere* of the Ghibelline Party who was killed at the Battle of Campaldino. He purges his soul in the Ante-Purgatory, among the late-repentant.



47. La Pia

Probably Pia Tolomei, of a noble Siennese family, who introduces herself to Dante with only a few moving words: «Remember me, I am La Pia.»

Dante believed that the prayers of the living could help the dead to advance through Purgatory.

48. Sordello

A Provençal troubadour, rumoured to be implicated in various kidnappings and seductions. He waits in the Ante--Purgatory as one of the late-repentant souls who died a violent death.

49. Corrado Malaspina

The heir of a family notable for the solidarity of its members, Conrad Malaspina died in 1294 without male descendants. He purges his sin among the late-repentant, in the Vale of the Negligent Rulers.

50. Angelo Portier

Each of the levels of Mount Purgatory is guarded by a Porter Angel. Two of the Angels come into the Vale of the Negligent Rulers to chase away the Serpent that ritually appears every night.



51. Oderisi d'Agobbio

Oderisi of Gubbio, famous illuminator of manuscripts, purges his sin on the Cornice of Pride, the first of Mount Purgatory's seven cornices on which saved sinners purge their faults.

52. La Sapia

La Sapia was a distinguished lady of Siena, guilty of envy. She has her eyes sewn shut with wire on the Cornice of the Envious.

53. Marco Lombardo

A gentleman from Venice, known for his fiery temper.
He purges the sin of wrath on the Third Cornice.

PURGATORIO MEDIO & SUPERIORE

54. La Sirena

The Siren comes to Dante in a dream on the Cornice of the Slothful. Virgil reveals her for the foul thing she is, releasing a sick stench from her belly.



55. Adriano V

Pope Adrian V was ambitious and greedy, and purges the sin of covetousness on the Fifth Cornice.



56. Stazio

The first-century epic poet Statius, author of the *Thebaid*, and a late convert to Christianity through his reading of Virgil. Statius has to purge his spendthrift life on the Cornice of the Covetous and Spendthrifts, and will accompany Virgil and Dante in their final ascent of Mount Purgatory.

57. Forese Donati

A friend of Dante, brother of Corso (in Hell) and Piccarda (in Paradise). He purges his excesses in the Cornice of the Gluttonous.

58. Guido Guincelli

An illustrious poet, founder of the *dolce stil nuovo* that Dante practised in his own poetry. His amorous ardour is purged in the Cornice of the Lustful.

59. Arnaut Daniel

Like Guincelli, Arnaut Daniel was a famous poet from Provence who answers Dante's questions in his native Provençal. He purges his sins on the Cornice of the Lustful. Dante called him «the great master of love».



GIARDINO DEL EDEN

60. Matelda

A mysterious figure not positively identified with any historical character. She is the nymph-like host of Eden who tells Dante, Virgil and Statius that the Golden Age of which poets sing is a vague memory of the glories of the Garden.



61. Beatrice

Beatrice Portinari, whom Dante fell in love with when they were both nine years old. It is she who descends into Hell to ask Virgil to guide the sin-ridden Dante through the first two Otherworldly realms, while she will take him through the third. She reminds Dante that «not only in my eyes is Paradise».



62. Il Grifone

The Gryphon is a complex creature, half lion, half eagle, symbolizing Christ and His Church. The Gryphon's pageant is an allegorical procession that comprises all of the books of the Old and the New Testaments, and brings Dante into Beatrice's presence at last.

PARADISO

Paradise is a space outside space in a time outside time. The blessed souls share an equal degree of bliss through varying degrees of grace. They identify with one of the seven heavens –of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn—encircled by the Heaven of the Fixed Stars and the Crystalline Heaven or Primum Mobile. Above all is the Empyrean, the place of God and the true home of all the blessed souls who sit in the White Celestial Rose.

LUNA, MERCURIO, VENERE

63.

Piccarda

Sister of Dante's friend Forese Donati, she became a devoted nun, but was forced to leave her convent and marry. She appears in the Heaven of the Moon, that of inconstant vows.



64.

Constanza

Empress Constance was the mother of Frederick II. After she became a nun, she was, like Piccarda, compelled to leave her convent and marry. She appears likewise in the First Heaven.



65.

Giustiniano

Emperor of Constantinople in the sixth century, he was responsible for the codification of Roman Law. He appears in the Heaven of Mercury, of those ambitious in active life.

66. Romeo di Villanova

Minister of the Count of Provence, he served his lord faithfully but fell into disgrace through slander against him.
He is also in the Heaven of Mercury.

67. Carlo Martello

Charles Martel, heir of the kingdoms of Naples and Hungary, whom the young Dante met when Charles visited Florence.
He appears in the Heaven of Venus with other souls who have loved well.

68. Cunizza

Unlike her savage brother Ezzelino da Romano, Cunizza incarnates the virtues of contented love in the Heaven of Venus.

69. Folco

Folco of Marseilles, a troubadour love poet whom Dante admired. He shares the Heaven of Venus with other lovers.



70. Raab

A prostitute from the city of Jericho who helped Joshua, the successor of Moses, to victory by hiding the spies he had sent into the city. Her soul earned a place in the Heaven of Venus.

SOLE,
MARTE,
JUPITER,
SATURNO

71. San Francesco

At the age of twenty-five Saint Francis devoted himself to «Dame Poverty» and founded the order of the Frati Minori who possessed no money, went barefoot and girt themselves with a simple cord. Francis died in 1226 in Assisi, and his soul is in the Empyrean.



72. Tommaso d'Aquino

Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest scholastic theologians, author of the *Summa Theologica*. He speaks to Dante in the Heaven of the Sun in praise of Saint Francis.

73. San Domenico

Saint Dominic, founder of the order that bears his name, was a relentless persecutor of heretics. His mother dreamt that she would give birth to a dog with a burning torch in its mouth.

74. Sa Bonaventura

Saint Bonaventure, a Franciscan, praises the life of Saint Dominic in the Heaven of the Sun. He was the author of many works, notably the *Journey of the Mind Towards God* that recounts a mystical voyage analogous to that of Dante's.



75. Cacciaguida

Dante's great-great--grandfather and crusader who died in the Holy Land. In the Heaven of Mars, Cacciaguida predicts Dante's exile and future sufferings.

76. Il Aquila

In the Heaven of Jupiter, Dante sees the words «LOVE JUSTICE, RULERS OF THE EARTH» form before his eyes, after which «M» transforms itself first into a lily and then into the Eagle of Justice, a composite of the many souls of the just rulers from the past.



77. Pier Damiano

Peter Damian was a father of the Church who became the abbot of the Benedictine

monastery of Fonte Avellana. He appears to Dante on Saturn, in the Heaven of the Contemplatives.

78. San Benedetto

Saint Benedict also appears in the Heaven of Saturn, where he bemoans to Dante the state of the Church in Dante's time. He was founder of the Benedictine order.

STELLE FISSE & EMPIREO

79. Cristo

The name of Christ is mentioned thirty-five time in *Paradiso*, five in *Purgatorio* and of course not once in *Inferno*. Dante sees Christ in his double nature (divine and human) shining from the Empyrean through the transparent Primum Mobile or Crystalline Heaven.



80. Maria

Dante has a first glimpse of the Virgin Mary in the white Rose of the Empyrean, attended by countless angels. Saint Bernard sings her praise before Dante is granted the final vision, calling her «daughter of your son».



81. Gabriele

The Archangel Gabriel appears to Dante in the Celestial Rose of the Empyrean, his eyes full of love for the Virgin Mary as when he announced to her the Conception of Christ.

82. San Pietro

Saint Peter was the first Pope, so named by Christ Himself. Peter holds two keys, one of gold, the other of silver. The gold key represents the power to bind and loose in heaven; the silver key the power to bind and loose on earth. In the Heaven of Fixed Stars, Saint Peter examines Dante on faith, the first of the three theological virtues.

83. Santiago

Saint James, the Apostle, brother of Saint John the Evangelist. In the Heaven of Fixed Stars, Saint James examines Dante on hope, the second of the three theological virtues.



84. San Giovanni

Saint John the Evangelist is Christ's Beloved Disciple. In the Heaven of Fixed Stars, Saint John examines Dante on the nature of love, the third theological virtue and the most important.

85. Adano

Adam, father of humankind, whose soul was brought back from Hell when Christ descended to bring back the worthy souls to Heaven. He tells Dante that he and Eve spent only seven hours in Eden and that he lived for 930 years on Earth. Adam sits now next to Mary in the Celestial Rose.



86. San Paolo

Before beginning his journey, Dante asks Virgil why should he, Dante, be allowed to visit the Otherworld, since he is neither Aeneas nor Saint Paul, both of whom were granted such a visit. Dante does not meet Saint Paul face to face, but as one of the Elders in the Gryphon's procession.

87. Dionisio

Dionysius the Areopagite appears to Dante in the Heaven of the Sun among other important theologians. He was the author of many books on mysticism and the nature of angels.

88. Gregorio

Pope Gregory the Great interceded for the redemption of the Emperor Trajan, and caused him to

be recalled from Hell to experience holy repentance. Dante meets Gregory in the Heaven of Jupiter.

89. San Bernardo

After Beatrice has finished her mission and, much to Dante's consternation, vanishes into the Empyrean, Saint Bernard appears to intercede for Dante with the Virgin Mary.



PUPPETS
OF DANTE'S COMMEDIA
AN EXHIBITION OF PUPPETS
BY ALBERTO MANGUEL

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