

Cerberus and the others. Monsters from the *Divine Comedy*

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Introduction¹

I think, from all I can learn, that heaven has the better climate,
but hell has the better company.

Benjamin Wade² (MacArthur, 1885, p. 500)

The most vivid memory of Dante's *Comedy* I've retained for years, from the high school desks to the "toilsome papers" of university, is that of an immense masterpiece, like it had been always presented to me – although just in theory, just on paper: such masterpiece remained totally unexpressed for me in the practice of daily study. It almost looked like it was a dismembered body whose pieces were made up of celebrated quotes («ye were not made to live like unto brutes»; *Inferno*, XXVI, 119), repeated suggestions («and [I] fell, even as a dead body falls»; *Inferno*, V, 142), and famous names (Virgil, Beatrice, Paolo and Francesca), that I was patiently attempting to reassemble, like a paleontolo-

¹ Lorenzo Montemagno Ciseri wrote two books on Dante, in which he analyzes the monstrous creatures dwelling in the Dantean otherworlds: *Mostri: la storia e le storie* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2018) and *Cerbero e gli altri. I mostri nella Divina Commedia* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2021). The translated fragments come from the latter: the *Introduction* to the book (9-15) and a conspicuous part (from the Three Beasts to Medusa) of the third chapter on Hell, *I mostri della Commedia: Inferno*. The entirety of the chapter is made up of the following parts: *The Three Beasts, Charon, Minos, Cerberus, the Erinyes (Furies) and Medusa, the Minotaur, the Harpies, Gerion, the Soothsayers, the Devils of Malebranche, the Serpents and Cacus, the Giants, Lucifer* (47-61). Ciseri's literary production on Dante has never been previously translated in Polish. Additional cultural references in the footnotes belong to the translator. The quotes from the *Comedy* are excerpts from Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy – Inferno*, trans. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

² The author is quoting A. MacArthur, *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction*, Boston: Press of Geo, 1885, 500.

gist would do with the fossilized bones of an ancient, long-extinct creature. A great distance kept me apart from Dante's work, and I blamed it on the listless, misguided school approach I was subjected to; the gap could only barely be filled with the memories of hidden laughter underlining the grossest and most licentious passages by the Poet. For instance, when Barbariccia, commanding his fellow devils to get moving, «made a trumpet of his rump» (*Inferno*, XXI, 139); or when Dante mentions Thais' «filthy nails» just before calling her a «harlot» (*Inferno*, XVIII, 131-133). There was no other way for a teenager – although perhaps good-willed – to lighten up those seemingly never-ending hours, crammed with boring explanations and tiresome exegesis of the text. A lot has changed (or rather – everything) since I discovered teratology some years later, while studying for my PhD in History of Science. Teratology is a fascinating branch of biology that deals with monstrosity and physical abnormalities in living beings. Far from being terrified, perhaps trained by my youthful readings of Edgar Allan Poe, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Stephen King and Clive Barker, my world began to populate with monsters. Wherever I turned, and wherever I laid eyes for research purposes, something or someone would speak to me about them. The same thing was happening to me that Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park (2000, p. 9) mention in the preface to *Wonders of the world. Monsters, prodigies, and strange facts from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*³, when they admit that others would read authors and their works of literature for the sake of poetry, philosophy, or natural history, seeking compelling arguments between the pages – whereas they only saw monsters, lots of them, and everywhere. Something slithering, something abominable had been waiting there to be awakened, just like the great ancient gods inhabiting the depths of planet Earth in my beloved Lovecraft's stories; and it had just begun to make its way up the stream of the unconscious.

All the monsters that passively sedimented in me during my school years, oblivious, and clouded by teenage hormones, were strongly coming back to light. Just like George Andrew Romero's zombies coming out of their graves, memories of monsters from a much younger age were resurfacing among the recesses of my memory. Strange monsters from the mysterious East I read about in the introduction to my geography book; François Rabelais and Luigi Pulci's giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel, that we mentioned during literature class; and, of course, Dante's monsters from the Comedy. What a shame – I thought, and I keep thinking today, as a professor – that my school-teachers (which I still fondly recall with great regard!) never took advantage of monsters as the amazing magnifying glass that they truly are, making use of their attractive perspective in order to transmit knowledge according to ministerial programs. Of course, all is not lost. I had the rare opportunity to rehabilitate and give further meaning to those long hours of hard work on Dante's cantos. I could re-read the *Comedy*, mainly *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, through their thriving population of monsters who had been waiting for someone to approach them, allowing them to reveal their innate charisma. Less poetry, more monsters, in a way. No one should feel offended, least of all – dantists, by the fact that Dante's work is a universal classic, it belongs to mankind, and – while this is far from being an excuse – I believe analyzing it through the eyes of a historian of teratology is nothing questionable. A paradigmatic example of this can be found in *Beatrice's eyes. What did Dante's world really look like?*⁴, by Romanian physicist and essayist Horia-Roman Patapievici (2006), who proposes a personal, original interpretation of the Dantean cosmos.

³ See Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park, *Le meraviglie del mondo. Mostri, prodigi e fatti strani dal Medioevo all'Illuminismo* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2000), 9.

⁴ Horia-Roman Patapievici, *Gli occhi di Beatrice. Com'era davvero il mondo di Dante?* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2006).

Here's the thing: if I were to think about Dante's world I wouldn't take into account the greatest systems of his poetic architecture, or at least not them alone. I would rather consider, much more trivially, his amazing, otherworldly journey and the many fantastic creatures he meets along the way. Dante being taken under the wing of his beloved and introduced to the very vision of God, surrounded by light, beauty, divine glory, and celestial harmony, is not the most compelling part of this journey. The *real* journey, the *real* adventure, what makes the audience flock to listen, takes place in the underworld, and partially – perhaps – on the Purgatory. Moreover, from my point of view, Hell in general – and Dante's Hell in particular – is also the teratomorphic and teratogenic place *par excellence*. Here everything is monstrified, everything is distorted by the glowing light of the sulphureous flames: the devils, the damned, the guardians of infernal circles; who used to be a monster in life becomes even worse in Hell, and who was not a monster is turned into one – body and soul. Descending into the depths of the earth (and – of the human heart) can only lead to one conclusion, so well summarized by Kurtz's unsettling last words at the end of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (2000, p. 246): «Horror! Horror!». Despite everything, Dante looks a bit like Conrad's protagonist Charles Marlow, who had a true passion for maps when he was little: he used to spend many hours just staring at them, and as he noticed a blank space, he would put his finger on it and declare: «When I'm big, I'll go there» (p. 17). Dante, the poet, tells us about Dante, the character, the protagonist of his *Comedy*, who is fearful and scared of embarking in such an incredible journey; he often falls unconscious, and can barely stand the disgusting smells, the excruciating cries, the sight of agony, and the endless torture. At the same time the poet appears lucid and aware as he moves his character and builds his own choreography around him. This is all very fascinating to us, probably because we have decided – just like Alice – to go all the way down the rabbit hole to see how deep it is. All things considered, Dante is not too different from Lewis Carroll's creation: just like a child, he is inclined to amazement and wonder, and follows a spirit guide in “another” realm so that the garden becomes the «forest dark» and the hole in the ground is the very gate of the underworld. In this respect, Umberto Saba's thoughts on Dante's double role (as an adult and a child at the same time) can be quite illuminating:

The miracle – Dante – is brought into existence only when the child and the man can coexist in the most extreme ways and given the most special circumstances. Dante is a small child, permanently astonished at the extent of what such a great man is experiencing; they truly are “two in one”. Look at this little Dante as he winces, cries, lights up with joy, trembles with rage and (simulated) fear, performs, exalts and humiliates himself with coquetry, he stands to the stars right in front of those extraordinary things that can get – through his mediation – to the Dante dressed in *lucco*, with stubble on his chin! And how he enjoys those rewards and punishments (the punishments, especially), those devils and angels, those «courteous janitors», those living and those dead – who are way more alive than the living themselves! What an unbelievable journey! Is there any greater feast for one to dream of? And against him, and one with him at the same time, we have Dante: Dante as a whole man, a husband, a father, a warrior, a partisan, an exile – unhappy, yet glorious; a mature Dante, with all the tremendous passions of his time, at war against everyone else and (but not as much) against himself; constantly proved wrong by facts, but even more so convinced to be right; always with his eyes popping out of his head, hallucinated with hatred and love.⁵

⁵ Umberto Saba, *Tutte le prose* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2001), 13-14.

By reading Dante's *Inferno*, one discovers, explores, and appeases darkness, both personal and suprapersonal, the so-called "dark side", the nemesis of light itself: a concept that was first theorized by Carl Gustav Jung in the first decades of the XX century, with all due respect to the *Star Wars* saga by George Lucas. Darkness is in every person – it represents all that is negative about the individual and mankind – but it can be found everywhere else as well – it embodies all that is negative about existence: in this form, we usually call it "evil". This second connotation of darkness has an archetypal core, which is as ancient as mankind; same goes with monsters, and the multiple ideas of a monster that every society in every age tends to develop, which are intrinsically archetypal as well. And just like darkness wouldn't exist without light, the monster can only be conceptualized through a direct opposition to what is normal, in a play of reflections, images and realities that self-define each other. However, when we look for thrills, when we are faced with something scary so that we cover our eyes – but our fingers are still spread out enough to let us take a peep in between them, we will know by then that the pull of the dark side has won out. With all due respect once again, but this time to Jung (who probably wouldn't be too surprised), it is no coincidence that Darth Vader's evil figure continues to generate the most profit when it comes to *Star Wars* merch sales, or that the fans of Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* cult tv show end up siding with the despicable protagonist Walter Hartwell White – almost without noticing.

In the end, no matter how we look at it, the *Comedy* has been exerting an unmatched attraction on us, and on global culture, for exactly seven hundred years. Dante's masterpiece was welcomed with overnight fame and immediate dissemination, as evidenced by the numerous 14th- and 15th-century manuscripts that have come down to us: at that time, such a flourishing production was second only to the Bible's. Forgive my triviality, or rather – just a simple observation: on par with all the greatest world classics, the undiminished success of this text has spanned the centuries, albeit showing a significant asymmetry when it comes to the fortune its cantiche were progressively met with. We can't deny that – regardless of our own point of view on the matter, including what I just said about the alluring power of darkness – following a "temporal selection" of some kind, Dante's *Inferno* has been able to absorb the blow of the biggest cultural shifts, where *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* performed less convincingly. The first cantica is, to this day, the most famous part of the *Comedy*, the most studied at schools, and undoubtedly for us the most compelling, vibrant, and suggestive. All of this at the expense of *Purgatorio*, but even more so – of *Paradiso*, which has gradually, and regrettably, lost its original impact. Either because of some eminent literary historians' judgement, like for instance Francesco De Sanctis, who blamed the unattractiveness of *Paradiso* on its (supposedly) monotonous architecture; or because, and here I'm referring to the *Writings on medieval thought* by Umberto Eco⁶ (who agreed with Thomas Stearns Eliot on *Paradiso* representing Alighieri's peak poetical expression), we have long lost those philosophical tools that are indeed required to appreciate the deepest meaning of the third cantica, the references to the metaphysics of light and the medieval aesthetic standards that make it a masterpiece. Meanwhile, the *Inferno* – and I will come back to this, in the conclusions to this volume – thanks to some of its peculiar characteristics, not necessarily and not just poetic and stylistic in nature, was able to cross seven hundred years «just like the one who was the lightest», as Giovanni Boccaccio puts it, that is – just like the poet Guido Cavalcanti, featured as a character in one tale from the *Decameron*, where he flees from

⁶ Umberto Eco, *Scritti sul pensiero medievale* (Milan: Bompiani, 2012).

a group of harassers with a quick and nimble leap (VI, 9; Boccaccio, 1927, p. 24). Despite the topic being rather the opposite of light, Dante's *Inferno* sailed smoothly across the centuries and got to us, because of a set of key elements that are – and always clearly were – capable of attracting our attention. Here we can find a good deal of adventure, danger, unexpected encounters, and plot twists – in short: «brivido, terrore e raccapriccio» (“thrill, terror, and horror”) as Cattivik⁷ would maybe put it; there are generous amounts of *splatter*⁸ and cannibalism, not to mention the rivers of blood, and the wide array of monsters. Anyway, otherworldly journeys have been around for quite some time before the *Comedy*; and therefore, prior to addressing its monstrous denizens, it is worth to summarize the previous episodes⁹.

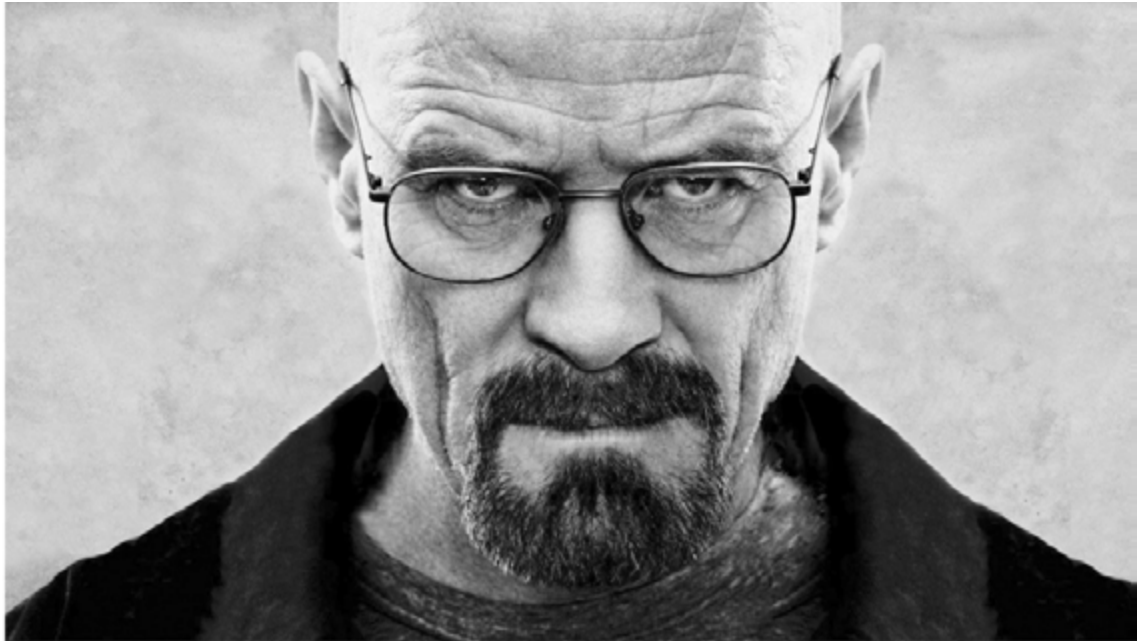


Picture 1: Cthulhu – the blasphemous entity from the series with the same name, created by Howard Phillips *Lovecraft*

⁷ Cattivik is an Italian comic book character who first appeared in 1965 as the protagonist of a series created by Franco Bonvicini and illustrated by Luca Silvestri. Ciseri mentions Cattivik in the last chapter (that we haven't translated).

⁸ A specific genre characterized by the conspicuous amount of gore and blood splattering everywhere.

⁹ We are instead moving straight to chapter 3.



Picture 2: Walter White (played by Brian Cranston), protagonist of the cult tv show *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013)

The monsters of the *Comedy: Inferno*

Hey now, all you sinners / Put your lights on / Put your
lights on / Hey now, all you lovers / Put your lights on / Put
your lights on / [...]

Cause there's a monster / Living under my bed / Whispering
in my ear / And there's an angel / With a hand on my head /
She says I've got nothing to fear.

Santana ft. Everlast, *Put Your Lights On*¹⁰

As we approach the analysis of the monstrous figures inhabiting the *Comedy*, one of the first surprising things we notice is that, despite the massive presence of these creatures since the very first cantos of the poem, the word for “monster” (“mostro”) doesn't show up in the text until the end of Purgatorio (XXXII 147), when the beast of the Apocalypse is described. Dante, virtuosic tightrope

¹⁰The song is available at the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCBS5EtszYI>.

walker of language, managed to describe such a conspicuous arrangement of monsters without ever making use of the simplest, most immediate, and most logical term there is to define and describe them – and we are still trying to wrap our head around this. Today we are used to refer to disadvantaged categories of people by different euphemistic periphrases along the lines of “differently something”, so Dante would be celebrated as a champion of political correctness: his monsters would become the “differently normal” guardians of the circles of Hell, the “differently good” devils of Malebolge, the “differently ordinary” exotic or fantastic animals scattered here and there around the text. Jokes aside, Alighieri honors the symbolical-theological culture of the Middle Ages by distributing literary and mythological monsters along his path, without disdaining some peculiar quotes, or even just hints, to the anthropological-fantastic tradition of the fabulous East. The monsters of the Comedy are therefore placed in the wake of the classical tradition and their immediate success is due to them being, in a way, “famous monsters”. This won’t prevent Dante from adding his own twist, as we shall see later. But the fact remains that he moves effortlessly and freely even in the specific field of teratology, borrowing and perfectly arranging the right monsters in the right place. He puts them in charge of guarding the circles of Hell (what a perfect collocation for a monstrous being), he turns them into tormentors, puts some key passages of the text into their hands, interacts with them in a completely different and innovative fashion compared to his predecessors. He fears them as a human, but he receives no harm from any of them; he is not there to wrestle them into submission or kill them like the classical heroes did: on the contrary, he can often benefit from them, because on more than one occasion he can continue his journey thanks to them. Dante, in fact, has been granted an essential safe conduct: he can walk unhindered among the damned, because «it is so willed there, where is power to do/that which is willed»¹¹. Virgil reminds him of it three times, in the presence of three different infernal monsters (Charon, Minos, and Pluto), with the immediate effect of calming their rage and silencing their legitimate concerns («and farther question not», *Inferno*, III, 95-96). Dante appears to be the third, or rather the first of the *Blues Brothers*: nothing and no one can stand in his way, because he’s «on a mission from God», like the unforgettable brothers Jake and Elwood in John Landis’ movie from 1980. But despite all of this, despite being guaranteed divine protection for the whole duration of his journey, Dante is masterful in sustaining narrative tension: whenever he meets a monster, that is – a potential threat, he is frightened and amazed, gets nervous and worried about a (possibly) impending danger, or is just sickened at the sight of these creatures’ deformities and filth (which usually go hand in hand). This happens quite often, since Dante’s *Inferno* is densely inhabited, run, and ruled by monsters, who form the backbone of its complex structural system. The monstrous denizens of Hell, who are akin to the damned in their diverse attitudes and transformations, appear to be (or just straight up are) based on a rich medieval bestiary, just like the entire *Comedy* can be read, and understood, as a medieval encyclopedia. We consider it “normal” for those figures who are born monstrous to be portrayed as such, in compliance with the literary tradition; on the contrary, it wouldn’t be considered equally fair to those sinners whose damned souls dwell in a state of total degradation, even worse than that of those we’d regard as the lowest of all animals. This state can be explained referring to Dante’s well-known idea of poetic justice, by which the sins committed during life are punished in a somewhat ironically appropriate manner. Once again, Dante is skilled in transforming what could have been a merely descriptive path (there’s more examples of otherworldly journeys

¹¹The quotes from the *Comedy* are excerpts from Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy – Inferno*, trans. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, (London: MobileReference, 2016).

that are like this exactly) into a real adventure. This implies taking as much time as he needs, to find all the rhymes that he deems necessary, while describing to the smallest, goriest detail those scenes that still manage to spark our imagination. I will not go as far as to say that *Inferno* was always the most popular part of the *Comedy*, because it literally overflows with monsters – which in the rest of the work do not show up at all (except for some instances in the *Purgatorio*). No, I won't go that far. But the adventures and the thrill, together with the monsters and the horrifying punishments of the damned, are indeed key elements of a seven hundred-year-long success.

The three beasts

Let's get started with our teratological reading of the *Comedy*, not so much from a monster in the strict sense, as from an element of danger and adventure, something that foreshadows the fear of Hell as a theme: the three beasts encountered by the poet in the «forest dark»¹². They also act as an introduction to the infernal guardians, who stand in Dante's way not just by physically blocking his path, but also with their monstrosity in full display. Nevertheless, in the classic tradition of medieval encyclopedias, bestiaries, and other peculiarities – which include, last but not least, Brunetto Latini's new¹³ *Tresor* – strange folk, monsters, and wild animals often get mixed up, merging into one another, their boundaries blurred.

So Dante got lost in his famous «forest dark», and here he witnesses his path being blocked by these three beasts, a lion, a wolf, and a «lonza» (much likely a lynx). As we all know well, these figures are allegories, and their symbolical meaning is religious and moral in nature; however, we can also clearly see how they are connected to a much more concrete context of historical conflict with humans. A fight for survival, which was bound to be ritualized and dramatized, starting from a certain point in history, and giving shape to the equally brutal and gruesome Roman venationes¹⁴. These entertainments took place in the amphitheaters and consisted in the hunting and slaying of wild animals, including lions, wolves, and leopards. The games were often followed by the staging of a particularly cruel form of execution, the so-called *damnatio ad bestias*¹⁵: those who were sentenced to it were thrown to the beasts, who tore them to pieces and devoured them; among them were many Christian martyrs. It would be hard to think of the *Comedy* as devoid of any echoes of this, although mediated by doctrinal symbology – which is surely rooted in those medieval bestiaries that contained in fact information about all three beasts featured in the first Canto and accompanied the often quite creative details about their nature with a moralized commentary.

¹²Here the author refers his reader to the following three pictures:

PICTURE 1 – A fresco by Joseph Anton Koch, *Dante e le fiere* ("Dante and the beasts", 1825-26, Rome, Casino Giustiniani Massimo al Laterano);

PICTURE 2 – Lombard miniature with *Dante e le fiere* ("Dante and the beasts", first half of the XV century; Imola, Biblioteca Comunale, ms. 76 [ex 32], f.2v);

PICTURE 3 - Lombard miniature with *Dante e le fiere* ("Dante and the beasts", first half of the XV century; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. It. 2017, f.10v).

They all show the three animals that appeared to Dante on his way to Hell.

¹³"New" from Dante's perspective. Brunetto Latini (1220-1294) was an Italian writer and politician, author of an *Encyclopedia* with a zoological chapter.

¹⁴*Venatio* (pl. *venationes*) means "hunting" in Latin. This type of "game" was popular among the Romans even before gladiator fights.

¹⁵"Sentencing to the beasts".

Anyway. As mentioned above, a “lonza” with a speckled coat shows up in front of Dante, at the very beginning of his journey. Many hypotheses were made about the zoological classification of this mysterious (for us) animal (a leopard, a panther...) but the beast can be probably identified with a lynx. There are several hints in support of this, starting from Latini’s mention of the creature in the one part of the *Tresor* that deals with animals, where he says that the “lupo cerviere”, or lynx, is characterized by a black-spotted fur, like a “lonza”. As a matter of fact, Brunetto provides the same Latin etymology, *lynx*, for the names of these two beasts, drawing from the *Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville – a cornerstone of medieval encyclopedic culture, based in turn on Plinius the Elder’s *Natural History* – when it comes to the physical description of the animal. There’s also a possibility that Dante might have seen this beast with his own two eyes: a Florentine document dated 1285 states that an animal called “leuncia” was being kept in a cage and exposed to the public at the Palace of the Podestà, in Florence. Moreover, Dante’s choice of this beast might have been influenced by his knowledge of Virgil’s passage in the *Aeneid* where he speaks of a “speckled lynx skin” (*Aeneid*, I, 323; Virgil, 2012, p. 21). Finally, given the rich and diverse literary evidence of a creature called “lonza”, and considering the quite approximate zoological systematics of the time, there’s a chance that Dante wasn’t necessarily referring to a particular species of carnivorous mammals; he was maybe just using “lonza” in the more generic sense of “wild animal”, perhaps the result of an inter-species mating. Be that as it may, the symbolical meaning that early commentators attribute to Dante’s “lonza” is that of lust, that keeps him from reaching the top of the hill¹⁶ and causes him to slip back into his sinful doubts. The lion, with his «ravenous hunger» (*Inferno*, I, 45), stands for pride, while the gaunt she-wolf (*Inferno*, I, 49) stands for greed, which is not just about money, but also includes splendor and wealth in the worldly life.

Anyway, Dante’s shock and dismay at the sight of the three beasts, with which we resonate empathically, are set against the first of many plot twists and narrative solutions that will resolve the most critical moments of the whole poem. Here, Virgil comes into the picture: Dante’s guide, his mentor, sort of a *deus ex machina* who’s not only going to accompany him for the first part of his otherworldly journey, but will also constantly pull him out of trouble and rescue him from the roughest situations, just like this one.

Charon

As Dante and Virgil continue along the path, entering Hell and approaching the «dismal shore of Acheron¹⁷», the first of the infernal rivers, we take a little step back to the epic of Gilgamesh, which represents one of the most ancient literary archetypes we know of that deals with otherworldly voyages. The protagonist, distraught over the death of his brotherly friend Enkidu, resolves to face a long and difficult journey (both physical and initiatory) that takes him to the so-called “islands of the blessed”, in front of a council of gods, to ask his ancestor Utnapishtim about his achieved immortality (the name itself means “the one who found eternal life”). To reach him, however, he must overcome several obstacles, eventually stopping by the shores of

¹⁶The one the Poet is attempting to climb when he encounters the beasts.

¹⁷The “river of sadness” or – according to the etymology – the “river of lament”.

a deadly sea that surrounds Utnapishtim's home and that no one except Shamash (the Sun) was ever able to traverse. The only one who can sail across this perilous sea, and help Gilgamesh get to the other side, is the ferryman Urshanabi. This passage is some thousand years older than the *Comedy*, and yet – doesn't it ring a bell? Nobody thinks, of course, that Dante was aware of the existence of the epic of Gilgamesh and was quoting it: we know it is not so, but we also know that whoever wanted to tell a good story revolving around travelling and adventure had to be familiar with the figure of the ferryman (and the one of the guide) as it was part of their cultural background and narrative devices. If the setting and the story allow for it, the ferryman (who is responsible of the outcome of the journey, that is to say – of the unfolding of the story itself) becomes even more interesting when his features are monstrified. This is what happened, for instance, to another famous ferryman from a completely different context: St. Christopher, who before the conversion was usually described as a quite feral giant; in one medieval iconographic trend – particularly fortunate among the Byzantines – he was even portrayed as dog-headed¹⁸.

In Charon's case, his teratological metamorphosis, his transformation into a monster, happened mainly in the Etruscan world, where he ended up becoming a personification of death itself. Charon, Charon's Etruscan counterpart, who often appears on wall paintings inside the Etruscan tombs, is always characterized by monstrous features: wings, a crooked nose, pointed ears, and snakes wrapped around his arms. When it comes to the motifs of Charon's description, Dante draws them from Virgil; however, he must have been influenced, at least a little, by all these monstrous visions that got to him through the Latin works of literature dealing with underworld descents, as we have already seen.

In the last part of the III Canto of the *Comedy*, Dante and Virgil come across a huge crowd of souls, gathered by the river Acheron, waiting to get into the infernal ferryman Charon's boat. He is both described as a white-haired old man, who could perhaps convey an idea of frailty at first sight, and as a fiery-eyed demon, ill-tempered, strict, and punishing¹⁹:

And lo! towards us coming in a boat
 An old man, hoary with the hair of eld,
 Crying: "Woe unto you, ye souls depraved!"

(...)

Thereat were quieted the fleecy cheeks
 Of him the ferryman of the livid fen,
 Who round about his eyes had wheels of flame.

(...)

¹⁸Here the author refers the reader to a picture:

PICTURE 6 – *Cristoforo cinocefalo* (XVII century, Athens, Byzantine and Christian Muzeum).

¹⁹Here the author refers the reader to two pictures:

PICTURE 4 – A miniature of Charon (XIV century, Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Holkham, misc. 48, 5)

PICTURE 5 – Michelangelo Buonarroti, Giudizio universale, detail of Charon (1535-41, Rome, Sistine Chapel).

Charon the demon, with the eyes of glede,
 Beckoning to them, collects them all together,
 Beats with his oar whoever lags behind.

Dante surrounds the infernal ferryman with dramatic details, and the whole episode strikes and grabs the reader's senses, through a constant stimulus of sounds, from the moans of the damned and Charon's cries of anger to his oar beating the souls' naked bodies. Visual contrasts are equally important, and they are realized in the mixture of colors that the Poet splashes on his monstrous canvas. Charon's white hair contrasts with the red embers of his eyes and the «wheels of flame» around them; this is all set on a dark, livid, funereal background, bluish to wine red, a hue that we associate with swollen soreness. Dante himself fall victim to a visible state of anxiety that borders on poetic tachycardia²⁰, and Virgil's comforting words are of very little help («it is so willed there where is power to do/that which is willed») as he silences Charon's reproaches about not wanting a living soul to get on board (which is something he probably had to allow more than once in the past, e.g., with the goddess Persephone, with Aeneas and Theseus, Pirithous and Heracles, Ulysses, Orpheus, and the Cumaean Sibyl²¹). Dante won't allow his readers to release tension; in fact, he adds to the horror of Charon's vision, of the tormented souls, of the dark infernal river, by introducing a plot twist in conclusion of the Canto: an earthquake so severe that it pushes his terror further than he would withstand, and as a crimson lightning flashes before him (one more splash of color!) he faints, he passes out. By virtue of this clever narrative trick, he hands over the whole scene to us in a crystallized, suspended form, retaining its colors and its soundscape, as he moves forward – to the next adventure, to more monsters.

Minos

This legendary and powerful king of Crete, who was described in different myths sometimes as fair and just, sometimes as cruel, had been assigned his role of infernal judge (often with his brother Rhadamanthus) since the time of Homer (*Odyssey*, XI, 568-570), and similarly in the *Aeneid* (VI, 431-3) and Statius' *Thebaid* (VIII, 40); therefore, his presence in the *Comedy* is not surprising. He is placed by Dante by the entrance to the actual Hell, that is – at the beginning of the second circle, where he sends the damned to their final destination, their eternal place of atonement. A brief but impactful apparition for this figure who fulfills his task in such a peculiar way, just as peculiar as the description that Dante offers of him:

There standeth Minos horribly, and snarls;
 Examines the transgressions at the entrance;
 Judges, and sends according as he girds him.

²⁰Medical term for a fast heart rate.

²¹Priestess of Apollo who lived in Cuma (Campania, Italy).

I say, that when the spirit evil-born
Cometh before him, wholly it confesses;
And this discriminator of transgressions

Seeth what place in Hell is meet for it;
Girds himself with his tail as many times
As grades he wishes it should be thrust down.

However, none of the classical sources, starting with Virgil, provides a physical description of the infernal judge, let alone with such specific features. Here, Minos' appearance transcends the human and fades into the beast, into the horrifying, snarling creature that «girds himself with his tail». A monstrous hybrid who won't even try to conceal his own restless and angry disposition, a supreme judge thrusting lost souls into the abyss with hits of tail. A demon characterized with bombastic eloquence and vibrant animal physicality, whose slimy, curvy appendage wraps itself around his body, a paradoxical reminder of the tempting serpent of Eden who deceived Adam and Eve, coiled around the tree of knowledge in the biblical Genesis. But Dante's «journey fate-ordained» (*Inferno*, V, 22) can't be interrupted by anyone, not even by him, as Virgil insists that «it is so willed there where is power to do/that which is willed» (*Inferno*, V, 23-24). Thus, Minos' powerful words are useless, and he is forced to let Dante and his companion continue with their journey.

Cerberus

If we were to take attendance in a class composed of infernal monsters, as if the underworld were a school, there is one who would always be there to answer; one in particular who never missed class, not to brag!, and tested out of the “top tier representative guardian of the realm of the dead” unit with full marks. We are talking about Cerberus²², the mythical three-headed dog with a serpent tail, covered with restless venomous snakes that hiss at his every movement, darting their horrid tongues. In Greek mythology he was chained by the gates of Hell and tasked with blocking the road to the living who ever attempted to enter (or to the dead who ever attempted to leave). There's no work of literature dealing with the otherworld that doesn't count him in among the denizens of Hell. He is mentioned in some of the founding works of our (and medieval) culture: the *Iliad* (VIII, 368), the *Odyssey* (XI, 623), Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (XI, III, 33), Hesiod's *Theogony* (311), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (IV, 450-451), Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*²³ (II, 5, 126). We can state, without fear of contradiction, that Cerberus (together with Charon) is an *essential* monster, he has to be there, otherwise – would

²²Here the author refers the reader to two pictures:

PICTURE 7 – Detail of a miniature showing Dante, Virgil, and Cerberus (XV century, ms. Urb. Lat. 365, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, F. 13r);

PICTURE 8 – Cerberus, illustration to the *Comedy*, by William Blake (*Hell* 6, 1824-27, London, Tate. Photo©Tate Images).

²³A compendium of Greek myths and legends. The author was long believed to be Apollodorus of Athens, however – as this is a much likely false attribution – he is usually referred to as Pseudo-Apollodorus.

that even be Hell? Cerberus is a landmark of Hades and Avernus²⁴, he is what the Colosseum is to Rome, or the Eiffel tower to Paris: you get the idea. One can't venture in the underworld without meeting him, seeing him, or even just sensing his terrifying presence. Cerberus is also characterized by a peculiar and fitting genealogy: he is the son of Typhon and Echidna²⁵, brother of Ortro, Geryon's monstrous dog, and of the Lernaean Hydra, the monster with the many serpent heads, fought and slayed by Heracles. A whole family of monsters where no one's left out, a horrifying jumble, rarely met in classical mythology, that would quickly shame the Addams, the Munsters, and even the Sawyers, protagonists of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, where the cannibalistic spree killer Leatherface murders people with a chainsaw while wearing a mask made from his victim's skin. A very respectable curriculum, that of Cerberus, that qualifies him for the crucial task he must carry out in such a place of suffering and agony.

In the *Aeneid*, where Cerberus is described with serpents wrapped around his neck, his attempt to oppose Aeneas descent is rendered useless by the Cumaean Sibyl's intervention: she throws at him some flat bread²⁶ filled with honey and soporific herbs, which appeases and subdues him immediately. In the *Comedy*, Dante entrusts him with the task of guarding the third circle of Hell, in the VI Canto, where he becomes an instrument of torture and punishment for the damned, that he relentlessly «flays and quarters» with the powerful swipes of his claws. Cerberus, who represented both gluttony and civil strife in the Middle Ages, is not accidentally placed among the greedy, and is narratively approached in a way that alternates between the *splatter movie* style – to put it in modern language – and the grotesque:

Cerberus, monster cruel and uncouth,
With his three gullets like a dog is barking
Over the people that are there submerged.

Red eyes he has, and unctuous beard and black,
And belly large, and armed with claws his hands;
He rends the spirits, flays, and quarters them.

(...)

When Cerberus perceived us, the great worm!
His mouths he opened, and displayed his tusks;
Not a limb had he that was motionless.

(...)

²⁴In the original we have “Cerbero sta all’Ade, all’Averno”, where *Averno* is the Latin name of the lake believe to be the entrance to the underworld, while *Ade* (Hades) is the Greek word for the underworld itself.

²⁵Both were human-snake hybrids.

²⁶In Italian “focaccia”. According to historians, this type of stuffed bread was known to the Etruscans long before the founding of Rome.

Such as that dog is, who by barking craves,
 And quiet grows soon as his food he gnaws,
 For to devour it he but thinks and struggles,

The like became those muzzles filth-begrimed
 Of Cerberus the demon, who so thunders
 Over the souls that they would fain be deaf.

Let's not forget that Cerberus is one and "triune", with his three heads and three gullets, says Dante, with which he swallows the damned, exactly like Lucifer, so that he, too, is configured as just one more anti-Trinity. Monster «cruel and uncouth», in Italian: «fiera crudele e diversa» – a beast cruel and "different". Here, that of cruelty is a humanizing aspect, as it implies intentionality (cruelty for the sake of itself is not a thing in nature, where there is only place for innate behaviors and self-preservation instincts), whereas diversity should be interpreted via its etymological meaning of "otherness", a deviation from any standards of "normalcy".

As he describes Cerberus, Dante alternates between beastly and human traits, just like he had done previously with Minos (*Inferno*, V, 4): «There standeth Minos horribly, and snarls». A horrifying creature, whose snarling is a purely animal trait, similar to the tail that he girds himself with, to indicate which circle of Hell the sinner is to be sent to. Likewise, as if he were trying to boost the monstrosity of the hound of the underworld, the Poet hybridizes him, associating by contrast unnatural aspects to more familiar ones, which however come off as entirely uncanny in that specific context. «Fouly anthropomorphic details», as Giorgio Inglese puts it in his comment to the *Comedy* (Dante Alighieri, 2007-17, vol. I, p. III, see notes): Cerberus' eyes, beard, belly, and hands, are juxtaposed to typically canine elements, like his barking and fangs, which contribute to both his perceived animalesque identity and his definitive monstrification. And his behavior becomes more fitting for a pet, or a guard dog, as he is ready to pounce on the two poets but is immediately pacified by Virgil, who throws a handful of earth into his throats (similarly to what happens in the *Aeneid*) as if they were meatballs. After all, we are now in the circle of gluttony, and Sigmund Freud would comment on the episode by arguing that this act appeases the monster, as if it were a child, by satisfying its oral stage.

And here is one more highlight of Dante's Cerberus: he goes from the mere guardian of Tartarus he used to be in Greek mythology, to an actual tool of punishment for the damned, which he plagues with his relentless, earsplitting barking (making them wish they were deaf) as he rends, flays and quarters them nonstop. The horrible monster, the «great worm», as Dante calls him, shudders like a rabid dog, in a rage so frantic he can't keep a single muscle still. Such uncontrolled animality is also described in the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*²⁷ (II, 15; Milan, 1977, p. III), which gives pride of place to Cerberus:

²⁷In Italian: *Libro delle mirabili difformità*, edited by Carlo Bologna (Milan: Bompiani, 1977). The book is made up of three parts, each describing different types of monsters, and was written in the VIII century in the Anglo-Saxon area, maybe by Aldhelm from Malmesbury.

Cerberus [...] is described as three-headed: according to poets and philosophers, he guarded the gates of Hell to scare mortals off with his threefold barking. But they also recount with vile falsehood that the famous Alcides [Heracles²⁸] carried him away in chains, all trembling, from the realm of Orcus, infernal sovereign, and when he was already provoked to a towering rage, he exasperated him with maddening howls.

The Heracles mention, as we saw in chapter I, refers to his twelfth and last labor, the most grueling of them all, which consisted of capturing Cerberus and taking him from the underworld to the land of the living, to obey king Eurystheus' orders. Dante quotes this one episode (*Inferno*, IX 98-99) as he mentions the still visible marks left by Heracles' chain on the monster's neck, once again making use of a very specific terminology, composed by words such as «chin» and «gullet», which recall Cerberus' double nature – human and feral.

Erinyes (Furies) and Medusa

High above the fortified walls of the infernal city of Dis there hover the Erinyes²⁹, also referred to as Eumenides in the Greek tradition; according to Hesiod (*Theogony*, 183-187), they were born of Uranus' blood as it fell on Gaia (the earth) and impregnated her, after the god was emasculated by his own son, Cronus. In Roman mythology, these violent creatures were identified with the Furies and represented as snake-haired, monstrous flying spirits, holding whips or torches. They dwelt in the darkness of the underworld, and this is how Dante must have met them: needless to say – starting with the *Aeneid*, (VI, 571; VII, 324), but even more in the Ovidian *Metamorphoses* (IV, 451-454) and in Statius' *Thebaid* (XI, 65). Since the ancient times, the Erinyes are considered revengers of crimes and persecutors of criminals: they are tasked with punishing those misdeeds that human justice left unpunished, regarding themselves as the ideal protectors of social order – a very interesting curriculum to show off when aspiring to the position of soul-keeper in the otherworld. The source literature mentions mostly three of them, the ones that Dante too meets in the *Comedy*: Tisiphone, Megaera and Alecto, who jump to their feet as soon as they notice the two poets approaching, in a far from reassuring way, manifesting their rage at the presence of those strangers:

(...) Mine eye had altogether drawn me
Tow'rd's the high tower with the red-flaming summit,

Where in a moment saw I swift uprisen
The three infernal Furies stained with blood,
Who had the limbs of women and their mien,

²⁸In Roman mythology, Alcides is one of Jupiter's sons, identified with Heracles.

²⁹Here the author refers the reader to two pictures:

PICTURE 9 – Miniature in the style of the school of northern Italy with the Erinyes (1456, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Plut. 40.I. F. 26r);

PICTURE 10 – Miniature with the Erinyes (half of XV century, London, British Library, ms. Yates Thompson 36, F. 16r).

And with the greenest hydras were begirt;
 Small serpents and cerastes were their tresses,
 Wherewith their horrid temples were entwined.

These are hybrid monsters, characterized by feminine bodies and attitudes, but wrapped in water serpents – the “hydras” mentioned by Virgil in the *Aeneid* (VII, 447); their hair is intertwined with small snakes and cerastes, the so-called “horned vipers” (*Cerastes cerastes*, according to the nomenclature introduced in 1758 by Swedish zoologist and taxonomist Carl Linnaeus). In particular, the cerastes (that Dante draws from Statius) were very well known since the ancient times (they are mentioned by Plinius, Solinus and Lucan) and in the medieval bestiaries for their strong venom, compared to the one of the mythical and monstrous Basilisk. In fact, *Cerastes* is a genus of dangerous snakes, all quite feared by man. Dante’s aim as he specifies their typology is to reinforce the idea of lethal perniciousness that comes with it, but also their repulsive appearance, characterized by two supraorbital “horns” that give the snake a rather... demonic look. The previously mentioned *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* (III, 15), highlights the fact that the horns are not at all as dangerous as the jaws and tongue, which are terrifying and deadly. And we can well believe it.

Getting back to the *Comedy*, Dante tells us that Virgil recognizes the Erinyes at once, and lists their identities accurately:

[And he] Said unto me: “Behold the fierce Erinnyes.

This is Megaera, on the left-hand side;
 She who is weeping on the right, Alecto;
 Tisiphone is between”.

The issue of the symbology linked to the three Erinyes fueled the discussion for hundreds of years, starting from the fourteenth century commentators – who were indeed closer to Dante’s culture, but this doesn’t always make them more capable of grasping its actual meaning, often much simpler than it seems – to the modern ones, sometimes misled right by the unnecessarily elaborate comments of the formers. I personally agree with those who apply the methodological principle of Occam’s razor – that is, we have no need to overcomplicate stuff and we should stick to the simplest solution, all factors being equal – so we can assume that the Erinyes are none other than the monstrous revengers and torturers from the classic tradition. This is more than enough as an infernal vision of the wicked and bloodthirsty keepers of the sinful denizens of Dis. And they cry, beat themselves with their palms, rend their breast with their fingernails, and call out loudly for one more terrifying figure to come forth: it’s Medusa the Gorgon, daughter of Forco and Ceto. She was changed into a monster by Athena because she had the audacity to lie with Poseidon in one of the goddess’ temples (or, according to an alternative version of the story, because she attempted to challenge her beauty). As a monster, she had the power to turn to stone anyone who dared to look into her eyes. According to the myth told among the others by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* (IV, 657 and following), she was decapitated by Perseus, but her head didn’t lose its capacity to petrify

animals and humans, so that Athena placed it on her shield. The Erinyes, summoning Medusa to their aid, are basically threatening Dante with the ultimate interruption of his path to the lowest infernal circles by turning him to stone:

Each one her breast was rending with her nails;
They beat them with their palms, and cried so loud,
That I for dread pressed close unto the Poet.

“Medusa come, so we to stone will change him!”
All shouted looking down; “in evil hour
Avenged we not on Theseus his assault!”

Here the Erinyes, in the words ascribed to them by Dante, refer to the hero Theseus' myth, who descended to the realm of the dead to kidnap Persephone, sovereign of the underworld; he was imprisoned by the powers of darkness, and eventually freed by Heracles. In the classic tradition, Medusa was in good company of her two sisters, Euryale and Stheno, with whom she lived not far from the garden of the Hesperides and the realm of the dead. They were described as dreadful, snake-headed female creatures, with huge boar tusks, bronze hands, and golden wings they could fly with. They had sparkling eyes and their look, as previously suggested, was penetrating and petrifying at the same time, so that when Perseus slices off Medusa's head – Medusa was the only mortal among the Gorgons, as it is reported in some sources like the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* (I, 38) – her eyes kept moving as if she were still alive. When it comes to the oldest commentators' different opinions about her presence in the *Comedy*, some of them (like Jacopo della Lana) sees her as the symbol of heresy, which transforms man into stone as soon as he turns away from the Scriptures, due to being seduced by the monster's sensuality. On the other hand, there are those – like Pietro di Dante, one of the Poet's sons – who propose an alternative vision of Medusa according to which she would be an allegory of terror. Be it as it may, from our point of view the monster is an instrument of wonder, a narrative device characterized with astonishing emotional impact that Dante – by virtue of his habitual skills – employs for us to fear for his fate, with the impending of such horror. Needless to say that his guide and master Virgil will once again save him from such a catastrophic hypothesis of failure: with swift and clever move, he makes him turn around and cover his eyes, overlapping his hands on Dante's in an extreme act of protection.

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KEYWORDS

teratology

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ABSTRACT:

The text shows how to read Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* through teratological analysis and attention to details. Pondering the monstrosities described in the work of the eminent Italian is a way to return the *Comedy* to our contemporary times and sensibility. The reader notices the importance of detail in the process of getting to know and understanding the text, which is an excellent introduction to the poem itself, and it also teaches a specific reading technique – focused on the analysis of the literary imponderables.

DIVINE COMEDY

DETAIL IN LITERATURE

reading details

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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