Parody or Paradox:
The Portrait of Satan in Dante's *Inferno*

By Beatrice Hall

The Satan of Dante's *Inferno* is strange. Readers familiar with the traditional depictions of the arch-demon might expect a ferocious king of fire and brimstone. Readers familiar with the Christian teaching that Satan is the enemy of human salvation might expect Dante's Satan to be the ultimate obstacle in the pilgrim's journey. Readers familiar with adventure stories might expect the confrontation with Satan to be the "boss battle" of the *Inferno*. Dante's Satan is none of those things. He is surrounded by ice and does not even seem to realize that Dante-pilgrim and Virgil are there. Far from being the ultimate obstacle, he is the literal means by which the pilgrim escapes Hell.

A reader may try to explain away Satan's strangeness by pointing out that he is obviously a parody of God, and then leave it at that. However, this reading does not do justice either to Satan's strangeness or to Dante-poet's artistry.[1] It would be uncharacteristic of the poet to make the climax of *Inferno* a mere recitation of opposite attributes. In fact, Satan is more than just a parody; he is a paradox. On the one hand, he is the creature farthest from and most opposed to God. At the same time, he is the creature in Hell that most recalls God and is the most important means to the pilgrim's salvation. In order to understand Satan completely, one must understand that he is both the best thing and the worst thing in Hell.

Consider first how Satan is the worst thing in Hell, that is, how he is the creature farthest from and most opposed to God. This aspect of Satan is more obvious, but it is worth understanding in full so that the intensity of Dante's paradox may become visible. To begin, consider Satan's

location in Hell. As Virgil explains in Canto XI, Hell has a logical structure. The more a sin "spiace a Dio,"[1] the further down in Hell it is punished.[2] The very worst sin is fraud, and the worst kind of fraud is treachery. Satan is the arch-traitor, and so is trapped in the center of the ninth and lowest circle of Hell. Simply by this fact, the reader knows that Satan is the most evil of all creatures.

Furthermore, consider the implication of Satan's location in light of Dante's cosmic geography. According to Dante, the noblest place over all creation is the Empyrean, the highest heaven, the dwelling place of God. Below that are nine more rings of heaven, and below them all is the earth. Hell is under the earth, which means that Satan, at the bottom of Hell, is the absolute lowest point in the universe. Of everything in the universe, therefore, Satan is the creature literally farthest from God.

Dante-poet also reminds the reader constantly of Satan's depravity by referencing the arch-demon's fall from grace. Satan's position in the universe is no accident, nor was he placed there against his will. Rather, because "contro 'l suo fattore alzò le ciglia" in rebellion, he deserves to be there.[3] According to Dante-poet, Satan's rebellion was not only the most wicked of all rebellions, but it was also the source of all grief: "ben dee da lui procedere ogne lutto."[4] After all, if the most beautiful, most God-like of all created beings could betray his creator, "then any betrayal is possible, and all sadness can be accounted for."[5] Thus, Satan's fall is nothing to pity; it is the just result of prime, primordial evil.

Dante-poet highlights Satan's wickedness and opposition to God's plan by referencing the demon's fall. The poet does this, first of all, by strategically juxtaposing the *passato remoto* and the present tenses to create a contrast between Satan's angelic origins and his current depravity.[6] For example, Dante describes Satan as "la creatura ch'*ebbe* il bel sembiante," and later "*fu* sì bel

[1] See Appendix for all translations of Italian passages

com'elli *è* ora bruto."[7] The fact that Satan has six wings also emphasizes his fallen nature, since it reminds the reader that Satan used to be one of the six-winged seraphim, the highest order of angels.[8] Finally, the colors of Satan's three faces also allude to his fall. According to Dante, Satan's front-facing face "era vermiglia" while "la destra parea tra bianca e gialla" and "la sinistra a vedere era tal, quali/ vegnon di là onde 'l Nilo s'avvalla."[9] These three colors (red, black, and whitish-yellow) are often understood to represent anger, ignorance, and impotence; however, as Hollander points out, this is not the most satisfying explanation.[10] A more satisfying explanation is given by Freccero, who argues that the progression from off-white to red to black was a medieval representation of decay. First, these were the colors of the mulberry tree, which has a white flower, red unripe fruit, and black mature fruit. St. Ambrose, whose writings were well known to Dante and his contemporaries, allegorized the mulberry tree to represent the fall of the devil from the "white flower and red power of angelic nature…[to the] black odor of sin."[11] Second, in medieval color theory, white represented heat and black represented cold. Furthermore, as an object transitioned from white heat to black coldness, it would pass through red as an intermediary color. Thus, Satan's faces tell a story that begins with the dying heat of divine love and ends with the black coldness of the bottom of Hell.[12] Thus, by referencing the arch-demon's fall, Dante-poet leaves the reader with no doubt that Satan is an evil, depraved creature.

Finally, Dante-poet shows Satan as the creature most opposed to God by making the demon's attributes parody God's attributes. (Note that Satan *is* in fact a parody of God; however, as will be demonstrated below, he is more than just a parody.) Consider the following examples: Satan is "Lo 'mperador del doloroso regno," a deliberate contrast with God, "quello imperador che là su regna."[13] Satan is suspended in the ice without touching it, yet he interacts with his empire by blowing a freezing wind over it. This is a parody of God, who transcends His creation yet

interacts with it through the Holy Spirit.[14] God is the source of all good, while Dante says about Satan that "ben dee da lui procedere ogne lutto".[15] Satan with his three faces "is the antithesis of the Divine Trinity: Lucifer spirates death where the Trinity spirates love."[16] Satan's very ugliness parodies God's beauty.[17] In fact, the horror inspired by the vision of Satan is unutterable, just as the beatific vision of God is beyond words.[18] However, Satan is no rival to God: he is enormous, yet he is measurable through a series of carefully calculated proportions.[19] God, of course, is beyond measure.[20] Finally, where God is the source of all life, Satan is "animated death."[21] The vast figure, mistaken at first for a lifeless "dificio," performs mechanical actions (flapping, chewing, drooling), but with just as much cognition as the "molin" he resembles.[22] He does not speak, nor does he react as Virgil and Dante approach, nor even when they literally clamber down his hide. In short, "Lucifer is a giant hulk of vacant, vastly un-charismatic, non-cognitive matter."[23] Nothing could be further from God or more opposed to Him.

Consider now the other side of the paradox. Even while Satan is the most depraved of all creatures, he is also the creature in Hell that most recalls God and is the most important means to the pilgrim's salvation. First of all, nowhere is God more visible than in the portrait of Satan. Consider the laundry list of opposites just above: by presenting a carefully crafted portrait of Satan, Dante-poet has managed to convey a detailed portrait of God as well.[24] This is a simple point to make, but the implications are profound. The fact that the most depraved of all creatures is the one to most clearly reveal God in Hell shows just how powerful God's creative power is. Satan may have betrayed his Lord and cast himself into the deepest, darkest hole of evil in the universe, yet insofar as he is created by God, he is good, a "maraviglia" that shows forth God's glory.[25] Satan

may have rebelled, but ultimately he cannot unmake what God has established, namely, that His creation is good and that all His works give Him glory.[26]

The paradox of Satan's goodness is especially clear when one considers how strongly Satan, "animated death," resembles the other paradox of life-in-death: the cross. For example, the very first line of the canto is "*Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni,*" a perverted quote from a hymn of the True Cross.[27] This line signals to the reader that the juxtaposition of Satan and the cross will be a dominant theme in this canto.[28] Likewise, the first simile to describe Satan is that of a "molin," a windmill, whose four arms create the outline of a cross.[29] Virgil then introduces Satan by saying "Ecco Dite," a phrase that recalls how Christ was presented to the crowds before his death ("Ecce homo").[30] The blood and slobber dripping from Satan's mouth parodies the blood and water flowing from the side of Christ after His death.[31] Satan's infernal meal, eternally chewing on the worst sinners in history, is a parody of the Eucharist, the sacrament of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.[32] Furthermore, the three colors of Satan's faces, in addition to referencing his fall, also reference Christ. St. Augustine, like St. Ambrose, allegorized the tri-colored produce of the mulberry tree; however, according to Augustine, these colors represent Christ on the cross. The white represents His flesh, the red His blood, and the black His scourges and bruises, all hung on a tree.[33] Paradoxically, therefore, Satan *looks* like the cross of Christ.

Satan's resemblance to the cross of Christ is not merely superficial; it is also functional. As Virgil is climbing down Satan's hairy thigh, he tells the pilgrim "Attienti ben, ché per cotali scale/…/conviensi dipartir da tanto male."[34] This passage brings to mind at least two significant Biblical parallels. The first is the Old Testament story of Jacob's ladder (which also includes "*scale")*, and the second is the New Testament story of Zacchaeus (who physically climbs a tree and is saved). Medieval authors saw both stories as metaphors for the Crucifixion.[35] Thus, Virgil

and Dante are escaping Hell by the power of the cross. Nor is it only true that the power of Christ's cross allows Virgil and Dante to use Satan as a ladder (though that is true). The connection is deeper than that: just as Christ's sacrifice redeemed humankind and opened the way to salvation, so Satan is literally the way out of Hell.[36] Satan serves the same function as the cross.

Satan is also a "good thing" by being a place of both literal and moral conversion. Physically, he is the transition between the northern and southern hemispheres of the globe. Note that in the Aristotelian worldview that Dante shared, the northern hemisphere was "down" and the southern hemisphere was "up."[37] As Virgil climbs down Satan, he at one point *turns himself over* and starts climbing *up*. This is, quite literally, a crucial turning point for the pilgrim's journey. The poet emphasizes this turning point by repeating the word "punto" three times in the canto, in reference specifically to this central point.[38] Virgil and the pilgrim have passed the center of the earth, and the world has been turned right-side up, "physically and morally."[39]

In fact, Dante makes it clear that Satan is the place of moral conversion even before the pilgrim reaches the physical turning point. When the pilgrim first sees Satan clearly, he tells the reader, "Io non mori' e non rimasi vivo."[40] In order to emphasize this crucial line, the poet instructs the reader to consider it carefully, telling the reader "pensa oggimai per te, s'hai fior di'ingegno/ qual io divenni, d'uno e d'altro privo."[41] In order to understand what Dante means here, one must first understand the medieval theory of generation, which was derived from Aristotle's understanding of "forms." In order for an object to pass from one form to another, the old form had to decay and make room for the new one. Thus, in every change, there are really two changes: first the decay of the old form, and second, the growth of the new form. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, sanctifying grace was a form of the soul. Thus, in order for a person to pass from a state of sin to a state of grace, the "old form," the state of sin, had to decay.[42]

This is precisely what is happening to the pilgrim.[43] The moment that he beholds Satan fully is the moment when he finally dies to sin.[44] He exists, for these brief moments, neither in the death of sin nor in the life of grace. Like the central turning point that is neither "up" nor "down," so the pilgrim, in the moment of his conversion, is neither dead nor alive. Satan himself is the place and immediate cause of the pilgrim's final death to sin, the point of his moral conversion. The other place and cause of death to sin is, of course, the cross of Christ. Satan is an evil thing, like the cross, where the pilgrim imitates Christ's death. This is an essential part of the pilgrim's salvation, since, as St. Paul says, "if we have been united with him [Christ] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."[45] Satan, by being (like the cross) the place of the pilgrim's conversion, is (like the cross) his path to the resurrection.

Now one can appreciate the full paradox that Dante's Satan represents. On the one hand, no creature is further from God or more opposed to Him. At the same time, nothing in Hell recalls God more clearly or brings the pilgrim closer to Him than Satan himself. In fact, the paradox of Satan is the paradox of the *Inferno* itself. In yet another parody of Christ who "recapitulates" all things in heaven and on earth, Satan recapitulates all of Hell.[46] In other words, one can find all of the rest of Hell represented in the portrait of Satan.

To see the extent of this recapitulation, consider how Satan recalls some element of each of the previous levels of Hell, starting with the gate itself. When the pilgrim is about to behold Satan, Virgil tells him "convien che di fortezza t'armi," just as he told him that "ogne viltà convien che qui sia morta" at the gate of Hell.[47] As for the incontinent, Satan is compared to a bird, as are the lustful; he is called a "vermo," as is Cerberus; he is compared to a ship with sails, as is Plutus.[48] The fact that he "alzò le ciglia" and is visible from the waist up recalls the heretic Farinata.[49] His "vermiglia" face recalls the "bollor vermiglio" of the violent.[50] The fact that

he is the "scale" out of Hell recalls Geryon, the "sozza imagine di froda," especially since the "image of stairs (with the same rhymes, at the same line numbers) is used for the ride on Geryon" as it is for Satan.[51] His "zanche" sticking up out of the earth recall the simoniacs (*Inferno* 34.90, 19.22-24). The reference to his "grand' ali" that "si convenia a tanto uccello" recalls the lesser demons of the fifth bolgia, who also have "l'ali" and are compared to "l' falcon."[52] The reference to his wings like "vele di mar" recalls seafaring Ulysses, as well as Guido da Montefeltro (who told the pilgrim of his resolution to "calar le vele"), and thus associates Satan with the false counselors.[53] This same reference also recalls Icarus, who, like Ulysses, was an over-reacher.[54] The poet directly references the giants to describe Satan, saying "e più con un gigante io mi convegno/ che i giganti non fan con le sue braccia."[55] Finally, the fact that Satan is eating sinners recalls the traitor Ugolino.[56]

These references to Hell in the portrait of Satan do not merely show that all sins are present in the arch-demon. Rather, they show that Satan sums up and represents all of Hell. What is true of the one is true of the other. Therefore, one can see that all of Hell is, like Satan, a paradox: a thoroughly evil thing that gets the pilgrim closer to God. Satan, like Hell, paradoxically ultimately points to "la divina podestate/ la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore" of God who can and does turn all things to good.[57]

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Appendices

Translations of Italian and Latin text

"spiace a Dio"— "displeases God"

"contro 'l suo fattore alzò le ciglia" – "he raised his brows against his Maker"

"ben dee da lui procedere ogne lutto" – "it is fitting that every grief should proceed from him"

Passato remoto—remote past [verb tense]

*"la creatura ch'*ebbe *il bel sembiante,"*— "the creature who *had* the beautiful appearance"

"fu *sì bel com'elli* è *ora bruto."*— "he *was* as beautiful as now he *is* ugly"

"era vermiglia" – "was vermillion"

"la destra parea tra bianca e gialla" – "the right [face] appeared to be between white and yellow"

"la sinistra a vedere era tal, quali/ vegnon di là onde 'l Nilo s'avvalla." – "the left [face] resembled [the faces of] those who come from where the Nile flows"

"Lo 'mperador del doloroso regno," – "the emperor of the sorrowful kingdom"

"quello imperador che là su regna." – "the emperor who reigns above"

"ben dee da lui procedere ogne lutto" – "it is fitting that every grief should proceed from him"

"dificio"— "edifice"

"molin" – "windmill"

"maraviglia" – "marvel"

"*Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni*"— "The banners of the king of hell advance"

"Ecco Dite"— "Behold Dis [another name for Satan]"

"Attienti ben, ché per cotali scale/.../conviensi dipartir da tanto male." – "Pay careful attention, because it is by such stairs that one must leave behind so much evil."

"Io non mori' e non rimasi vivo." – "I did not die and I did not remian alive"

"pensa oggimai per te, s'hai fior di'ingegno/ qual io divenni, d'uno e d'altro privo."— "Think for yourself, then, if you have the flower of ingenuity/ what I became, deprived of both the one and the other."

"convien che di fortezza t'armi" – "you must arm yourself with courage"

"ogne viltà convien che qui sia morta" – "every cowardice must die here"

"vermo" – "worm"

"alzò le ciglia" – "raised his brows"

"vermiglia" – "vermillion"

"bollor vermiglio" – "vermillion boiling"

"scale" – "stairs"

"sozza imagine di froda" – "foul image of fraud"

"zanche" – "haunches"

"grand' ali" – "large wings"

"si convenia a tanto uccello" – "befit such a bird"

"l'ali" – "wings"

"l' falcon" – "a falcon"

"vele di mar" – "sea-sails"

"calar le vele" – "lower the sails"

"e più con un gigante io mi convegno/ che i giganti non fan con le sue braccia." – "I am closer in size to a giant than the giants are to his arm."

"la divina podestate/ la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore" – "the divine power/ the highest wisdom and the primal love"

Notes

[1] Remo Ceserani, "Lucifer." *Lectura Dantis: Inferno: A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*, eds. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross (California: University of California Press, 1998), 434. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp55s.37

[2] *Inferno* 11.26.

[3] *Inferno* 34.35.

[4] *Inferno* 34.36.

[5] Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition," Commento Baroliniano, Digital Dante (New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018), https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-34/.

[6] Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition."

[7] *Inferno* 34.18, 34. Emphasis mine.

[8] Robert Hollander, *Inferno* (Commentary) (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), commentary on lines 34.46-51.

[9] *Inferno* 34.39, 43-45.

[10] Hollander, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.39-45.

[11] John Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 171.

[12]Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," 171-3.

[13] *Inferno* 34.28, 1.124.

[14] Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (Commentary to *Inferno* 34) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), commentary on lines 34.28-67. For Satan's suspension, see Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.75:

since Virgil can climb down Satan's leg and come out the other side, there must be space between Satan's leg and the ice of Cocytus.

[15] *Inferno* 34.36. Note the use of the technical theological term "procedere," used ordinarily to describe all goodness proceeding from God). See Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.36.

[16] Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition."

[17] Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.28-67.

[18] Theodore J. Cachey Jr., "Lettura del Canto XXXIV dell'*Inferno*," *Revista di Studi Danteschi* anno XIX, fascicolo 1 (gen-giu 2019): 53.

[19] *Inferno* 34.30-33: "e più con un gigante io mi convegno/ che i giganti non fan con le sue braccia/ vedi oggimai quant' esser dee quel tutto/ ch'a così fatta parte si confaccia."

[20] Cachey, "Lettura del Canto XXXIV dell'*Inferno*," 54.

[21] Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition."

[22] Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition." See also *Inferno* 34.6-7.

[23] Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition."

[24] Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.22-27. See also *Inferno* 34.37.

[25] Hollander, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.37-38.

[26] See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 145:10.

[27] *Inferno* 34.1.

[28] Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," 169.

[29] Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," 170. See also *Inferno* 34.6.

[30] *Inferno* 34.20. See also Vulgate, Jn 19:5.

[31] Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.54.

[32] Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.61-67.

[33] Both Ambrose and Augustine's interpretations would have been well known to Dante. See Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," 170-1.

[34] *Inferno* 34.82-4.

[35] Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," 177-8. See also Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.70-93.

[36] Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.70-93.

[37] Cachey, "Lettura del Canto XXXIV dell'*Inferno*," 42.

[38] Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition."

[39] Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition."

[40] *Inferno* 34.26.

[41] *Inferno* 34.27-28.

[42] Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," 173-4.

[43] Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," 173-4.

[44] Hollander, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.22-27.

[45] Romans 6:5, Revised Standard Version.

[46] See Ephesians 1:10, RSV. Note that the word "unite" is a translation of the Greek word "anakephalaiōsasthai," which literally means "recapitulate."

[47] *Inferno* 34.21. Cf. *Inferno* 3.15.

[48] *Inferno* 34.47. Cf. *Inferno* 5.40-48; *Inferno* 34.108. Cf. *Inferno* 6.22; *Inferno* 34.48. Cf. *Inferno* 7.13-15.

[49] *Inferno* 34.35. Cf. *Inferno* 10.45. See also Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.29

[50] *Inferno* 34.39. Cf. *Inferno* 12.101

[51] *Inferno* 34.82-84. Cf. *Inferno* 34.7, 82-84. See also Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.82.).

[52] *Inferno* 34.46-47. Cf. *Inferno* 22.127, 131.

[53] *Inferno* 34.48. Cf. *Inferno* 26.100-102 and *Inferno* 27.81. See also Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.46-48.

[54] Durling and Martinez, commentary to *Inferno*, 34.46-48.

[55] *Inferno* 34.30-31.

[56] *Inferno* 34.55-56. Cf. *Inferno* 33.76-78.

[57] *Inferno* 3.5-6. See also Romans 8:28.