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Prohibition, Boundaries and Exclusion in the *Divine Comedy*

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Many have already remarked that Dante’s *Comedy* is indeed the most comprehensive synthesis of medieval life. It is no wonder then that—in providing a faithful reflection of medieval mentality—it contains, among other things, an elaborately worked out semiotics for prohibition, delimitation, discrimination, exclusion and expulsion.

Prohibition is, in effect, the organizing principle of the moral order within the poem. On the one hand, this follows straightforwardly from the way that law and sin, prohibition and the Fall are conceived to be interconnected within Christian teachings. In addition, it also follows from an essential feature of the world in which Dante lived, and which he recreated in his poem: that people’s lives were governed by a multitude of prohibitions. The poet describes the fates he encounters during his otherworldly journey as examples of sin and punishment, of justice issuing rewards or punishment, all consequences of obeying or defying such prohibitions.

According to Dante, commands involving prohibitions serve as foundations for the moral order not merely in the trivial sense that doing what is prohibited is sinful, but also in a more profound sense: that acts can acquire a moral sense only in a world that is entrenched by prohibitions. Bearing witness to this, the most important passage can be found in Canto XXVI of *Paradise*, where Adam speaks about the original sin and his expulsion from paradise:

“[...] the tasting of the tree was not by itself the cause of so great an exile, but only

the overpassing of the bound.”

(*Paradise*, XXVI. 115-117.)<sup>1</sup>

Adam’s sin is therefore related to the symbolic, rather than the material aspect of his action. The Fall was the result of a prohibition being violated, not merely an action that was bad in itself—the taking of the forbidden fruit.

In major respects, this corresponds to Saint Thomas Aquinas’s conception, according to which in the case of the Fall, it is not the act itself that should be regarded as sinful, since, as he explained, it is no sin at all to desire knowledge and to wish to resemble god with respect to his knowledge. Thomas’s primary emphasis is on the intemperance apparent in performing the act, which consisted in Adam’s wanting to resemble god too much. His sin is that he overstepped a certain boundary, “il trapassar del segno,” as Dante also noted. And this is precisely what pride is,<sup>2</sup> which is the chief sin within the system of *The Divine Comedy*.

The thought that sin’s origins are to be found in the symbolic sphere, can be even more easily discerned from Paul’s words: “but sin, finding occasion, wrought in me through the commandment all manner of coveting: for apart from the law sin *is* dead” (Rom, 7:8). This explanation of the roots of sin contains the legal principle that without law there is no sin, as the apostle elsewhere states explicitly: “but sin is not imputed when there is no law” (Rom, 5:13), “through the commandment sin might become exceeding sinful”. (Rom, 7:13)<sup>3</sup>

In this *Paradise*-episode, the question of the origin of language is also known to arise. Using Adam as his mouthpiece, Dante explicates a new and rather original theory—with respect to both the tradition and his views in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*—according to which language is

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<sup>1</sup> Or, figliuol mio, non il gustar del legno  
Fu per sé la cagion di tanto esilio,  
Ma solamente il trapassar del segno.

English translation: Dante 1952 (1984).

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Aquinas 1952 (1984), II, CLXIII, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations from the American Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

not a gift from god, but Adam's creation. It is no accident that the two themes are interconnected. Just as the first sin was committed by the first man, he was also the one to utter the first words. In other words: the origins of sin and of language are one and the same.

Thus a strong symbolic link exists between sin and language. This is enforced by the fact that when Dante describes Adam's sin, he uses the word "segno", which in his language simultaneously means, among other things, "boundary," "measure," and "sign." Adam therefore crosses the boundary by disregarding the sign and thereby opposing god. He rationalizes the fact that god had placed the tree there as a sign, and had endowed it with a certain significance.

The interconnection between sin and language also crops up in other places that are fundamental to the interpretation of the poem as a whole. One of these is the Odysseus-episode in Canto XXVI of *Hell*. The following brief remarks about the episode should be noted: (1) Odysseus is the poet's alter ego, (2) Odysseus's sin as a *fandi factor* is also a language-related sin, (3) enclosed within a tongue of flames with the underworld, Odysseus's penitence is through or by language, in accordance with the principle of contrapasso (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth), appearing as a flame in front of Dante ("as if it were the tongue that spoke" - *Hell*, XXVI. 85-90.).

This link is so strong that the punishment for those who had committed suicide (*Hell*, XIII) as well as for Nimrod (*Hell* XXXI) also becomes linguistic in nature. In each of these cases, we are justified in talking about a case of "linguistic contrapasso."<sup>4</sup> Those who committed suicide have thrown away life, depriving themselves of the essence of their humanity, and as a result, the most distinctive human characteristic, speech becomes a source of eternal suffering for them. They turn into trees and every one of their words streams forth with blood spurting out from their wounds where their twigs and branches used to be before having been broken off.

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<sup>4</sup> I have already considered this question in Kelemen 1994.

(“Who was thou, who through so many wounds blowest first with blood a woeful speech?” - *Hell*, XIII. 137-138.) Nimrod, who out of excessive pride convinced people to build the tower of Babel, ends up losing his humanity through garbled and nonsensical speech. His punishment excludes him from human communities. (“Let us leave him alone, and not speak in vain; for such is every language to him, as his to others which is known to no one.” - *Hell*, XXXI. 77-81.)

Of course, the figure of Odysseus is endowed with special significance through the fact that we can recognize in him the likeness of the poet. It is obviously no coincidence that in comparison to all other characters in *Hell*, his is the story in which the greatest emphasis is placed on a prohibition being violated, on a boundary being crossed, on the motif of disregarding a sign. Let us remind ourselves of the story’s structure: upon leaving Circe’s island, Odysseus and his remaining companions set off yet again, and after passing the Straits of Gibraltar, where the Pillars of Hercules mark the border of the world, they reach the mountain of Purgatory in the middle of the ocean, at the shore of which they are shipwrecked. The relevant lines are as follows:

I and my companions were old and slow when we came to that narrow strait where  
Hercules set up his bounds, to the end that man should not put out beyond.

Io e ’ compagni eravam vecchi e tardi  
quando venimmo a quella foce stretta  
dov’ Ercole segnó li suoi riguardi  
Acciò che l’uom piú oltre non si metta.

(*Hell*, XXVI. 106-109.)

Immediately after the reference to the Pillars of Hercules, we read Ulysses's famous speech, through which this great master of persuasion convinces his crew to undertake the final journey:

Consider your origin; ye were not made to live as brutes, but pursue virtue and knowledge.

Considerate la vostra semenza:

fatti non foste a viver come bruti,  
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.

(*Hell*, XXVI. 119-121.)

The parallel between Adam and Odysseus already becomes striking at the first glance. Just as the first man attempts to acquire knowledge by plucking the forbidden fruit, the Greek hero is driven by his desire for knowledge to sail past the boundary marked by the Pillars of Hercules. We know all too well how wide the range of possibilities for interpreting the Odysseus-episode is, but fortunately, these bear little connection to the present inquiry. We should, however, make one remark. In the light of the parallel between Adam and Odysseus, and taking into account Thomas's interpretation of the original sin, Odysseus' case, like Adam's, can be regarded as one in which the quest for acquiring knowledge does not in and of itself constitute a sin. Odysseus's sin is not what he describes as "the ardor which I had to become experienced of the world, and of the vices of men, and of their virtue" (*Hell*, XXVI. 97-99.), but rather the fact that he has crossed the boundary (and he did literally do so) and thereby violated the prohibition. For his case, too, the words describing Adam's act are perfectly fitting: „il trapassare del segno." At the level of semantics, this is supported by the

fact that in the line (108.) referring to the border that cannot be crossed, we encounter yet again the semantic content of “sign” and “signal” in connection with various lexemes: „dov’ Ercole segnó li suoi riguardi” (“Segno” appears here as a verb: and “segnò” on the “riguardi” should be understood as a warning inscription, border marking). This way, the literal meaning of the line is as follows: “where Hercules inscribed his sign (inscription).”<sup>5</sup>

We can be certain about the sense attributed to the Pillars of Hercules. They serve to signal more than just a border, they are signs of warning and prohibition as well: they are there so “that man should not put out beyond” (109.) Disregarding the sign is inescapable and the punishment is comparable to that of Adam’s. The punishments received by Odysseus and Adam are structural counterparts of one another, just like their sins are. Odysseus is shipwrecked at the foot of Purgatory, on the top of which is earthly paradise. Meanwhile, Adam was expelled from earthly paradise, losing immortality for him and his descendants (he therefore died in a symbolic sense). Odysseus’s journey is accordingly an attempt at returning to the starting point for humans prior to the expulsion from paradise. This is why it was forbidden to sail past the Pillars of Hercules, and this is why Odysseus’s fate repeats Adam’s: he is effectively expelled from paradise through his ship being wrecked and through being sent to hell.

We have already emphasized that Adam’s and Odysseus’s sins are symbolic, semiotic in nature, if you like: they consist in the two men neglecting the sign. But in Odysseus’s case, the prohibition refers to the crossing of a concrete, spatial boundary—a geographic border in the fully literal sense. In describing this, Dante follows an existing tradition which can provide further help in understanding the Odysseus-episode.

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<sup>5</sup> Witte’s German translation corresponds to this: “Wo Herkules die Zeichen setzte”. Dante 1945. 101. In a work by Brunetto Latini, Dante’s mentor, entitled *Tesoretto*, Hercules is said to have “put there as signals “ (“vi pose per segnale”) “great columns to show people that the earth ends there and terminates”. See Singleton’s commentary of the *Comedy*: Singleton 1989 (*Inferno*, 2.) 1989. 465.

Starting with Strabon, several authors from antiquity and medieval times have written about the Pillars of Hercules,<sup>6</sup> recalling a Hercules-temple decorated by Phoenician columns (not mentioning initially the prohibition for sailing through the straits). Certain Arabic sources<sup>7</sup> also include accounts of a copper statue depicting a man with a long beard enrobed in a golden cloak, turning towards the east, and pointing at the strait behind him with a prohibitive motion of his hand, meaning “no further.” The sources also tell about an inscription on the cliff wall, reading „non plus ultra.” This is the same expression as the one Dante used in line 109: *piú oltre non*.

As always, from the perspective of our present theme as well, we should distinguish between descriptions of the afterworld on the one hand, and those earthly stories about which Dante is informed during his otherworldly encounters. Accounts of the physical location of hell and the purgatory generally include descriptions of their boundaries and the vicissitudes involved in crossing these boundaries. In these cases, the boundaries are not without symbolic meaning, but they still primarily remind us of “geographic” borders, due to the fact that Dante has elaborately worked out the topography of hell and of the purgatory. By contrast, paradise presents a completely different image. Because it is no physical-spatial place, its various circles are not separated by boundaries from each other or from earthly paradise on top of the mountain of Purgatory. From earthly paradise, Dante flies into the skies in an unconscious state, in a single flash: “lightning, flying from its proper site, never ran as thou who art returning thereunto.” (*Paradise*, I. 93.).

Let us examine some types of boundaries in hell and in the purgatory:

Everyone knows that at the semiotically marked boundary separating hell from the world of the living, one must pass through a gate with the inscription (“Through me is the way into the

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Corti gives a detailed account of the various sources from antiquity: Corti 1993. See the sections entitled “Il divieto ovvero la navigazione proibita” (“Prohibition or Prohibited Sailing”) and “Canali di informazione arabo-castigliani (“Castilian-Arabic Information Channels”), 122-124.

woful city [...]”, etc. – *Hell*, III. 1-9.). This, in contrast with the inscription on the Pillars of Hercules, does not serve to *prohibit*, but to *inform*, announcing (along with numerous other signs with a similar function) who are allowed to enter the given area and what they should expect (no hope). It is also a *border marking* sign, just like contemporary signs with scripts like “boundary of Budapest,” “country border,” and many other similar signs.<sup>8</sup> But the gate is not all. The real boundary, in accordance with the classic tradition, is Acheron, whose ferryman, Charon is also a border guard keeping a watchful eye to make sure that only those who are entitled will get into his boat to cross over to the other side. The encounter with him is followed by a sequence of scenes with repetitions of almost ritualistic monotony: each time, the guard recognizes that Dante is one of the living, and prohibits him from entering (“thou who art there, living soul, depart from these that are dead” – *Hell*, III. 89), and Virgil secures permission to carry on through appeal to a higher will:

And my Leader to him: “Charon, vex not thyself; it is thus willed there where is power  
for that which is willed; and ask no more.”

(*Hell*, III. 94-96.)

The same ceremony recurs at the entry into the purgatory. The realm of the purgatory, with an entirely different set of laws, still has a guard: Cato of Utica, the Roman hero who sacrificed his life for freedom. His figure commands respects and is quite the opposite of the mythical and rude Charon’s figure, but is no less strict and vigilant than him. The two travelers have to throw themselves to the ground and Virgil has to give a long speech in order for them to gain admission. The speech is one of several splendid rhetorical feats within the *Divine Comedy*,

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<sup>7</sup> Corti 1993. See the section entitled “Canali di informazione arabo-castigliani” (“Castilian-Arabic Information Channels”), 124-126.

containing every tried and tested element for influencing the audience, ranging from appeal to a higher command to rational explanations and strategically placed mention of *captatio benevolentiae*. A beautiful example of this is the reference to the hero's love of freedom:

Now may it please thee to look graciously upon his coming. He goes seeking liberty,  
which is so dear, as he knows who for it renounces life.

(*Purgatory*, I. 70-74.)

Meanwhile, appealing to the character of the great Roman nobleman is not enough.<sup>9</sup> In the end, Virgil manages to soften the stern guard only by reminding him of his love for his wife Marcia, and promising to convey to her the guard's greetings:

For her love, then, incline thyself to us; allow us to go on through thy seven realms:  
I will report this grace from thee to her [...].

(*Purgatory*, I. 81-83.)

The situation in the purgatory resembles the preliminary events in hell in a further respect: the function of border crossing regulations are twofold. Much like during their journey into the underworld—where Dante and Virgil had to pass through the gates of hell and then had to cross the Acheron in Charon's boat—on the way to the purgatory, they have to request admission from Cato, while the souls awaiting penitence are carried across the sea by the angel of god, the heavenly ferryman, and deposited on the island of purgatory. But this gets us

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<sup>8</sup> In this instance, Dante is following a practice already familiar. In his era, it was common custom to place inscriptions alongside coats-of-arms and other badges on houses and especially on buildings with a sacred function.

<sup>9</sup> I would like to note a loosely related point: perhaps this is an example of Dante's irony and self-irony, since the poet suggests that there are far too many words. For at one point Cato has had enough of the speech: "But if a Lady of Heaven move and direct thee, as thou sayest, there is no need of flatteries". (*Purgatory*, I. 91-92.)

no further than the foot of the mountain yet. In order for the travelers to be admitted into the purgatory itself, they have to cross yet another border and first go through the ceremony—already familiar from previous episodes—of negotiating with the guard. This time around, the guard is an angel with a sword, who etches the *P*'s representing the seven sins onto Dante's forehead (each of which will be erased by an angel upon entering the next circle). Here then the admission ceremony is complemented by *branding*, physically marking the entering individuals.

Perhaps the most paradoxical example of prohibition and exclusion within hell is offered by the city of Dis. The travelers have to sail through the sea of mud in Styx, in order to reach the giant fortress surrounded by a rampart and moat:

We at last arrived within the deep ditches which encompass that disconsolate city.

The walls seemed to me to be of iron.

(*Hell*, VIII. 76-79.)

At the city gates (which recalls the memory of the gates of hell)<sup>10</sup> a siege-like situation develops, but in the opposite sense: here, the demonic inhabitants of the city are the ones who react aggressively towards those requesting entry. The logic of exclusion works in reverse. The travelers wish to enter a place whose gates the angry guards slam in front of the negotiating Virgil („These our adversaries closed the gates on the breast of my Lord, who remained without” – *Hell*, VIII. 115.)—a place that is the city of horrors and a perfect opposite of the noble castle visited in Limbo. This time around the negotiations between the guards and those seeking entry, ends in failure. For despite Virgil encouraging his protégé (“I shall win

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<sup>10</sup> “This their insolence is not new, for of old they used it at a less secret gate, which still is found without a bolt. Above it thou didst see the dead inscription [...]”. (*Hell*, VIII. 124-127.)

the contest, whoever circle round within for the defence” - *Hell*, VIII. 123.), they cannot get past the walls without the help of an angel sent from above.

As we see from the foregoing, hell and purgatory have characteristic natural boundaries: the river and the sea. We should add that several other rivers described in the *Comedy* serve the same function. A nice little brook surrounds the ancient castle in Limbo, where Homer leads Dante and the accompanying poets. Also, Lethe and Eunoë, the two rivers of paradise flowing from the same origin, also serve as borders in a symbolic sense. The travelers reaching the ancient castle, whose idyllic surroundings strikingly resemble our encounter of earthly paradise, is described as follows:

We came to the foot of a noble castle, seven times circled by high walls, defended round about by a fair streamlet. This we passed as if hard ground; through seven gates I entered with these sages; we came to a meadow of fresh verdure.

Venimmo al piè d'un nobile castello,  
 Sette volte cerchiato d'alte mura,  
 Difeso intorno d'un bel fiumicello.  
 Questo passammo come terra dura;  
 Per sette porte in trai con questi savi;  
 Giugnemmo in prato di fresca verdura.

(*Hell*, IV. 106-111.)

We are in an idyllic place, but entry is by no means simple. The nice little brook does not merely surround the castle, but also *protects* it („difeso intorno d'un bel fiumicello”); and even if it were an exaggeration to say that the castle is like a prison, still, it is surrounded by

seven *tall* walls („cerchiato d’alte mura”), with seven gates. Prominent commentaries have it that the castle symbolizes human wisdom; the seven walls, the seven branches of philosophy; the seven gates, the trivium and the quadrivium; the stream, eloquence and experience. Whatever the allegorical meaning of the description might be, the image in front of us depicts a medieval castle surrounded by a wall and a moat, with the inhabitants—sages—living there shut off from the world. And the allegorical meaning is no different: the seven branches of philosophy (physics, metaphysics, ethics, politics, economics, mathematics and dialectics) encircle and protect the castle of knowledge. At this point, too, we are presented with a world in which the interconnections among exclusion, isolation and segregation are expressed in terms of divisions of physical space and various symbolic manifestations of social hierarchy alike. Social space is directly recreated in physical space.

The forked river running through earthly paradise is not a boundary in a literal or physical sense. In one place though (when Matilda appears), the text expressly suggests that the small river constitutes exactly the kind of boundary that the Hellespont is for others:

The stream made us three paces apart; but the Hellespont where Xerxes passed it—still a curb on all human pride—endured not more hatred from Leander for swelling between Sestos and Abydos, than that from me because it did not then open.

*(Purgatory, XXVIII. 70-75.)*

Despite this, the river’s border function is not purely symbolic: it separates the poet’s old and new selves from one another. The water of forgetting (Lethe) frees him of the sin (makes him forget the sin), whilst the water of remembering (Eunoë) enforces virtue (makes him remember it). The poet becomes a new man by crossing the boundary. *Purgatory* is the

cantica of freedom: the story of a traveler who has shrugged off his sins and was *set free*; one who has overstepped the boundary within whose confines he *used to be a prisoner*.

Of the forms and types of discrimination and exclusion which structure the episodes of the *Divine Comedy*, from the theological point of view, the decisive one is, without a doubt, the opposition of Christians and non-Christians. They are separated by the kind of boundary that we have encountered above, and baptism is a gate into another world, just like those gates that Dante had passed through with the help of Virgil. Dante's wording is by no means accidental then when he talks about the gate of faith when introducing the unsinning inhabitants of Limbo:

[...] these did not sin; and though they have merits it suffices not, because they did not have baptism, whis is port of the faith that thou believest.

[...] ei non peccaro; e s'elli hanno mercedi,  
non basta, perché non ebber battesimo,  
ch'è porta de la fede che tu credi.

(*Hell*, IV. 34-36.)

Of course, Dante introduces an innovation at this point as well, theologically, morally and poetically speaking. In Canto XIX of *Paradise*, staggering words appear about the doubt that the exclusion of non-Christians raises weighty questions. Is it just to condemn “a man who is born on the bank of the Indus”, and “no one is there who may tell of Christ”? If “all his wishes and acts are good”, „where is his sin if he does not believe?” (*Paradise*, XIX. 70-78.) Dante's other innovation relative to medieval conceptions of hell consists in his placing on the doorsteps of hell children as well as the greatest representatives of antiquity and Arabic

culture. This is an important and telling compromise, which nevertheless leaves the logic of segregation unaltered: the sages in question are confined to a place fenced off for them, even if that is not hell itself.

The structure apparent in *Paradise*, whose world lacks hierarchic structure entirely, is of course very different from the one previously described. The saved souls are all equally close to god, and are not distributed into assigned spots. That we encounter them in apparently different circles which seem to be lower or higher, is just an allegoric demonstration of the fact that their merits are not equal:

These showed themselves here, not because this sphere is allotted to them, but to afford sign of the celestial grade which is least exalted.”

(*Paradise*, IV. 37-39.)

In contrast with the arrangement within hell, where in accordance with the principle of talion every sin has its own punishment, rewards in paradise are not issued in proportion to merit and everyone partakes in the same happiness. This is the allegoric expression of a kind of utopia that a different era has formulated as follows: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” This is the utopia that invalidates the logic within hell about prohibition, delimitation and exclusion.

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