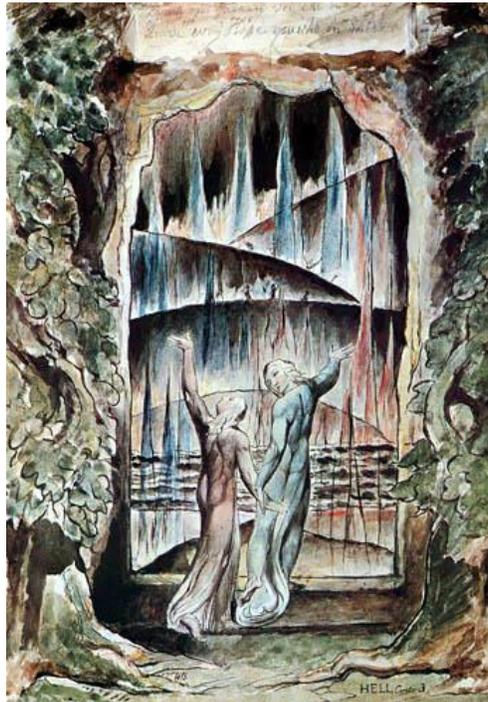


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From Nothing to More Than Nothing



“Legend has it that when he awoke, he sensed that he had received and lost an infinite thing, something he would never be able to recover, or even to descry from afar, because the machine of the world is exceedingly complex for the simplicity of man.”

—Borges

“Enormous beauties round him move,
For grandiose is his vision
And grandiose his love.”

—Auden

What Hell is solipsism? What sleep, what nothingness?

Without reality or *Logos* or Other, the solipsist reasons himself God. He creates his own world, his unreal city—dismissing all the cashiered, beautiful people, “whose world has been rotted by skepticism, and who wish to know how to proceed, when no one offers guidance save those who are mocked for doing so” (Scruton 15). Oh, but “May it come, may it come, / The time we will fall in love with” (Rimbaud 289). And may we, in the journey of our life, come to ourselves, and set forth the good.

No statesman or philosopher or poet or lover is better suited to this task than Dante, though it is through each of these four roles that he succeeds. An adept at the rhetoric of citizenry, and the power of reason, lead by the bardic compulsion “to find words for the inarticulate, driven to capture those” feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them” (Eliot “Dante 38). Following the deferential reevaluation of his work by Romantic and the Victorian writers, Dante—while not a modern *poet*—became a modern favorite, the poet’s poet and poet-philosopher’s idol (Montale 95). Borges calls *Comedia* the apex of all literature—he cries from the page that it will “last beyond our lives, far beyond our waking lives, and will be enriched by each generation of readers” (131, 119). Pound asserts emphatically, as do Eliot and Lowell and Heaney and so on, that, of all the brilliant English-language poets, Shakespeare alone matches Dante (Pound 7).

By reading the *Inferno*, by leaving the dark wood and journeying through Hell, we can outvie our own modern Inferno, can leave error and find the way. Dante the lost, in this the first canticle of *Commedia*, must brave Hell “in order to save himself and to

bring a divine message to mankind” (Montano 211). The divine message is his poetry; and its origin is the flawed human self—whereby the dark wood of error is the very juncture in “our life,” in the tumultuous spiritual wrestling unique to each yet exclusive to none, simultaneously the plight of one and the blight of all (*Inferno*. I. 1-2). If, therefore, Scruton is correct in asserting that “the most important task for philosophy in the modern world, is to resurrect the human person, [and] to rescue it from trivializing science” (56), then *The Inferno* succeeds not only insofar as it operates outside of science, but as it holds at its core “the search to discover what it means to be a human person” (Brand #1). In Dante’s own time, the pursuit was common, it was the method of artists “optimistic about human possibilities, [who] attended enthusiastically to human achievements” and beckoned advancement, not of the individual, but of the whole of man (Flew 153).

To the Florentine poet, though, these two—the individual man and the whole of mankind—must both advance, together. This is clear from the first line of *the Inferno*, where, we learn that the journey is ours, while the moment of awakening his (*Inf*.I.1-2). Dante himself is at once the citizen and all citizenry, the thinker and all thought, the poet and all poetry, the lover and all lovers—he is, as émigré, the guide who holds our hands, ours, who leads us, himself and all selves, as “we the readers are, as readers, pilgrims,” each and all and every (Brand#1). Let’s call this purview Dantean Humanism.¹

¹ Re “humanism”: Though it claims Hellenistic origins, the Greeks were humanistic without ever recording it—they just were. A treatise like Aristotle’s *Ethics*, for example, in which “he describes the ideal citizen,” is *by nature* aligned to the philosophy, just without the lingo (DeWitt 265). Instead, it’s in Latin, with Cicero’s “*humanitas*,” relying upon Greek *thought* (not Gk. *usage*), that “Humanism” originates, where it denoted, on one level, a speaker’s oratory cultivations, and on another, more broadly, the governance of both humanism and humanitarianism as essential to a life’s refinement, through which the “meanings of *homo* and *humanitas* reveal Roman interest in man’s better aspects” (Nybakken 396). Gadamer finds proof of this through Shaftbury’s interpretations of Roman classics, which “reveal [Roman understanding] of a sense of common weal, but also love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness” (Gadamer 22). In Dante’s time, those “crude Middle Ages” with all “their folly and nonsense, of infamous priestcraft, and half brutal, half idiotic chivalry,” the term moved beyond mostly

Dantean Humanism 1: a scholasticism combining patristic ideation with Greek philosophy/Roman literature toward the valuation of a moral urging to the well-being of man, especially with regard to community, love, and God, as expressed in a highly poetic and allegorical form nonetheless meant to be interpreted with the same seriousness as Biblical texts **2**: a meaning of life as intellected from love through the philosophic and moralistic poetry of Dante Alighieri.

“The Human mind,” writes Dante in *the Convivio*, “is divinity” (Montano 212). This statement articulates the dualism much of his poetry elaborately allegorizes. No mere bard, the Florentine intermingles his poetic allegory with a lexicon of philosophic command (Alexander 38). It’s certainly unique, his Humanism, and no doubt a “poetic philosophy,” emphasizing imagination and intuition over concept and reason (Lafferty 1), and its sway is inestimable. Take, for example, Raphael’s *Stanza della segnatura*, fresco-work that transforms the room’s corners into the four pillars of human learning: law, philosophy, poetry and theology (Hartt 521). The three maternal Virtues in *Justice*, the enlivened philosophers of *School of Athens*, the great poets of the *Parnassus*, and the

literary and rhetorical homage to antiquity (Schopenhauer 124), and into a patristic humanism infused with philosophy and theology, coupling the great universal literature in Latin (Anselm, Hildebert, Aquinas) with the nascent “development of a great literature of the vernacular” (McGuire 405). These advancements were further realized in Renaissance Humanism, when the patristic-minded revival of classical studies were paired with an unabashed devotion to art—autonomic loyalty to Religious practice and unfiltered pagan historicity united “in the order of visible achievement” (Walsh 120). Propelled by Hellenistic thought, “the literary humanism of the Renaissance brought philosophy once more down from heaven to earth” (De Witt 265). In Schopenhauer’s words, “devotion to the study of antiquity” is called the *study of humanity* because it is “through it the student above all becomes a *human being* again” (124).

For the most part, the term has consistently described either the philosophic/literary/artistic revival of antiquity or as “a system of thought in which the interests of mankind are the chief concern, and a social system of which mankind shall be the chief beneficiary” (DeWitt 263). Unfortunately, the word “humanism” has recently been adopted by a movement—with Vonnegut as poster child—composed of “those who reject all religious beliefs, insisting that we should be exclusively concerned with human welfare in this, allegedly only world” (Flew 153). With this modernization, the function of existence belongs only to the individual; whose human purpose is to achieve “dignity” and “worth” “through self-realization and the scientific method” (Webster 1100).

holy order of the *Disputa*—all reflecting and embodying one another. Of these four walls, Dante can be found on two: *the Parnassus* and *the Disputa*. But, easily, he could be on all four: Dante of *Justice*, the citizen: history; Dante of *the School of Athens*, the philosopher: heavens and nature; Dante of the *Parnassus*, the poet: language; and Dante of the *Disputa*, the lover: love.

Nothing is our beginning: the infinite Nothingness of Hell, as a symbol of modern skepticism, upon which we will categorically apply Dante's abovementioned four roles as the way from nihilism to Dantean Humanism, each level dependent upon its predecessor, starting with the revival of History, which, by imbuing the present with a confirmed past, awakens Nature, reviving identity and method to restore the fluency of Language, whose constructs alone can express the fullness of Love—into the essence of All, the restoration of humanity: our end is Everything.

It must be noted that these roles are separate only as predominate aspects unified in Dantean Humanism, which is, just as Williams claims of the four allegorical meanings, “always the one Way in four categories” (117). Let us first examine, then, Dante the citizen, Dante of *Justice*, who provides a conception of the human person as devoted to history and duty, keeping in mind the pity of modern devotion to the present and the *derelection* of duty.²

² Because to forget the advancements of human history is to lob off your own big toe; to eschew the spirit of the ancients is to yawn as the vitality “tied to their languages disappears from literary education,” vanishes from mind and future, prompting a meandering selfhood, “for the works of the ancients are the pole star for every artistic or literary effort” (Schopenhauer 124). The poet, writes Elizabeth Browning, “should / Exert a double vision” (1173); must, like Raphael's *School of Athens*, simultaneously “resonate backward and forward in time” (Minor 70). If left unresolved, this progressive retreat from antiquity will continue to enflame “the despair of modern art” and the silence of contemporary living (“Hellas” 72). “Upon all men,” writes Dante in *De Monarchia*, “whom a common humanity has lifted to the love of Truth, and who have been enriched by the labors of the past, there rests, surely, this responsibility of so toiling for the future that posterity may be enriched by them” (1). Because there is no sacrifice to futurity with such a return, it “does not require the overcoming of historical distance by itself,” but, rather, makes the present

According to Dante, the historical purpose must be intellectual in form. Obverse to the modern conception of intellection, however, “it is a purpose which requires the whole multitude of mankind” (Walsh 119), beckoning “the confidence and self-sufficiency of man to know the truth through his own intellectual efforts” (Wilken 35).³ But Hell is an image of the human soul turned upside down, so, discerning what’s best for the multiplicity involves its own inversion (Brand #2). For, just as Hell’s weeping “starless air” is the negation of the Godliness of light, of “le stelle,” Hell is to Paradise as evil is to absolute humanity: The privation of Good (Inf. III. 23), where man must, having reason, “be able to not reason” (Williams 113).⁴ Dante the citizen, therefore, affirms the importance of History by portraying its rebels, those who have lost the good of the intellect, and the cost of such rebellion. So, if we are to begin with Nothingness, where better than Circle 0, the pit of Nothingness?

Truly a wasteland, this non-place seems eerily to be a caricature of the modern landscape. Eliot’s use of the image is frightening enough, notably: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/ I had not thought death had undone so many” (Eliot 31). But more disconcerting, as if Hell is leaking, is how increasingly widespread this phenomenon of crowded, lifeless indifference has become since 1922, so that such abject neutrality is not merely intuited, but observable, as with, say, The Occupy Movement, an anarchic collective of people, who could, in my opinion be characterized using Dante’s

forever accessible, timeless, where “this timelessness is a mode of historical being” (Gadamer 290). To be effective, therefore, a society must imbue itself with the very thing skepticism seeks to eradicate: antiquity.

³ Consider Rimbaud’s view of modernity as in the throes of a struggle to *possess truth in body and soul*—a spiritual battle “as brutal as a battle of men” (Rimbaud 303).

⁴ The methodically categorized structure of Hell, and the specific purpose of each of its levels, delineates the function of human duty by negation. Within each of Virgil’s staid descriptions of the hierarchy of the inferno, for example, are interspersed disgust and rebuke—which, despite the odious nature of the sin, venerate the thing that is tarnished by the sin. In describing the punishment reserved for fraud unique to abused trust, for example, Virgil is, by condemning the act; exalting the “special kind of trust” such an act destroys (Inf.XI.63).

own words—i.e. their being a scattershot gathering of un-likeminded sloganeers claiming a political movement, who are “not rebellious and not faithful,” whose blindness “is so abject/ that they are envious of every other lot,” simultaneously too high-minded to choose and too low-willed to leave the square for pizza, “without disgrace yet without praise,” celebrating the empty pursuit of each Hayman fallacy, as “Mercy and justice hold them in contempt,” reduced to contradictory slogans and confusing rhetoric, chasing a “whirling banner” that can never be caught, disdainful of rules and unsatisfied with order, the living march of Kafkaesque Nothingness (*Inf.* III. 38, 47-8, 36, 50, 52) As Aurelius noted centuries earlier, “nothing is more pathetic than people who run around in circles” (Aurelius 18). Because a man ought stand for something, ought to recall some past. And it ought to be a collective past, “For when the power of thought / is coupled with ill will and naked force /there is no refuge from it for mankind” (*Inf.* XXXI.55-57). By punishing the Neutrals’ rebellion of History, therefore, Dante illuminates what it is about History that merits dutiful citizenship. Part of this allegory uses the empty “Whirling banner” to direct our attention to the meaning of a flag (*Inf.*III.52). A flag is an object emblematic “of allegiance and of loyalty,” of individuality through solidarity, given to the whole idea of surrendering your autonomy in order to achieve a more satisfying autonomy, and, most important, “a flag has to stand for something” (Brand #3).

Stated in the positive, Dantean Humanism posits that, in order to experience meaningful living (Nature), a person must seek and honor a human citizenship instilled with a timeline that follows and precedes itself, able to consider, if but a little, life itself as “some work humanity as a whole [can] pursue and achieve” (Walsh 119). Specifically, it is one of intellectual pursuits, particularly those of classical thought; with which, by

deduction, the collective pasts can all merge, so that “[o]ur historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard,” and by that multivocality alone can such “voices exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part” (Gadamer 285). Further, Auerbach describes Dante’s historicity as comprising an eternal gridwork of patterned events both happened and yet hatched, capable of moving not only forward but downward and up, a versified divination (Auerbach 194). Just as Brunetto taught Dante that “man makes himself immortal” through art alone (Inf. XV. 85), man, knowing this, if only by intuition, turns to the realm of imagination, the sphere and scope of creation, to celebrate humanity, aware that “we are made for art, we are made for memory, we are made for poetry, or perhaps made for oblivion,” yet, despite such human temporality, “something remains, and that something is history or poetry” (Borges “Comedy” 121). Fueled by his “drive to understand everything, to leave nothing out,” Dante crafted a philosophy⁵ of poetic history based on the Hellenistic precepts (Brand #4); a study of goodness inspired by the Greeks, a striving for human perfection modeled on the Romans.

Thus we move from Dante of *Justice* to Dante of *School of Athens*, Dante as philosopher, who, as Lafferty claims, “of all the philosophers of the Middle Ages [was]

⁵ Like Aquinas, Dante would look to Aristotle for guidance, which is unremarkable during an era in which Aristotle was simply referred to as “The Philosopher”—what is remarkable is his knowledge of “much of Aristotle’s oeuvre ... (directly or indirectly) and how intimately he knew it” (Most 22). Ubiquitous within his poetry, for example, is the Aristotelian idea that visually perceived objects “may be made actual in language only through the imitation of sight” (Tate 256). Or the his use of the hierarchy of being as described in *De Anima*, in which man “incorporates the main features of the other levels of being, both higher and lower, so that he is quite literally to the medieval imagination a microcosm of the universe, reflecting the totality of its essence,” an idea central to the system of meaning Dante applies to Hell (Lansing 74). This mind for classical philosophy is particularly interesting to us because it provides view to a time in which an intellectual movement refashioned Ancient philosophy as a means of improving a culture, a time, too, barely preceding the point where modern skepticism diverged, determined to invalidate the “predominant mode of philosophical enquiry” that had held sway from Plato to the mid-nineteenth century, thereby rejecting the quest “for some absolute truth and ultimate good” (Marcus xvi).

the most personal” (Lafferty 3). But more, his Humanism signals the unification of classical thought and Christianity, as made concrete in the *Inferno*.⁶ Dante the philosopher is as clearly and equally divided into two halves as is *the School of Athens* itself. The first portion of Dante’s philosophic role concerns his spiritual objectives, which—though largely Aristotelian—resemble the Platonic half of Raphael’s fresco, where our eyes are lead upward, to Heaven as the endless float of an indestructible float: this is Dante the theologian. The second portion of his role as philosopher expresses his philosophic naturalism, and parallels the mathematic and literal half of *Athens*, where our minds turn inward and our aims tangible, to earth and Hell as the folly, a machine with clock-engines: this Dante the pilgrim, nature.⁷

Just as Aquinas determined to understand Theology through Philosophy, to intellect God through reason, the ambition of Dante was to write allegorical poetry answerable to the allegory of the theologians, whereby “we are to read his poetry as if it

⁶ This fundamental accord is forgotten in the contemporary affection for the *Inferno* independent of the other two canticles, which has lead to the *Commedia* being often erroneously considered by the modern reader as foremost a literary advancement, whereas, as McGuire contends, it is instead “typically mediaeval in its emphasis on philosophical and theological problems, on reason and Revelation, on man and human nature not merely in themselves but in relation to God their Creator and Preserver”—in actuality, he continues, Dante himself favored *Paradiso* (McGuire 407). While it would be ludicrous to entirely reduce the poem to such a purpose, perhaps it is better for the moment to think of the *Inferno* as a literary “map of medieval spirituality” (“Dante’s *Inferno*”), emphasizing in particular the characteristically patristic divide in his philosophy between classical (pagan) thought and theology.

⁷ Modern life erroneously eschews the former in blind pursuit of the latter, claiming as a philosophic (as opposed to literary) jumping-off point St. Augustine, insofar as his ideas concerning memory and interiority became premises for Descartes’ “Cogito.” Dante blames, among others, Epicureanism, “that is the most foolish, vile and persistent which holds that there is no life after this one” (Gallagher 25). From the Enlightenment followed Empiricism, which strives to vitiate *a priority*, hurling essence but keeping what was left of “existence,” booting God from throne and man from progeny, reducing spiritual truths to magical fancy, error and folly, with sarcasm its language and cynicism its mien—heart riven, nature shorn: left to a Cartesian impotence. The rest is silence. In the classical approach, conversely, doubt leads to virtue, virtue leads to excellence; and excellence leads to a fuller Being, a totality. Classical philosophy, unlike our modern Weltschmerz, willingly trusts in this humanist’s balance. Most impressive—and true testament to their values—“the great achievements in the human sciences almost never become outdated” (Gadamer 285). With this classical approach as his foundation, Dante established great accord between Greek thought and Christianity, often citing “Aristotle and the Bible in conjunction with one another as equally authoritative witnesses” (Most 22).

were revelation, scripture” (Brand #4). He used “the theology of his time” to blend Thomas Aquinas’s strict observance of Aristotelianism with the boundless and celestial realm of art, whereby art would exalt Love, Divinity while cultivating a Roman intellect and Greek awareness (Lafferty 3).⁸

This function of Dantean Humanism appears everywhere, right down to Dante’s use of Virgil—Roman, venerated, classical—who despite his status among those of the Middle Ages as an “unconscious prophet of Christianity” is confined to limbo, summoned by Divine order to lead Dante toward a Heaven that he himself, a pagan, cannot know (Sayers 67). Virgil can, however, as Dante’s “teacher and author,” show us “nature at its best,” can reveal the world of Art, Poetry, and Love through the lens of philosophy (Brand #2). Through *Maro*, which, as Gallagher notes, is not only Virgil’s family name but one third of a thematic anagram (Maro, Roma, Amor), we can understand better the theme of “nature and natural grace as embodied in Virgil” (8).

The pilgrim, and the terrors he survives, represents what man can fall to and what man can withstand. This is Dante, philosopher, of grit and nature. Just as “nature of any kind thrives on forward progress” (Aurelius 90), Dante’s failures are those “as fallen

⁸ The brickwork here is as much a part of Dante’s art as his words are; because, as de Rougemont observes, Dante is “never more passionate than when Philosophy is the theme of his song” and Piety its rejoinder (178). The *Inferno*, it follows, is at once an ode to Divinity and “a treasure house of classical learning” (“Dante’s *Inferno*”). Hell itself, for instance, while fully Christian, not only contains Greeks and Romans, but also utilizes their practices, honors their mythologies and heroes, lauds their monsters and defeats and lost valor. Here contains the earth and the heavens, the gods and the Trinity. Broadly speaking, while Ancient theory singly involves the “simplicity and grandeur” (Minor 88), Christianity and classical culture, when fused together, form an ideology that “focuses on the great issues of philosophy” (Wilken 35).

As an art form, it “contain[s] both a humanistic celebration of intellection and an idealistic canonization of human form,” (King 76). As a theological doctrine, it espouses classical ideas concerning “the human form and the human mind [which the Greeks] attained to a perfection” as a means of better understanding the Divine (“Hellas” 72). It is as belletristic as it is rational, as spiritual as it is philosophic, as symbolic as it is real, composed of myriad interlocking gears: always moving toward light; always treading upon the moment; an assemblage of Christian life and “rational Hellenic culture (Marcus 11). From this, he postulates “the truth of Revelation and the truth of natural reason are one and the same” (Most 22).

man in Experience, dominated by his Selfhood and temporarily separated from Beatrice, his Emanation” (Baine 114).⁹

Throughout Hell, the pilgrim must reconcile darkness with light—as if glimpsing his reflection across a filmstrip negative, a warped image that abstracts both the privation of mankind and the dynamism of mankind; whether the vale of death in the dark wood of human error or the vault above of hope in burnished spectral mirrors.

“Where man is not,” writes Blake “nature is barren” (35). Because, as Virgil observes “nature takes her course / from heavenly intellect and its operation . . . [and] human toil . . . follows nature, as the pupil does his master” (*Inf.* XI. 97-104). It’s obvious, then, that there is a no more barren place than Hell. That gruesome fetid “panoply of horror,” that gashing roil of blistering earth far beneath us boiling; the volcanic innards of puked feverish slobber—dark, darker than any abyss: the kingdom of barren Nothing (“Dante’s Inferno”).¹⁰ Dante, upon seeing the impoverished hellscape, proclaims “O vengeance of God, how much / should you be feared by all who read / what now I saw revealed” (*Inf.* XIV. 16-18).

If this underworld is so like our own and the pilgrim so like us, what can the “abode of pain” tell us of humanity? (*Inf.* V. 16). Because there’s something viciously human present; as if Hell’s blackened haunts and revenant shades, its ossified husks of unaccomplished life, who robbed the flesh “from their own souls,” will somehow remain

⁹ So too, as Hopkins, in “Spring and Fall,” reveals to us that Margaret weeps not for fallen autumn leaves but “the blight man was born for, / It is Margaret you mourn for,” Dante’s awareness of the lostness of man is really the lostness of Dante (Hopkins 152). Yet, confronted with the “image of the deepening possibilities of evil within the soul,” the pilgrim must fight for humanity all the more (Sayers 68). The pilgrim is most redolent of our modern struggle, against the isolation, the degradation, and “the cruelty of a society torn apart by pride and self-love” (“Introducing” 7).

¹⁰ Elsewhere Goethe’s own Lucifer refers to Nature as “The thing opposed to Nothingness, / This stupid earth, this Somethingness, / For all that I have undertaken, / Against it, still remains unshaken” (59). This is evil’s task: “to scorn nature and her bounty,” which is violence against God (*Inf.* XI. 48), so that the damned are “the perverters of the images of earth” (Williams 137).

human, will merely remain human at its ugliest—forever mephitic, purulent —dragging on, as answerless as before, confined to an underworld bereft of nature, blemished like deathly miners: marred and blackened and ruined by soot (Inf. XIII. 105). The further Dante slants down the darksome blear, “occurrence, events and even transformations” bustle as in a night-held city, populated by writhing ghouls who seem to preserve the “freedom to speak and gesture and even to move about within limits . . . within their changelessness, a limited freedom of change” (Auerbach 197). Disembodied, bent or stung or boiled, headless and misshapen, the damned are strung empty, of their own volition, kept where “the soul reduces itself by a stubborn determination to evil” (Sayers 68). Each disfigured shade furthers the pilgrims’ knowledge to “the true nature of sin [that] is necessary for his ascent,” each a lesson of the reality before him, a credit to Menos’ caution in Canto V to “beware how you come in and whom you trust,” as it reveals itself more steadily through the mutilated souls, who wraithlike hound him (Leithart 86). Still, though, the damned remain somehow in possession of the earthly lives they were shorn of, each a result of histories that rambles on, singed by a past they chose for eternity, so that “the impression they produce is not that they are dead—though that is what they are—but alive” (Auerbach 191).¹¹

The image of pilgrim is perhaps best mirrored by Ulysses.¹² Once the cunning wrecker of cities, our famed Greek journeyman is now hid behind paltry burn, “like a

¹¹ At times, even, it’s as if they’re more alive. We see this expressly in Canto XIV with Capaneus’ disdainful proclamation: “What I was in life, I am in death.” As the sole living presence, gravitating ever-downward, Dante variously quivers and faints and hollers and weeps beneath the sight of these reflected misshapes, forced to look to his reflection.

¹² This encounter is nearly selfsame in personality, conduct, meaning and to Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses”—the rhetoric, too, is similar—so that it’s easy to imagine his meeting with the tension and release of Tennyson himself glaring into a mirror in search of the lost Arthur Hallam, a wearied sojourner who nonetheless must admit to his own quixotic power: “I am become a name; / For always roaming with a hungry heart / Much have I seen and known; cities of men / And

flame that is worried by the wind” (*Inf.XXVI.87*), fallen as tread upon and wasted, downright threadbare as he announces that his want was “to gain experience of the world / and learn about man’s vices, and his worth,” an exhaustive triumph in self-glorification, an ignorant procedural venture toward pity (*Inf.XXVI.97-9*). Dante’s voyage, on the other hand, is a divinely-ordained lesson, “a training in submission to the will of God, a training in piety” (Leithart 97). Dante’s journey began with his nearly “drowning”; Odysseus’ ends with sunken ship. The striking unity between the two men is as baffling as the blaring discord, where somehow they are both the same man and the other’s inverse—they are like warped mirrors in varying grey-to-white mismatch, redoubling then furling, winding then ceasing to wind.

Dante brings historicity “into his beyond,” whereby the damned display, as part of their sentence, an unwavering obsession with their life on earth, almost as if was merely a precursor to their true life, their endless stint in Hell, like a man only functional in a penitentiary, they fain would be crowned with feces than kneel to a presence greater than themselves (Auerbach 193). Hence their fixation on fame, examples of which traverse the entire poem, from the rot and stilt of pride, spread across Hell, atop “the grimly familiar landscape of most human desire and action” (Warren 334). But this hellscape is only the mirage of those two things—where, since sin involves the egotistic rebellion, the deification of self, the turning away from God and one’s neighbor and into oneself,” any familiarity is the warped discard of lostness (Brand # 6). Because, each has ceded his

manners, climates, councils, governments, / Myself not least, but honor’d of them all” (82). Tennyson, we know, resolves his pilgrim’s role, as Nature’s red tooth and claw vanish into the assurance that Hallam his lives in God; Ulysses’, however, is not spared: his “heroic lust for adventure ends” at the very place Dante’s redemptive “pilgrimage of faith begins” (Leithart 97). One of the figures is deferentially lead to “pursue virtue and knowledge,” guided to it as like to a star; the other disembarked with bombast reciting words bereft of truth, and will be forever pointing to the starless mire with feigned direction (*Inf.XXVI.120*).

human caprice, has already come to himself, in vain, and, after a lifetime of following the crooked way, is firmly embedded on (or into) the right path, “the path which reveals what was decisive in the individual’s life” (Auerbach 197).

It is important to clarify that, while there *are* great souls in Hell, they derive from tenderness in “the work of human frailty,” prompting an emotionally-charged affection, or pity, that is more a husk of such greatness, a symbol, pointing beyond itself to true Good (*ibid.* 202). Meanwhile the immediate reality confronting us is that of hunkered gibbous shadows, stung by the viperous darks, who crawl the ice-fangled nothingness. Denized by wretched stench and mottled with scars, containing neither hope nor human, the city of woe, of eternal pain, alone can claim nothingness, its inviolable desolation the only possible nullity (*Inf.III.1-9*). This coward-spangled underworld is devastating to our protagonist. Through him, Hell becomes mere carrion comfort, a platform for fear and despair and longing, so that each character’s unique damnation “heighten[s] the effect of these completely earthly emotions” (*ibid.* 200). Jilted glades of caustic silence collapse onto each corrupted husk decaying—no hope, none remaining—deafened by “[t]he hellish squall which never rests” (*Inf.V.31*).

So, despite any appearances, Hell is the nothingness of man, the spoil of nature, and the utter perversion and privation (negation) of God, “the city of man’s depravity” (Brand #2). A great example appears at line 81 of Canto XV, wherein conversation regarding the damnation of Brunetto Latini reveals that the damned are not only “banished from mankind,” but also expelled from *human nature*, foresworn by nature itself, so that even Brunetto, the man “closest to Beatrice’s shape,” is, being damned, emptied of his nature (Williams 150). Elsewhere, soul-containing thorned knots of black

gnarled wood horrifyingly portray the lack of nature remaining in the hell-confined, those who were once men “that are now turned to thorns,” as the broken thorny branches “splinter oozed / blood and words together” (*Inf.* XIII. 90-102, 37, 43-44). These scenes are likely what grimaced through Michelangelo’s mind as he, an admirer of the *Inferno*, painted the *Last Judgment*, which itself brings the characters and punishments of Hell into a vivid and lashing fore, with undulant and visceral gnawing (Hartt 651). As Dante descends farther, any human resemblance melts and the damned steadily pass “beyond anything that can be humanly understood” (Williams 137), with each drop lower, “we find the damned less and less able to exercise control over their bodily movements,” this paralysis, reckons Anderson, is a “physical analogue of the decay of mental control” (17-18). In these passages, we again see Aristotle’s hierarchy of being at work, so that “the man who flings off his body does not thereby escape from existence, but simply dooms himself to a lower form of life, is degraded from the animal to the vegetable” (Lansing 76). Elsewhere, Man and Nature collide on the wasteland of Crete, its mount Ida “once glad / with leaves and streams” has become “barren like a thing outworn,” a doleful caution of man’s ignominy (*Inf.* XIV. 95-99); but more—Virgil’s mythic account holds tells the story of man, woe begotten, cracked, descending, with “Hell as the inevitable outcome of human history, of human nature, of the human expulsion from Eden” (Brand # 6). Hegel’s description of the three realm’s inhabitants as leading a “changeless existence.” But Hell, in particular, is the worst, utter stagnation, where “the consciousness of *Never* is itself never lightened” (Williams 114).

But while Hell itself contains no nature or humanity, Dante’s presence—which repeatedly irks and startles the damned—signals an act of sacrifice so powerful that, by

accepting his submersion into absolute darkness, he enacts the absoluteness of man's capabilities. By rappelling down its null-dark hinges and re-emerging, he puts light to all that darkness. More important, Hell is not the "blind world" because its prisoners have chosen *blindness*, but because they've chosen against the world of hope and the world Divine, where sight resounds with beauty, with each pouring hue, each an ever-cascade of resplendent glow, a festival of colors (*Inf.IV.13*). If it is "mute of all light" (*Inf.V.28*), it is because we are to remember that, as a gift, "light speaks to us, sings" (Brand #3). In this way, Dante invalidates the power of Hell by surviving it. Despite this feat, however, Dante the pilgrim is not perfect. Nor is he perfect as Philosopher or Citizen. These roles can only be thought of as attributes of, experiences in, iterations from, or predecessors to man's Perfection, which must occur within the soul, as understood through the Dantean Humanist use of the "Greek philosophical predisposition for seeking absolute order in nature" alongside the predisposition for seeking absolute order in man (Marcus 6). Recall that the only two renderings of Dante that Raphael put into paint are Dante of the *Parnassus* and Dante of the *Disputa*. Perhaps because in these two alone—as love poet and as Godly lover—he is perfect. A unification of the world demands that we first "unify the poetic imagination of the world," becoming acquainted with Wordsworth called "the amplitude of the mind" (Williams 108).

But he, specifically in the case of poet, is only perfect when the role propels him beyond himself, into the image embodying a thing of perfection. Neither Poetry nor the human Poet writing it, *in and of itself*, is flawless, and not exactly "spiritual," insofar as it tends to imbibe "the nature of those visions and locutions from which the wise are warned to be detached," but, rather, Dante as poet is as flawless as the unique and infinite

power of his words are able to actualize Divine Love through the otherworldliness of Language—perfect only when his words lead to the *Logos* (*ibid.* 111). As a pilgrim, he can but follow the way and travails of a “fallen man in Experience, dominated by his Selfhood and temporarily separated from Beatrice, his Emanation” (Baine 114); as a philosopher he remains but “an astonishingly great and profound man of religion,” who lauded morality and sought the divine (Montano 212). As poet, he is the creator and perfection of both. If the pilgrim faints at the fault of his senses, the poet, in his perfection, is made the honorary sixth among the greatest poets ever. Yet he, the perfect poet is, unlike them, still alive, still burning with the scrupulous words and tireless song, the dotting scribbler in *La Vita Nuova* who tells us that bliss alone lies in “those words that praise [Beatrice]” (*Vita* 34). Before, the pilgrim belonged to Virgil, and held like lantern in thicket the near perfection of “reason without revelation, nature at its best, but nature without the fullness of Grace,” yet, just as the human person must reestablish classical duty to History in order to deduce the realities of human Nature—invisible or concrete—before he can know the perfections of Language, toward the fullness of Love, Virgil is a lesser being. Nonetheless, he guides Dante through some of the poem’s most difficult lessons and most important motifs: “the character of love and choice, the role of self-deception, and the nature of justice,” but also, notably, the way language forms life (Yearley 142). And unless grace comes to him “not *from* language ... but *through* language,” he’ll remain a wanderer on the page, never a poet (Warren 336). But more important, Dante cleverly finds a way to remain the pilgrim while still honoring the perfection of his verse—by conversing with the reader.

Because Language, man's truest art, the soul's voice and partner, is meant to be communicative and inviting, not, as it has become, ceaselessly expressive, depthlessly private. Because to converse is to channel a boundless current through mind and mouth, wherein you are simultaneously a part of "the anticipation of conversation with others and the introduction" of those others into the infinite inner dialogue of the soul with itself (Gadamer 547). In Hell, this dialogue is emptied of meaning, made valueless, conniving; and in its place reigns the *perversion* of language, that ruse which hissed the surreptitious words so sweetly to Eve, the leaden echo "we have made of the Word that was in the beginning, and was with God, and was God" (Warren 334). As Dante engages Hell's victims, it becomes clear that, being damned, they can now speak no other but the dialect of ruined word. Of course, it's important to remember that "[o]ur sources may be both dammed and damned, but we must acknowledge the derivation"—though perhaps more important to remember Minos's portent (Williams 151).

But the Word is ruined in more ways than by dishonesty. At its most extreme, the privation of the Word results in nonsense. Only in Hell could a derelict language truly exist, there alone can absence take position. Nonsense language appears several times, in the first line of Canto VII, then later, with Nimrod, whose vile plan rid the world of his tongue, which he alone knows, and belches and belligerently roars. This idea of a private/nonsense language is elemental to the Cartesian notion that each personhood is private, etc., and it is through this linguistic implausibility that Wittgenstein has, in the minds of many, invalidated Descartes' claims, arguing that "no language can refer to a sphere of merely private things," since every language, "even one that I invent for myself, must be such that others can learn it too" (Scruton 48). Because language is not,

as Descartes supposed, ours to create; nor is it our to excise. Yet these deprivations are the perfections of Dante the poet, whose “beautifully definite” language Pound considers the artistry behind an elevated-style capable of drawing poetry from sinew, from morass or trumpeted asshole, by “integrating what’s characteristically individual,” even the filth and stench of Hell, with that Divine judgment which “transcends the ultimate limits of our earthly conception of the sublime,” better yet, the elevated-style persists no matter how “vulgar, grotesque, horrible or sneering” (Auerbach 194, 199). He, for this task, developed a *lowly* style, which gave voice to his characters with “the directness of his language, [which], as with his images of natural observation, comes straight from the Italian of the streets and the countryside” (Anderson 387). Dante’s familiarity with Latin and his mastery of that style, “as his Latin treatises and letters bear witness,” only furthers his triumph in composing *The Commedia*, “the greatest, most mature, and most characteristic literary achievement of the Christian humanism of the Middle Ages” not in Latin, but in Italian (McGuire 407). Dante’s approach here, using Latin as the undergirding for Italian, is vital to what Schopenhauer refers to as “the use of languages for learned investigation” (124). Moreover, when this process of linguistic scrutiny is put onto paper, the Word is no longer “a fragment of the past world,” but rather a transmigration of boundless instants, so that “[t]he ideality of the word is what raises everything linguistic beyond the finitude and transience that characterize other remnants of past existence” (Gadamer 392). Though it *is* possible, as Auerbach observes, to produce a genealogy of Dante’s influencers, “his sources are so numerous, his ears hear them, his intellect uses them, so accurately, so simply, and yet so originally,” that any such charting-out would merely add to the impressive prowess of the poet’s unique style,

exchanging linguistic impenetrability for an ethereally formidable latticework (Auerbach 183). Within *the Inferno*, language is actualized by “doubling the image: our confidence in its spatial reality is won quite simply by casting the image upon a glass, or otherwise by the insinuation of space between” (Tate 256). With his use of allegorical language proffered as itself a reality, all things have meaning (Ginsburg 493).

Dante’s verse uses this this pliability as a creative force “to produce an almost painfully immediate impression of the earthly reality of human beings” (Auerbach 199). Spotted with clever incompleteness, “gaps and holes made for imagination, the economy of Dante’s storytelling” demands of its reader a level of moral appraisal, demands the completion of its tiny deviations, a kind of verbal “Rorschach blot” (Brand #4). As such, one of the *Inferno*’s greatest merits is its buoyant dialogue—the conversations which occur: whether agreeable or poignant or enraged or enchanted, each is replete with curiosity and attention, with Dante’s penetrative and innovatory ability to “open the panorama of the common and multiplex world of human reality” (Auerbach 220). Undeniably “an acute study of human psychology, ”from the atomic level to the universal, the poem achieves an ontological scope that extends and narrows, shrinks and expands (“Dante’s Inferno”). This process is mediated by language.

Borges describes Dante’s ability to unfasten the central moment, the flash or glimpse that —contrary to the modern exhaustive approach—defines, in that moment, the personhood of the soul being peeked at; the poet is here “presenting a moment as a cipher of a life,” awarding them a fame no spoken word could stand by, so that they “live in a word, in a gesture,” the ghoul or the starlight that resounds from the blotted pallor (Borges, “Comedy” 126). Lowell holds Dante’s particular genius as a writer of epic

literature to be that “his chief characters are not heroically enlarged, but life-sized” (Lowell 180). Dante adds further dimensions to this transmigration of language by creating a poetry that initiates a dialogue with its reader. As equally a search within—past stern interiority—as it is a reformation of humanity or a labor to the saints, the ever-shifting voice and span and reach and sweep all meld into a purview so complex it becomes itself truly human.

Dante begins this conversation with the poem’s first two lines, but periodically approaches us with his unabashed yet offhanded breaking of the fourth wall—Dante, as narrator, “in a tone of intense and dignified comradeship” stops what he’s doing to look us in the eyes and say, “Now, reader, you shall hear strange sport” (Gallagher 23, *Inf.XXII.118*). Mostly, he directly addresses us when recalling scenes or sights of abject chaos or unnerving danger. But the notable magic to this approach is the fluidity with which he maintains the chat throughout the poem, at times casual enough for us, the more we read, to confuse the actual narrative as part of our conversation, so that the entire canticle becomes an active exchange, with the reader but two paces behind Virgil.

Also, there’s his proclivity to eloquently pronounce himself as “at a loss for words.” His ability to express his “wordlessness” as well as the circumstances which cause it make the writing all that more believable because it involves the reader, who is forced to imagine all the prickly details, as when, after painfully navigating down the vortices to finally arrive at the last circle, after building suspense for thirty-odd Cantos, he balks: “reader, do not ask, for I do not write it / since any words would fail to be enough” (*Inf.XXXIV.23-4*). By emphasizing such unspeakable authenticity, Dante’s failings rush to the fore of the scene, all the more vivid in the imagination they demand,

snared as concealed as Vulcan's web beneath the War and Love of man (Ovid 87). As Narrator, Dante is "one of the characters," so that, amid the fervor and chaos, we feel his terror, sense the incompleteness of his demanding task, and—most of all—believe that what he's recounting is undeniably true (Borges "Comedy 124). A slight variation of the fourth wall technique, here more playful yet indirect, are the two instances in the poem when Dante includes the word "Comedy." In both occurrences the usage is self-referential; the first time, it sort hides behind the frantic, "I swear to you, reader" shtick that concludes Canto XVI, whereas the second practically starts Canto XXI, more cryptic, yet while also seeming jocular to the hilt. Either example evinces what Pound refers to as Dante's "points of pure sound," the mastery is in his fitting the inarticulate sound of a passage to the mood or the quality of voice which expresses that mood or passion" (10). Eliot finds in Dante an advising comfort, a mastery which teaches the reader "that the poet should be the servant of his language, rather than the master of it" ("Dante" 36). In this sense, we see of Dante a rare process Eliot describes as the poet's submissive determination to "give body to the soul of the language" (*ibid.* 37). If, then, "man makes himself immortal" through art alone (*Inf.* XV. 85), Dante's immortality lives within the divine message of his poetry, its voice and his language. His divine message will endlessly continue, so that "[a]t every moment the reader ... retains the possibility of free movement back to himself, and thus is at once both here and there" (Gadamer 392).

Yet the alchemy of the Word is paltry without Love. Moreover, it must be the transcendental Love in store, for "a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for" (Browning 346). Recall the image of Dante in the *Disputá*, crowned by light and environed by saints. The soft glimmer of the aged paint, burnished regal like our

poet, damson-shouldered amid the assemblage holy men, forehead curtailed by cap, festooned by the lambent pour of light from the saints above him displaying all the clemency and pity which divine painting can demonstrate to mortal man” a dear bloomed crown of Divinity, taken into the vibrance patient violets, where dappled illuminants are their draperies and stricken are their jowls (Vasari). Dante the lover, the saintly figure of Love, is perfect, above even Heaven. His Divine message remains, poetry that contains a theological complexity devoted “to human *amore*, to the possibility that the beloved might actually become the way to God” (Hawkins *xvii*). As when Beatrice, moved by a Divine Love “that mirrors Christ’s own humiliation,” leaves Paradise to rouse Virgil into the Dark Wood so that he can save Dante (Leithart 90).

Beyond this, there’s a certain difficulty to the process of defining Love’s function within the *Inferno*, a poem focused on the “perversion of images,” a poem replete with obscurations of the intellect—that vitality crucial, in Dante’s mind, to the understanding of Love—and the decisive supplanting of reason for sensible craving (Williams 134). Francesca comes to mind while reading Céline’s quip that “Love is harder to give up than life” (59). It’s a culpable lure, a coquettish eroticization that entices the imagination with appeal of evil, with “chivalric romance or courtly love poetry [as] particularly seductive” (Leithart 89), but more important, we must remember that, for a time, Dante “employed for himself the language ... employed by or about Francesca” (Barolini 42). Viewed as such, Love becomes, as Céline elsewhere quips, “the infinite placed within reach of poodles” (4), which can be reduced to signify in this instance that “a treatment of lust need have little or nothing to do with a discourse of desire” insofar as its presence can be seen as sheepish, respectful even (and most certainly proud), wherein “the lustful do not

perform a degraded act of love for the pilgrim and his guide” but tell a story, however deceitful, that completely avoids anything but love—yes, lower case (*ibid.* 31, 33). The point of such romanticization, then, is to “oblige the reader to deromanticize and to learn that what is called love may not always be love” (*ibid.* 42).

As such, Dantean Humanism actuates Love in such a way that it is not merely a continuation of the above tenets (History, Philosophy, Language) or an obvious necessity, but also an ever-present challenge, a cause for reflection, a search for reality—intensified by the equivocality inherent to its own contentious dichotomy, which contains, on one hand, an “immediate and admiring sympathy with man, the principle, rooted in divine order, of the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man” and, on the other, a Divine order that somewhat forbids, and perhaps disproves, the effect such a devotion to man has on one’s piety—that, in doing so, “[t]he image of man eclipses the image of God” (Auerbach 202). But, as Borges argues, this way of occasionally disagreeing with Divine judgment, rather than a kind of blasphemy, produces in him a correct humanity, whereby, unlike the modern solipsist, he doesn’t deify himself, but, conversely, humbles himself so that he “must accept the evil of the world, [just as] he must worship a God he does not understand” (Borges 130). And what does this have to do with Dantean Humanism-qua-Love? Well, just as is the case in nearly all aspects of this philosophy, Love involves a balancing of humanity and Divinity; it is simultaneously “the history of man’s inner life and unfolding” and “a constant reduplication and emanation of the active love of God” (Auerbach 202, 194). But it’s more complicated still—consider Rilke’s plead: “Shouldn’t these ancient / sufferings of ours / finally start to bear fruit?” (33). In it, he voices not hopelessness but weariness deriving from hope,

from the pendulous motion of human experience that gives the fullness of neither Heaven nor Hell but infuses mankind with both. From here, as Auden posits, “[t]here is only one step to take, from person creature who can love and be loved to the personal Creator who is Love” (Auden 143).

The heroism of the angel in Canto IX is a kind of indirect symbol of Divine Love—and the Romantic Love that emerges through it via Beatrice—but even this instance is a portrayal of the intrinsic *incapacity* for love within Lucifer’s underworld. Of course, as has been sufficiently observed elsewhere, Hell itself is a monument to God’s Love, insofar as it is man’s free-willed choice to oppose God that, because “Power, Wisdom, Love gave man free-will,” results in a realm where those who’ve shunned such Love may, through punishment, exalt the Goodness forever lost to them (Williams 113). Moreover, we have to trust that, by Dante’s explicitly using the (capitalized) term “Comedy” in Cantos XVI and XXI, and using it with such deliberate usage, i.e., since it appear *only* in the most devastating and seemingly hopeless of the three canticles, we are being promised a story that “begins with sad things and ends with joyous ones” (Auerbach 188). This is part of the journey of our life, that, through its difficulties, there is *amore*, which can reveal the soul, both our beloved’s and ours—Love can “launch the beginnings of self-discovery” (Anderson 75). True Love “is a life-force, and that the life-force is love,” a profound gentleness of the heart (Barolini 39). But more than this, Love is “the heightened consciousness in which [Dante’s] conscious relation to art and to life was stirred to action, and in whose presence” the strictness of word is infused with the spontaneity and fullness of image and rhythm, “[like Aquinas’s conception] of the intellect as the highest condition of knowing because what is known is present and does

not have to be sought” (Anderson 17). It is Dante’s unerring, unfaltering Love for Beatrice, it is that “he has never completely ceased to love her which makes it possible for Beatrice to intervene from heaven to save his soul” (Auden, “Vision” 142). Truth conforming to music. For to love is to spread further the darkness from the light—and to read Dante is “to learn to take one’s own loves more seriously,” it is to learn the art of love (Hawkins *xix*). Dante, our guide, contains a humanity worth admiring; he, as “the world’s great love poet, celebrates every kind of sensitive and rational love that we have” (“Dante’s Inferno”). There is the Love he shares with Virgil, the love he has for Brunetto, the Love he reserves for Beatrice, the Love he is with each step striding toward, all of which hides within the introduction of Canto XXIV, when he allegorizes the story of humanity, the conciliation of man, who is seized by despondence in his loneliness among a barren land, until—looking again—he fully comes to himself, brought into the fold, by the bright of day amid flushes of color that reward peasant’s struggle, embraced, embraced. Then, adjusting sights, the muted light resounds, the blinded night days, the pitiful tinge turns to piety, illumined “as when a peasant, resting on a hillside— / in the season when he who lights the world least hides his face from us” (Inf. XXVI.25-7). Doting on action, dithering like tossed hay, finally to understand beauty, finally to, somehow, to somehow return to beauty, to uncross our arms into ambrosial light and overcome discomfited pause, sentiment with hale, and ringing. And if, dour, the night fell of nightscape falls, sunlit verdant and weightless rise will return spirit to the downtrodden drifter, who had grown weary and forlorn in his drift, until he is “restored to hope, / seeing that the world has changed its face,” seeing that his companion was there all along (Inf. XXIV. 12-14).

Beneath the overlooking holy cast, Dante is vying for the open air, adrift along soft sift of a drifting breeze in his ascent toward “the world of light” (Inf. XXXIV. 134). Winded and upended, he doesn’t notice at first. But ease is lifted chin look to the stars, calmed by “the bond of love that nature makes,” safe passage, the way into the lucent buds of day, as the stars reflect the love in his eyes (Inf. XI. 56). With firm foot lower, and right hand at lead, the man is drawn toward the beautiful things that Heaven bears. Across the passage of minutes, of hours caught by day, over day—through each transfiguration of emotion, in memories both made and foregone—the shift of a life and drift of each living, then beyond, toward the unending never-bending all-enveloping after—all transform like wine from water into the bond of Love—upon those who’ve fallen world-weary, tired, restless, achy, dark. But always, remember, always, that the truth—up from below, behind, and beneath—emerges, ascends from mire and clay and noxious stench, into a calm, into a garden

“That time was like never, and like always.

So we go there, where nothing is waiting;

We find everything waiting there.”

—Neruda

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