Introduction to the Commentary on the *Inferno*

Pietro Alighieri

Translated by Brandon P. Otto

Introduction

Commentaries on Dante's *Divine Comedy* date back to its origins: we might find the first, limited, commentary in Dante's own *Letter to Can Grande* (*Epistle* XIII). Though Dante himself commented on the structure of the work, general aspects, and certain individual points (mainly regarding the *Paradiso*), full, canto-by-canto commentaries were left to others, and the task was quickly taken up. Among these earlier commentaries are those by Dante's sons Jacopo (1285-1348) and Pietro (d. 1364). Jacopo's Italian commentary is considered the first full commentary on the *Divine Comedy*; Pietro's later commentary was in Latin.

Pietro's commentary was not a one-and-done work: he kept revising it, so much so that we have three distinct versions of it. All of them are stuffed to the gills with references and quotations; in the earlier versions, Patristic and theological references dominate, whereas the needle shifts towards classical references in the later versions (in keeping with new-found zeal for the classics in the burgeoning Renaissance). Massimiliano Chiamenti edited the third version of the text; it is this edition that I translate from below.

Whereas Jacopo's commentary was a tercet-by-tercet commentary, Pietro's is less granular; he discusses each canto separately, but he only occasionally dives down to the level of the individual tercet or verse. Along with the canto-by-canto commentary, Pietro provides brief introductions to each of the three parts of the *Comedy*, and the introduction to the *Inferno* also gives general commentary on the work as a whole. What I have translated below is this introduction to the *Inferno*, with its concomitant general commentary on the whole *Comedy*. To easily compare the translation with the original text, I have kept Chiamenti's numbered section divisions. Chiamenti also tracked down every quotation Pietro uses; I have replicated these citations in my footnotes, in which I have also included some additional comments and references. For the full references to these citations, see Chiamenti's edition, xii-xxv.

Source: Pietro Alighieri, *Comentum super poema Comedie Dantis: A Critical Edition of the Third and Final draft of Pietro Alighieri's* Commentary *on Dante's* The Divine Comedy., ed. Massimiliano Chiamenti, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Volume 247, Mediterranean Studies Monographs and Texts, Volume 2 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), 81-87.

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Introduction to the Commentary on the *Inferno*

1. When, a little while ago, some, by pen, tried to open up the poem of the *Comedy* by Dante Alighieri of Florence—the most gracious father of I, Pietro—[which was] thus enclosed and hidden in its shell, in my judgment, they did so only as to the part, not as to the whole.

2. Now I, after them, kindled, not so much by any trust in my own knowledge, but by a certain filial zeal, strive, if I can, to open up each particle of it by means of commentary, being persuaded to this by Seneca, who wrote to Lucilius, *What is not spoken of enough is never spoken of too much.*[1]

3. Perhaps another, too, will come, who will, to aid our writings, carry that book on his shoulder, as is said in Job, Chapter 31, where the *Gloss*, explaining, says, *To bear a book on one's shoulder is to achieve the opening of the Scriptures.*[2]

4. Therefore, to such an opening as I am to undertake, let there come to me that key of Him Who, as is written in the Apocalypse, Chapter 3, *opens the sealed book and no one closes, closes and no one opens,*[3] namely, Christ our Lord, and the grace of His mother, the glorious Virgin.

5. Macrobius, intending to explain, in writing, the *Dream of Scipio*, before he begins, in a prefaced introduction, thus says, *About this, a few things need to be said first, so that the mind of the work of which we are to speak might be clearly understood*;[4]

6. which I willingly follow in this, my prefaced introduction, before I come to the explanation of the indicated poem, so that I might, with its own mind, that is, with its highest cause, in another fashion, attain to a clearer knowledge and understanding of it, as the Philosopher says in the beginning of the *Physics*, *For we deem we know each thing when we know its first causes*,[5]

7. and he says, in the second [book], *Causes are to be considered, what they are and what is their number, for knowing is the reason for this business. But we do not deem we know a certain thing before we have grasped the reason why a certain thing [came to be]: but this is to grasp the highest [cause], the first of all.* [6]

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1 Seneca, *Epistles to Lucilius* XXVII.9.

2 The *Glossa Ordinaria* to Job 31:35-36. See the Douay-Rheims of Job 31:35-36:"Who would grant me a hearer, that the Almighty may hear my desire; and that he himself that judgeth would write a book, that I may carry it on my shoulder, and put it about me as a crown?"

3 Rev 3:7.

4 Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* I.i.3.

5 Aristotle, *Physics* I.i (184a 12-13).

6 Aristotle, *Physics* II.iii (194b 16-20).

8. Furthermore, it is also said by the same Philosopher, in the aforesaid second [book] of the *Physics*, *The final cause is the most powerful of the other causes; I begin with the final cause of the aforesaid work, comprehending the others in itself.*[7]

9. For, according to the demand of the end [*finis*], the final cause moves the efficient, the efficient moves the material, and, in the chosen material, one intends to acquire a competent form, and so, in the intention of the worker, the end is prior to those things that lead to the end, like a certain cause moving one towards them.

10. Therefore, the final cause of this *Comedy* will be the end for which Dante himself wrote it, which is so that he might show, by its effect, what men ought to do in this world, and from what they should abstain, in which, indeed, human good consists, as the Philosopher says in the first book of the *Ethics*,[8] by laying down and bringing forth the tortures which the vicious will reasonably suffer in this world and in the other, and the prizes that the virtuous, both here and there, will be worthy to obtain, through which the virtuous men in this world will be better confirmed in their state and the depraved will also be better removed from their viciousness,

11. just as Horace says in his *Sermons*: *The good hate to sin through love of virtue. / You will commit none in yourself through fear of punishment.*[9]

12. The efficient cause is the aforenamed Dante, the author, but the material cause will be that the author will come to describe the aforementioned matters poetically, through a kind of allegorical fiction, discussing the three-fold life of human nature under the analogy and type of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise;

13. the Philosopher spoke of such a three-fold life in the first book of the *Ethics*: *For three are the most excellent lives:* namely, *the lustful* (and he will treat of this as a kind of Hell), then the *civil* or political or active (and he will write of this as Purgatory), then, too, the *contemplative* (and he will treat of this as Paradise), [all] in the allegorical sense.[10]

14. The formal cause is two-fold, namely, the treated form and the treating form: the treated form is that union of the parts of the volume called *The Comedy*, while the treating form is that mode of writing which the author himself intended to use, which itself is multi-fold:

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7 Aristotle, *Physics* II.iii (195a 24-25).

8 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.i (94b 4-7).

9 Horace, *Epistles* I.xvi.52-53. Dante himself, in *Epistle* XIII.25 and XIII.34, says that the whole *Comedy* can be interpreted allegorically as referring to the prizes and punishment man merits through his free will, and that "the end of the whole and the part is to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of happiness" (*Epistle* XIII.39); in the literal sense, the poem simply describes the state of the soul after death (*Epistle* XIII.33).

10 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.iii (95b 18-19).

for he sometimes wrote some things that are to be understood only as written, without any mystical understanding, as is the manner of writing either fables or history.[11]

15. For *fable*, which is named from *fando [making]*, and *so speaks of things made*, differs from *history*, which is called *narration of things done, through which those things done in the past are described*, as Isidore says in the end of the first book of the *Etymologies*,[12]

16. wherefore Augustine, *On the City of God*, Book XVI, Chapter II, thus says about this: *Clearly, not all deeds that are narrated should also be thought to signify something else, but, for the sake of those things which signify something else, those things which signify nothing are also interwoven. The earth is split open only by the ploughshare, but, so that this would happen, all the other members of the plough are necessary.*

17. Again, in this poem, the author writes other things under diverse figures and colors, as a kind of decoration of this work of his, so that serious things would be painted with jokes, as is also the manner in other poems;

18. wherefore Isidore says, in the book of *Etymologies*: *It is the manner of poets to go from things that are true deeds to other, diverse kinds, with oblique figurations, with some decoration*, with figments or fictions interwoven in the poetic fashion.[13]

19. For *fiction* is thus defined: *Fiction is taking a certain thing, which is contrary to truth, as true*, and, from this, *poet* is named from *poio, pois*, which is the same thing as *fingo, fingis*, according to Papias.[14]

20. All of which Horace teaches poets how to do in his *Poetry*, when he says there: *Let fictive causes of pleasure be close to true, / and let fables not demand belief in whatever they will; / He removes every prick who mixes useful with sweet, / pleasing the reader and likewise warning him*, for *Poets want to profit or to please.*[15]

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11 Compare Dante's own comments in *Epistle* XIII.26-27: "But the form is two-fold, the treated form [*forma tractatus*] and the treating form [*forma tractandi*]. The treated form is three-fold, according to a three-fold division. The first division is that by which the whole work is divided into three canticles. The second, that by which each canticle is divided into cantos. Third, that by which each canto is divided into verses [*rithmios*]. The treating form or mode is poetical, fictive, descriptive, digressive, metaphorical [*transumptivus*]; and, with this, definitive, divisive, proving, disproving, and positive in examples."

12 Isidore, *Etymologies* I.xl.1, I.xli.1.

13 Isidore, *Etymologies* VIII.vii.10.

14 See the entry for the word *poeta* in Papias the Lombard's *Elementarium.* In Greek, *poieō* means "to make," just as *fingo* does in Latin.

15 Horace, *Art of Poetry,* vv. 338-339, 343-344, 333.

21. Again, the same author writes many other things under an allegorical understanding; for *allegory* is said to be like *speaking foreignly [alieniloquium], so that the letters say one thing and another should be understood*;[16]

22. this is like when the Apostle thus says to the Galatians, Chapter III: *For it is written how Abraham had two sons, one of a handmaiden and one of a freewoman, but the one of the handmaiden was born according to the flesh, while he of the freewoman, through the promise, which things are thus said through allegory.*[17] *For there are two Testaments, namely, Old and New.*

23. "Allegory," as a genus, comprehends, as species, "anagogy," from which a spiritual sense results, and "tropology," from which moral understanding emanates, as one is wont to say: *Literal teaches deeds, allegory, what you should believe, / moral, what you should do, anagogy, what you should hope*;[18]

24. and this is the reason why Brother Bonaventure of Bagnoregio said, in his *Breviloquium: The same Sacred Scripture has a depth which consists in the multiplicity of mystical understandings. For, beyond the literal sense, it is, in many places, explained in three ways, namely, allegorically, anagogically, and tropologically.*[19]

25. Gregory, in the first [book] of the *Moralia*, says the same about this: *We interpret some things through historical explanation, and we analyze some things through a typical investigation, through allegory. We discuss some things allegorically, through the instruments of morality alone, but some things, demanding more care, we explore through all three ways together. Then, sometimes, we neglect to expound open words historically, lest we come to obscure things, but, sometimes, things cannot be explained according to the letter, since, taken superficially, they beget for their readers, not instruction, but error*[20]—all of which I will hold to below, in my present commentary, as I will show in the course of it.

16 Isidore, *Etymologies*, I.xxxvii.22. See also Dante, *Epistle* XIII.22: "And, although these mystical senses are called by various names, all can generally be called 'allegorical,' when they are different from the literal or historical. For allegory is named after the Greek 'alleon,' which in Latin means 'foreign,' or 'different' [*'alienum,' sive 'diversum'*]."

17 Gal 4:22-24.

18 This couplet was incredibly popular in the Middle Ages as a way to summarize the four senses of Scripture; a variant of it, attributed to Augustine of Dacia's *Rotulus pugillaris*, is quoted in the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #118. Pietro's schema of the senses is somewhat distinct from the typical interpretation. The traditional interpretation separated the literal sense from the three spiritual senses (allegory, tropology, anagogy), without making a hierarchy out of the latter, while Pietro subsumes *tropology* and *anagogy* under *allegory*, as species under a genus.

19 St. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, Prologue §4. Bonaventure was not canonized until 1482, over a century after Pietro's death, hence why the latter calls him simply "Brother" (*frater*).

20 St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, Introductory Epistle §3.

26. Having concluded these things, we come to the title of this book, *Comedy*, which ought to have, in its first title-line,[21] *Here Begins the Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, and its first book, in which he treats of the descent into Hell,

27. about which, first of all, it should be asked why the author named his aforesaid poem *Comedy*, regarding which it should be noted that, in antiquity, as Isidore says, among the other poetic songs, there were some which were called "comedy,"namely, when some poet sang, that is, offered his songs, about the deeds of private and humble persons, with a modest style, as Plautus, Accius,[22] and Terence, and other comic poets, did, as "tragedy" is another poetic song, namely, when something is described in a high style, touching upon the sad deeds of kings, at most.[23]

28. But sometimes the aforesaid comedy is also sung in the highest style, wherefore Horace says in his *Poetry*, *Yet sometimes even comedy raises its voice, / And wrathful Cremes rails with puffed-up mouth*;[24]

29. where the *Gloss* says, about the words *Comedy raises*: *As Terence does in his Comedy, saying, "O heaven, O earth, O sea of Neptune," "For highest Jove's sake," etc.*[25]

30. And because Horace adds, in praise of such a comic style, *Old comedy succeeded these, not without much / praise*, etc.,[26] it should be noted that,

31. as Hugh wrote, *"Comedy" begins in sadness but ends in joy, while tragedy is the opposite, wherefore, when greeting, we are wont to proffer and desire a tragic beginning and a comic end, that is, a good and joyful beginning and a good and joyful end.*[27]

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21 Literally, *rubric*.

22 Lucius Accius (170-86 BC), or Attius, is generally considered a tragedian rather than a comic playwright, based on his surviving titles and fragments.

23 See Isidore, *Etymology* VIII.vii.6-7. On the "humble persons," consider Dante's etymology of *comedia* in *Epistle* XIII.28: "'Comedy' is named from *comos*, 'village,' and *odos*, that is, 'song,' wherefore comedy is like a 'village song.'" This idea of "village" could also tie into Dante's use of the vernacular, which Pietro discusses below. Aristotle likewise mentions the *comas* etymology in *Poetics* §3 (1448a 35-38); he also says that comedy deals with "the imitation of meaner men," but that it focuses only on their "laughable" faults (*Poetics* §5, 1449a 32-34); he agrees that tragedy is the "imitation of better men" (*Poetics* §15, 1454b 8-9).

24 Horace, *Art of Poetry*, vv. 93-94. Dante quotes these same lines in *Epistle* XIII.30.

25 From Pseudo-Acron's gloss to *Art of Poetry*, v. 93. This gloss was commonly printed alongside Horace's text in the earliest printed editions; its name comes from the fact that it was falsely attributed to Helenius Acron, a 3rd-century Latin grammarian.

26 Horace, *Art of Poetry*, vv. 281-282.

27 Hugh of Pisa, *Derivations*, entry on the word "oda." The grammarian Hugh of Pisa (Uguccione da Pisa) is often conflated with the canon lawyer Huguccio, Bishop of Ferrara, though some scholars think the two were separate people. Compare Dante, *Epistle* XIII.29; Aristotle's more nuanced analysis of tragic plots can be found in *Poetics* §§13-14.

32. Therefore, our author, tending towards this proposition, and intending to write in a humble —that is, a vulgar or maternal—style,[28] in poetry, about the deeds of, at most, private persons, and also writing of heavenly things in a high and elated style, as he does in the *Paradiso*, his last book, and, beginning with sad things, that is, with infernal things, and ending in joyful things, that is, in heavenly things,[29] as he does, for this reason, I believe he also ends each book of his aforesaid *Comedy* with the final word "stars,"[30] as he does, so that, due to these joyful and splendid things, with merit did he name this poem of his *Comedy.*

33. Secondly, we come to another part of the aforesaid title, in which the author says he will treat of the descent into Hell mystically, regarding which two things should be asked: first, where this essential Hell is; second, how he says he descends into it; also [it should be said] that this author's intention was to treat of Hell mystically, namely, as both essential and allegorical.

34. Let us determine the existence of each of these two: among the Gentiles, especially the Platonic philosophers and the poets, they said that the aforesaid essential Hell was under the sphere of the moon; the truth is that it is in the abyss of the earth, with its demons and damned spirits,

35. which is made clear by the *Sacred Scripture*, that is, the 14th chapter of Matthew, where the Lord, answering the Jews, says, *No sign will be given you except the sign of Jonah the prophet; as he was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights, so the son of man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights, that is, in the limbo of Hell;*[31]

36. again, [this is made clear] by Augustine, saying, in the book of *Retractions*, correcting what he said in *On Genesis*, Chapter 12, namely, that the pains of Hell were in imaginary vision, and that the place of Hell was not bodily, but imaginary: *Regarding Hell, it seems to me that I should have taught that it is under the earth rather than give a reason why it is believed to be, and is located, under the earth, as if it were not so;*[32]

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28 Dante says that comedy and tragedy "similarly differ in the manner of speaking: elatedly and sublimely in tragedy, but mildly and humbly in comedy" (*Epistle* XIII.30). His own *Comedy* is written in a "mild and humble manner, since it is vulgar speech, in which little women also chat" (*Epistle* XIII.31). A similar characterization is found in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I.i.1; in the same work, he also describes the vulgar as the "motherly speaking" [*maternam locutionem*] or "mother tongue" (I.vi.2).

29 See Dante, *Epistle* XIII.31: "And through this it is clear why the present work is called 'Comedy.' For, if we look to the matter, it is horrible and fetid in the beginning, because [it is] Hell, prosperous, desirable, and gracious in the end, because Paradise."

30 The final word of each of the three books of the *Divine Comedy* is *stelle*: "and thence we departed to re-see the stars" (*Inferno* XXXIV.139), "pure and disposed to leave for the stars" (*Purgatorio* XXXIII.145), "the love that moves the sun and the other stars" (*Paradiso* XXXIII.145).

31 Mt 12:39-40.

32 St. Augustine, *Retractions* II.xxiv.2. Augustine is correcting a passage in the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* XII.xxxiii.62.

37. again, [this is made clear] by Virgil, saying, in the 6th [book of the *Aeneid*]: *Then Tartarus itself / gapes straight down and stretches 'neath shadows, twice as far / as sky's gaze towards ethereal Olympus.*[33]

38. But another Hell in this world, allegorically, is the state of the wicked, namely, torturing them, if it is well considered, like something that is hellish.

39. To the first aforesaid essential Hell, one descends in three ways: truthfully, namely, when a wicked soul, leaving a body, descends to it for its deserved eternal punishment; again, fictively and fantastically, and by this way our author here is said to descend to it; again, necromantically, namely, when someone, through superstitious and profane conversations and sacrifices, descends to answer demonic speech,[34] as Virgil writes of Aeneas in the 6th [book] of his aforenamed *Aeneid*.

40. According to one understanding, one descends to the aforesaid allegorical Hell in two ways: one way virtuously, the other, viciously. Virtuously, when someone descends, in contemplation, to knowledge of earthly things as to a kind of Hell, so that, knowing the nature of temporal things and their mutability and miseries, he would spurn them and serve the creator, and, for this reason, our poets are to descend to such a knowledge, just as Hercules, Orpheus, and the aforesaid Aeneas, according to another understanding, and Theseus and Pirithous and others like them, descended to a certain Hell and remained there as virtuous, and, unattracted, fled from worldly delights, and so thus our author [does], with the aid of Virgil, in a subsequent chapter.

41. Again, one also descends to this Hell viciously, namely, when some descended to the aforesaid knowledge, but ineffectively, as [being] unstable in the good, and drawn away from this state, and one remains in it as in a kind of Hell, as is read of Eurydice, wife of Orpheus, and of Castor, of which two mystical Hells the Psalmist wanted to touch upon tacitly and expressly, saying, *Let death come upon them and let them descend into Hell alive*[35]—the Gloss says here, *That is, into the chasm of worldly desire—*

42. and elsewhere he says, *Since Your mercy is great, Lord, and You snatched my soul out of the lower Hell*,[36]

43. and Solomon, in *Proverbs*: *Path to life for the knowledgeable, that he would turn away from the final Hell.*[37]

33 Virgil, *Aeneid* VI.577-579.
34 *Ad responsa dictorum demonum.*
35 Ps 55:15.
36 Ps 86:13.
37 Prv 15:24.

44. Finally, let us divide this first book by its principal parts, and—perhaps so that he would allude to those words of Virgil, saying, in the 6th [book], *Facts oppose, and the unlovely marsh with sad waves / binds, and with ninefold circles the Styx confines*[38]—

45. the author divided it into nine parts with just the same consideration, so that, as the blessedness of heaven [is divided] among nine heavens and nine regions and orders of angels, so the calamities of Hell would be divided among nine regions and orders of evil angels, so that discipline would be its own contrary. [39]

46. For, in the first [part], having prefaced the preliminaries, he speaks of the first circle of Hell, namely, Limbo, and this first part lasts until the 5th chapter; there begins the second, in which he speaks of the torture of the lustful, and this lasts until the 6th chapter; there begins the third, in which he speaks of the punishment of the gluttonous, and lasts until the 7th chapter; there the fourth, in which he speaks of the punishment of the greedy and prodigal, and this lasts until the end of the 7th chapter, where [it says], *Noi ricidemmo il cerchio a l'atra riva*;[40]

47. there begins the fifth part, in which he speaks of the Stygian swamp, in which he imagines the souls of the wrathful, brash, envious, and proud are punished, and this lasts until the end of the 9th chapter, where [it says], *Dentro n'intrammo senza alcuna guerra*;[41]

48. there begins the sixth, in which he speaks of the punishment of heretics, and this lasts until the 12th chapter; there the seventh, in which he speaks of the punishment of the violent, punished in three circles there, in diverse ways, and this lasts until the 17th chapter; there the 8th, in which he begins to speak of the punishment of the fraudulent, punished in ten ditches, and this lasts until the 31st chapter; there the ninth and final part, in which he speaks of the punishment of betrayers, and this last until the end. These things having been thus prefaced, let us come to the text.

38 Virgil, *Aeneid* VI.438-439. Pietro misquotes the first word as *facta (facts)*, when most texts instead read *fas (fate* or *divine law)* or *fata (the fates)*.

39 *Ut contrariorum eadem sit disciplina.*

40 Dante, *Inferno* VII.100: "We cut across the circle to the other bank."

41 Dante, *Inferno* IX.106: "Within we entered without any strife."