

To modern readers the *Divine Comedy* appears as a great Gothic cathedral made not of stone but of verse. The poem's architecture is as sublime, vertical, and vertiginous as the Duomo of Milan or Notre Dame de Paris. Its elaborate construction reflects a world order that Dante took to be absolute, even if nowadays we view it as a historically determined construction of Christian faith, not as an accurate representation of reality. Nevertheless, there is something awesome about the sheer weight and grandeur of the *Comedy*. One has a sense that a thousand or ten thousand years from now, the nine circles of its *Inferno* and the nine spheres of its *Paradiso* will perdure unchanged, while the world of our diminutive modernity, with all its fleeting concerns and anxieties, will have long disappeared.

It seems therefore strange and counterintuitive to claim, as I intend to do in the following pages, that this monumental poem—as solid and immovable as the Alps or the Rockies—has one overriding, all-consuming vocation, namely, to probe, understand, and represent the nature of motion. Just as Shakespeare is the poet of motivation, Dante is the poet of motion in its physical, spiritual, and cosmic manifestations. To advance my claim, I will begin by discussing (1) the crisis that is staged in *Inferno* 1; (2) Dante's choice of Virgil as his guide through Hell and Purgatory; (3) the rhyme scheme of the *Comedy*; (4) Dante's understanding of the nature of sin; and finally (5) his conviction that love is essentially another word for motion.

1. The Prologue Scene

Inferno 1 is a bewildering canto. The reader who approaches it for the first time feels as dazed and confused as the pilgrim in his dark wood. The landscape is hallucinogenic. We go from a forest to a deserted shore to the foot of a mountain, where three beasts confront the

terrified pilgrim. The commentary tradition tells us that the landscape is allegorical, as are the three beasts that impede Dante's ascent up the mountain. Yet even after we have consulted our notes—which identify the leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf with lust, violence, and greed, and which tell us that the mountain may in fact be the Mount of Purgatory (which is supposed to be in the southern hemisphere!)—the entire scene remains opaque in meaning. One thing at least is certain. The pilgrim is lost. His way is blocked. Until Virgil arrives on the scene, he is unable to move forward.

To find yourself at a dead end in the midst of life—to discover all of a sudden that all your venues are closed off—is a kind of spiritual death. Anyone who has experienced even mild forms of depression knows what this state of immobilization is all about. Depression brings everything to an oppressive standstill; its objective correlative is a dark room and a bed. Depression debilitates and renders helpless, and there is little doubt that shortly before Dante embarked on his *Comedy* he had succumbed to what we today would call a clinical depression, due to his exile from Florence, his adversities of fortune, and his growing despair over the intractability of human folly. In Dante's day there was no psychoanalysis and no antidepressant medication. Dante had to administer his own cure. His treatment—one of the most extraordinary self-therapies in history—took the form of a poem that sent him on an extended journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. In sum, his cure took the form of self-mobilization.

How does the pilgrim get out of his bind in *Inferno* 1? How does he get moving again? It is not until the next canto that we learn that an act of grace actually saved him from his impasse. All we know in *Inferno* 1 is that the ghost of Virgil—a Roman poet who had been dead for well over a millennium—shows up at Dante's side to unblock the situation. This is a bizarre apparition: a pagan poet coming to the rescue of a lost soul in the most Christian poem ever written. It adds to the weird oneiric (dreamlike) quality of the Prologue Scene, as *Inferno* 1 is often called.