

The Divine Comedy (Hell) through Aristotelian ethics and Thomistic ontology

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ABSTRACT

The first part of the Divine Comedy, the Inferno, should be interpreted through the prism of the Aristotelian conception of virtue. Against all expectations, Dante did not base his work on virtue as defined by Catholic morality, which makes his work seem less guided by established principles, even if the ontological essence of the text reflects the Thomistic structure. This is not without consequence. The characters of the Inferno are not approached from the angle of absolute morality, but rather through the accounts of their concrete lives, which Dante narrates and analyses in depth. In this way, he can position himself uniquely in relation to these figures, expressing his own personal feelings. The poet has a deep respect for those who had a direct or indirect influence on his life (such as Virgil, Brunetto Latini and the fictional character of Ulysses), even if they are among the damned. He sees them not in absolute terms, but relatively, considering their humanity, which, like all humanity, is imperfect and fallible. From this perspective, the term “transhumar”, one of the main vectors of the spiritual habitus in the Comedy, can be seen as an equivalent of the Greek term “eudaimonia”, which designates the supreme good or its quest. This is precisely what the poet aspires to, and what his most beloved characters cling to, whom he saves from eternal damnation by means of Aristotle’s moral teaching. That’s why the play is called “Comedy”. It is, after all, a story with a happy ending. And how could it be otherwise, when Dante, and those he holds in high esteem in the Inferno, aspire to maximum personal fulfilment in the light of “the love that moves the Sun and the other stars”? In the end, the “lectura aristotelica” proves to be a great help in grasping the dialectic of the poem.

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Aristotle’s concept of virtues (and their absence): a hermeneutical key to Dante’s attitude towards the protagonists of the first part of the Comedy

The notion of virtue, represented in classical Latin vocabulary as a source word, is derived from the moral qualities most valued by the ancients: courage, determination and moral judgement together with the intellectual abilities of technique, prudence, science, wisdom and intellect. Virtue has accompanied humanity since the origins of civilization. In this sense, Stagirite plays a fundamental role in the creativity of the Florentine poet, who is one of the greatest exponents of Western cultural identity: he himself makes this explicit. As Andrej Capuder, a Dantologist and translator of the *Divine Comedy* into Slovenian¹ points out: “As far as the structure of the *Divine Comedy* or its concept is concerned, we are sufficiently well informed by the poet himself. In the last of the thirteen Latin letters attributed to him, Dante addresses his protector Cangrande della Scala, revealing to him the beginnings of his life and dedicating to him his literary work, conceived and realized according to the ideas of the great Aristotle”² (Capuder, 1991).

¹ Andrej Capuder (1942-2018) was also a member of the EASA, Class I.

² All translations of literal quotations in the article are ours.

His conception of virtue therefore follows the typology developed by Aristotle. The philosopher distinguishes between intellectual virtue and moral virtue, both of which are integral parts of the soul. The human being's spiritual physiognomy is based on transcendence: beyond physical nature, which coexists with thought, lies a supernatural agent, metaphysics. *"Virtue is also differentiated according to this division of the soul. Some forms of virtue are called intellectual virtues, others moral virtues. Wisdom or intelligence and prudence are intellectual virtues. Liberality and temperance are moral virtues. To describe a man's moral character, we do not say that he is wise or intelligent, but that he is gentle or temperate; but a wise man is also praised for his dispositions, and praiseworthy dispositions are called virtues"* (Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1, chapter 13).

According to him, the virtues are divided into intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and intelligence, and moral virtues, such as generosity and temperance. The virtues are divided into theoretical wisdom (Sophia), which involves the contemplation of unchanging truths and is oriented towards what is eternal and unchanging, and practical wisdom (Phronesis), which deals with changing human affairs and involves thinking about how to act and make decisions in everyday life. The latter form of wisdom is crucial in guiding moral virtues, ensuring that actions are carried out justly and appropriately.

In the Divine Comedy, particularly in the first part, the Inferno, Dante encounters individuals whose sins are often the result of a proportionate transgression of the norm, of intemperance, as in the case of Brunetto Latini, Ulysses and Paolo and Francesca. In the case of Pier delle Vigne, who committed suicide after being falsely convicted, we could also speak of a certain excessiveness in the reaction of the individual mentioned. Then there are those whose downfall is sometimes the result of fate, as in Virgil. Practical wisdom is thus essential to the correct application of moral virtues, enabling individuals to discern and choose the right course of action.

Aristotle asserted that the development and exercise of these virtues are essential to the attainment of eudaimonia, the term used in Greek tradition to designate the highest human good, which is also the greatest happiness. This perfect condition derives from acting in accordance with the highest virtue, that of the best part of ourselves, whether intellectual or of some other nature. *"Consequently, perfect happiness (eudaimonia) is the activity that achieves the highest virtue"*. Or, in other words: *"But if happiness (eudaimonia) comes from an action that conforms to virtue, it is logical that this action should conform to the highest virtue; this will be the virtue of the best part of ourselves. Whether it is the intellect or anything else that is thought to guide and direct us by nature and to have a perception of what is noble and divine, whether it is really divine in itself or is relatively the most divine part of us, it is the action of that part of us in accordance with its own virtue that will produce perfect happiness"*.

The importance of the Aristotelian virtues in understanding Dante's journey is crucial, particularly in the darkest part of his journey, the Inferno. There, the poet encounters historical, mythological and biblical figures who embody, often by absence, the notion of virtue, especially through intemperance (akrasia), which plays a central role. Aristotle distinguishes two forms of this vice: moral vice and intellectual vice. The former arises when we fail to follow moral reason because of emotional impulses, while the latter occurs when we fail to respect intellectual judgements about what is right. Dante's Inferno is full of such examples. Intemperance proves destructive to human

virtue, placing it in inextricable situations. Aristotle explains: *"The unrestrained man commits acts that he recognizes as evil in the grip of passion, while the self-controlled man, although he has desires that he knows to be evil, chooses not to follow them on principle. The temperate man is always restrained and enduring"*. These words come from the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which deals extensively with virtue, character and the good life.

Furthermore, intemperance can be seen as a central element of the deadly sins. Dante himself suffers from it, as he reveals during his journey with Virgil through Purgatory. For the poet, the quest for virtue represents a path to purification and redemption. Using the structure of the work, he explores the moral and spiritual laws that govern humanity, emphasizing that adherence to virtue leads the human soul towards its ultimate destiny: union with God. This theme is also reflected in his personal journey, which begins in the darkness of a forest symbolizing sin and perdition, and gradually rises to the divine light through an awareness and acceptance of virtue.

Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas: the ontology of the Divine Comedy

Why did Dante appropriate Aristotelian concepts within a Christian, even Catholic, structure? The reason is that Aristotle was already part of the intellectual horizon of the time, a century before Dante. His work was reflected in the scholastic structure of the world of his time, a dimension that was embodied by Thomas Aquinas. The latter, one of the major medieval thinkers, integrated Aristotle's thought into Christianity, innovating both in the discipline of Christian theology, then emerging, and in his relationship with it. As Etienne Gilson points out: *"It should be remembered that he studied Aristotle primarily with a view to prepare an essentially theological work. As a result, aspects of Thomistic philosophy are even more profound because they relate more directly to Thomistic theology. The theology of Saint Thomas is that of a philosopher, but his philosophy is that of a saint"* (Gilson, 1947).

Without the scholastic fusion between Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the very structure of the Divine Comedy, as we know it, would never have seen the light of day. In this synthesis, God is envisaged as the most perfect entity, embodying the absolute perfection of everything that exists, in both the visible and invisible orders. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* states: *"The perfections of all things are found in God. He is therefore universally perfect, for there is no perfection lacking among all those that can be perceived through the different orders of existence. Whatever perfection there is in an effect must necessarily be present in the cause that produced it"*.

In a more lyrical vein, the French poet Paul Claudel expressed a similar sentiment, which can be seen, by analogy, as an explanatory key to the ontological mystery present in the Comedy. In his view, creation is metamorphosed into a poem, structured around a network of causal connections that originate in God and return enriched. Human morality plays a crucial role in this process. *"From love and knowledge of invisible things, we are led to love and knowledge of visible things. The Creator alone holds the key to revealing his creation to us, a coherent and unified whole. He has given us the opportunity to discern the good through discussions of causes, complications, provocations, passions, desires, vocation and analogy, all of which bind us into a great whole. Thus, the world is no longer a col-*

lection of scattered words; it has become a poem, endowed with a meaning, an order, emanating from something and heading towards a precise destination” (Claudel, 1952).

The human being, according to this vision, finds fulfilment in a world where the visible and invisible are interconnected, guided by moral principles derived from Aristotle’s doctrine of the virtues, as summarized in the Thomistic synthesis. Thomas deepened Aristotle’s ethics of the virtues, emphasizing that all knowledge is acquired through sensory perception and reason, enriching these ethics with a crucial theological framework, visibly illustrated in the *Divine Comedy*. If painters and sculptors such as Sandro Botticelli³, William Blake⁴, Gustav Doré⁵, Auguste Rodin⁶, and Salvador Dalí⁷ have drawn inspiration from the *Divine Comedy*, it is because it is designed first and foremost for the senses, for sight and hearing. For the reader, theological and philosophical reflection comes after the sensory impact⁸.

All in all, there is the fleshed-out ethics that emphasizes the development of moral virtues through habits and reason, integrating them with divine will and natural law, and thus forging a robust moral system. This system forms the external dramatic mechanism of Dante’s work.

However, to fully grasp the dialectic of Dante’s work, it is essential to focus on Aristotle’s original theses. Aristotle’s philosophy distinguishes between virtue, seen primarily as practical wisdom, seeking excellence through moderation and rationality. In contrast, sin, which is the negation of virtue, often stems from an excess or lack of control over oneself, one’s behavior and one’s instincts. According to Dante, such defects can lead to Hell. It is the curse of intemperance.

But these transgressions are relative, not absolute. Jacqueline Risset observes: “Dante’s classification of sins, inspired by Aristotle, does not derive from Christian dogma. It is Dante’s own invention, an organization of Hell around three major sins: intemperance, bestiality and wickedness, with intemperance taking precedence. Excess or deviant use of what is not inherently bad is central. Dante does not set himself up as a judge; he feels irresistible compassion for some of the damned he meets in hell”⁹.

Aristotle saw virtue as a goal linked to the here and now, to immanence, to eudaimonia, characterized as maximum fulfilment, a state of optimal functioning in the activities that define an individual. In contrast, in Christianity, virtue depends not so much on man as on God, the ultimate perfection of all things, and it is in God that virtue finds its fulfilment. Understanding this is essential if we are to appreciate Dante’s approach to his

characters, especially in the first part of his *Divine Comedy*, particularly regarding Virgil, Brunetto Latini, Ulysses, Paolo and Francesca and Pier delle Vigne.

Another distinction between Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle lies in the formation of the virtuous person in relation to the community, notably through laws and educational systems rooted in the metaphysical tradition. Aristotle’s ethics do not emphasize moral absolutes, but rather situational considerations. Translated into the language of the *Divine Comedy*, this means that each of the characters we meet in the work is not presented from the point of view of an absolute morality, but relatively, in the context of his personal history, that of his life, which Dante always describes and comments on in detail. Christianity is different: because it emanates from the revealed absolute, it demands that man make an absolute commitment to it. If he violates this commitment, he is condemned to perish eternally. Thus, in Christianity, the emphasis is placed a priori on moral absolutes. These are dictated by divine commandments and natural law, both of which are considered imperative.

The *Divine Comedy* necessarily opens with a paradox. Hell was created by God as the first thing to last forever: “*Dinanzi a me non fur cose create se non eterne, et io eterna duro*” (Canto III, Inferno). Moreover, this eternity is a kind of analogy of duration in the sense of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Bergson defined the non-linear function of time as the negation of space, *i.e.* of the material dimension. Duration is, therefore, something that fits *a priori* with the concept of punishment, since it immobilizes the individual in pure subjectivity, in his deepest self, situated outside space and time. It is precisely outside the perimeters of time and space that the eternity of Hell is located. “*Pure duration is the form taken by the succession of our states of consciousness when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from establishing a separation between the present state and inner states*” (Bergson, 1970). For those who are in Hell, it is no longer possible to make a caesura, a cut, between past acts and their present state. In other words, where Dante and Virgil arrived, the past (*i.e.* the past states of a human being) is an inalienable part of the present. Guilt stemming from the past is the focal point of this part of the *Comedy*.

The eternity of the Inferno is presented as an a priori existential given, as a fact, prior to any experience, even if we take Henri Bergson’s thought as our criterion, a thought born outside the context that shaped the *Comedy*. Consequently, even – and by any criterion – this tercet can only be followed by the one that has become the most famous part of Dante’s text, the one that dispels any ambiguity as to what really awaits the individual here: “*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate*”. Hell is therefore an irrevocable phenomenon.

But Dante crosses it accompanied by the sage, who was the absolute law in the Middle Ages, but also later, in the Renaissance. “*In Dante’s time, Virgil was the absolute master*,” says Bertrand Scheffer, philosopher, dantologist and specialist in the Italian Renaissance. The author of the *Divine Comedy* describes Virgil in superlatives, not least because he is delighted by this unexpected encounter. How could he not be, when the man standing before him is everything that makes up his identity as a poet: teacher, master, unrivalled example.

“*Or se tu quel Virgilio, e quella fonte
 Che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?
 Rispuos’io lui con vergogna fronte.
 O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
 Vagliami il lungo studio e ’l grande amore*”

³ Mandel G, *L’Opera complete di Sandro Botticelli*, Rizzoli, Milan, 1978.

⁴ Schütze S, Reiner A, *William Blake: Dante’s Divine Comedia: complete drawings*, Benedikt Taschen, Cologne, 2020.

⁵ *The Doré illustrations for Dante’s Divine Comedy*: 136 plates, Dover Publications, New York, 1976.

⁶ Rodin A, *The Gates of Hell*, Musée Rodin, Paris, 2006. <https://musee-rodin.fr/en/musee/collections/oeuvres/gates-hell>

⁷ Descharnes RNéret G, *Salvador Dalí: 1904-1989: The paintings*, Benedikt Taschen, Cologne, 1994.

⁸ EASA, Class I, Humanities, organized a symposium on September 18, 2021, on the 700th anniversary of Dante’s death. This event focused significantly on graphic depictions of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Special attention was given to the works of Sandro Botticelli and William Blake. June 2, 2024. <https://euro-acad.eu/events?id=102>

⁹ What is the *Divine Comedy*? YouTube Documentary 2006.

*Che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.
 Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore;
 Tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
 il bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore*" (Canto I, Inferno)¹⁰

Virgil steps in front of the poet, lost in a dark forest, and invites him: "It is Virgil who is inviting him on a journey to the beyond."¹¹ We seem to be faced with an inexplicable paradox.

The *Divine Comedy*, which exalts the Christian God in the Thomistic manner as Actus purus, the ultimate ontological reality, paradoxically incorporates into its structure a pagan poet who, *a priori*, is condemned to hell. This poet stands behind a door beyond which those who enter abandon all hope. As such, he plays a crucial role in the whole action, escorting Dante through Hell and Purgatory to the threshold of Paradise, where he passes the baton to his next guides, Beatrice and Saint Bernard, the patron saint of Europe.

Virgil thus endures eternal punishment and, as such, is separated from God, but he also leaves the space of reclusion in two crucial ways. The first is that he is the only mortal who can, like Orpheus, cross the threshold of eternity and venture into linear time to meet his disciple, the great poet in whose work he will appear. The second is that it is possible for him to cross the spheres of eternity itself, passing from Hell to Purgatory, and from there to the vestibule of Heaven.

"Transhumar" and Aristotle's concept of virtues

The subject, however, is not exhausted by this. Carlo Ossola's introduction to his *Introduction à la Divine Comédie* places Virgil in a very specific context. Indeed, when Virgil bids farewell to Dante, he is crowning him in his quest for perfection. In this role, the Roman poet is presented as superior to the author of *The Divine Comedy*. Although he cannot continue the journey with him, he performs an essential ritual in which grace, God's will and man's spiritual forces are united.

This brings us to the heart of the Comedy, best expressed by the verb "transhumar". Carlo Ossola reveals its meaning: "*The verb 'transhumar' reveals the deep structure of Dante's thought. 'Transhumar' is one of the most evocative words in The Divine Comedy. It refers to the way in which man, through his free will and with the help of grace, transcends himself. But also: Virgil's last words in the Commedia, 'Per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio', illustrate Dante's profound humanism. Man does not participate in grace and progress for his own sake, in the tautological sense, otherwise, God's presence would be totally unnecessary.*"¹²

The term 'transhumar', a key element in Dante's vocabulary, also takes on a special meaning by combining, at the highest level, intellectual virtue and moral virtue, as presented by Aristotle. By analogy, he presents a kind of "eudaimonia", integrated into Thomas's scheme of divine creation, based on free will and linked to grace and the spiritual powers, reason and morality of man. In fact, man cannot be truly man if he does not constantly progress, if he does not himself make a spiritual journey towards higher spheres of being, until the final synthesis revealed in God ("luce inteletual"), the light of the intellect, the highest goodness and reason at the same time.

With the notion of "transhumar", Virgil also associates himself with the most sublime person in the Comedy, Beatrice. In-

deed, this term reappears in the first song of Paradise. It is linked to her, because she serves as Dante's guide through Heaven, leading him towards an understanding of divine truths and the vision of God. Her role is crucial in Dante's spiritual journey, in his transcendence from human limitations to the divine. In the context of *Canto I of Paradiso*, Dante thus uses the term "transhumar" to describe the ineffable experience of surpassing human nature, a process facilitated by Beatrice's guidance. Her presence is instrumental in helping Dante achieve this higher state of being and understanding.

For that reason, Dante is urged to rise beyond the earthly world, and he would repeat in his mind what the great guide had said to him during his farewell.

*"Vedi lo sol che 'n fronte ti riluce;
 vedi l'erbette, i fiori e li arbuscelli
 che qui la terra sol da sé produce.
 Mentre che vegnan lieti li occhi belli
 che, lagrimando, a te venir mi fenno,
 seder ti puoi e puoi andar tra elli.
 Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno;
 libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
 e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
 pour ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio"* (Canto XXVII,
 Purgatorio)

When Dante received the poet's consecration, he realised that his art was contained in Virgil's poetry. So, Hell is not an absolute place, at least not for some people. Dante's freedom of imagination in relation to Virgil is even more remarkable given that Pasquale Porro, professor of medieval philosophy at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, states: "*In Dante's work, it is impossible for a single one of the pagans to be saved*"¹³. However, Virgil is not the only one to enjoy a special status in Hell. There are at least a few others, like him, at his side. One of the first is Brunetto Latini. He also plays an important role in the *Divine Comedy*, although he only appears in the fifteenth Canto of Hell. He is presented as a damned soul of the seventh circle, where sodomites are punished, forced to walk forever in a rain of fire.

Brunetto Latini really existed. A 13th century politician, philosopher and intellectual, he was Dante's mentor. Dante treated Brunetto with great respect and affection. The meeting between the poet and Brunetto is one of the most moving moments, underlining the deep intellectual and personal bond between them.

In this dialogue, Brunetto Latini encourages Dante to continue his spiritual journey. It is a reprise of the episode with Virgil, who crowned Dante for the next stage of his transformation on the path to God. It's about the transmission of knowledge and ethics between master and pupil, which once again comes close

¹⁰ We quote Dante in the original. The reason for this is the general recognition of his verses, as well as the fact that we discuss certain elements of vocabulary in the article, and quoting a translation would make it even more difficult to understand what we wanted to communicate.

¹¹ Philosophy and Literature: Dante, The Divine Comedy. YouTube. Ancrage Editions, 2023.

¹² Ossola C, Introduction à la Divine Comédie. YouTube 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQHvDwGutJM>

¹³ Ossola C, Introduction à la Divine Comédie. YouTube 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQHvDwGutJM>

to Aristotle's teaching. Although Dante has placed Brunetto among the sinners, the tone of their interaction reveals respect and underlines the deep intellectual debt that Dante owes to his former teacher. Like Virgil, Brunetto occupies two roles. The first is that in which he endures his punishment for the sin of sodomy. Sodomy, in the context of the *Divine Comedy*, means sexual deviance, mutatis mutandis, and misconduct. According to Jacqueline Risset, it is simply a transgression: "It is the excessive or deviant use of something that is not in itself bad"¹⁴. Sexuality is a necessary mechanism for the preservation of the human species and its transgression, in the sense of Aristotle's ethics, is merely intemperance. It is, however, understandable and justifiable, and a reason for sympathy. When Dante meets Paolo and Francesca in their torment, who are also guilty of the sin of intemperance, he describes the end of the scene as follows:

*"Mentre che l'uno spirito questo disse,
 l'altro piangeva sì che di pietade
 Io venni men così com'io morisse;
 e caddi, come corpo morto cade"* (Canto V, Inferno)

It is important to note that Dante was not in any way related to the couple in his life. They were just a fragment of his creative imagination. However, he was so shocked after meeting them that he literally experienced his own death: "*The theme of death for love links Paolo and Francesca to the other souls in this group, in particular to Dido, and to Dante's own swooning at the end of the episode*" (Canto V, Inferno).

We can therefore ask a rhetorical question. To what extent could Dante have been shaken by his meeting with Brunetto Latini, who was his superior? In fact: "*Dante has two masters, Virgil and Brunetto Latini*"¹⁵. In particular, Dante and Latini are linked by a concept that has the highest semantic weight in the *Commedia*, that of "transhumar," as previously mentioned. This connection reveals that it was Brunetto Latini who, like Virgil, played a fundamental role in transforming Dante into a divine poet. He is therefore essentially integrated into the very structure of the *Commedia*, which is a glorification of God. Once again, we are faced with a paradox.

The Odyssey and the story of Dante's life, transformed into a comedy

This is again revealed by Ulysses. We must bear in mind Pasquale Porro's point, mentioned above, that for Dante it is a priori impossible for a pagan to be saved. However, Ulysses seems to enjoy special favor, even though he is placed in one of the darkest depths of Hell, in the eighth circle. But then again, he represents one of the strongest examples of the notion of 'transhumar', which prevails in the spiritual portrait of Dante's characters. Ulysses transcends his pain through his free will, despite the impossibility of accessing divine grace, because he was born before Christ.

His story is a complex one. He and his companion Diomedes are punished not only for their tricks, which are famous in the Homeric tales, but also for their role in building the Trojan horse, a decisive ploy in the Greek victory. But this is only the first layer

of the narrative. Odysseus' guilt is, in fact, nuanced, even relativized as much as possible. His attitude to war, as described by Homer (*Odyssey*, books 1-24), oscillated between ambivalence and reticence. It seems highly likely that he did not approach either combat or the development of the horse with enthusiasm, but rather with serious reservations. Basically, his ultimate ambition was always to return to Ithaca, the island of his birth.

The years he spent in Troy seemed to him to have been largely wasted. He feels the same way about his compatriots, kept away from their country by the siege or killed in the fighting. So, given all these circumstances, his sin is relative, not absolute: "*For the Odyssey, therefore, the legacy of Troy is misery and implacable hatred, amongst the living and the dead. The war was not a glorious victory, but led to the deaths of great men, the loss of some of the best years of their lives for husbands and wives, the decline of great houses, the separation of sons and fathers, the death of sons before fathers, disputes among former allies and hatreds that survive the grave. It is perhaps no coincidence that the destructive Sirens sing the story of Troy, which Odysseus must listen to but not be detained by listening to the story of Troy is, as it were, bad for your health*" (Bowie, 2013).

Dante therefore considers Ulysses to be a hero, fully aware of all the relevant facts. This interpretation has been recognized: there is ample evidence to support it. Among the most famous works about Ulysses is Jean Giraudoux's play *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* (Giraudoux, 1935). In this play, Ulysses is portrayed almost faultlessly; together with Hector, the Trojan army leader, he sincerely seeks to avoid conflict, aspiring to keep the peace. This theme is particularly evident in the most famous dialogue. In scene thirteen of Act Two, the two commanders establish a deeply human bond. They see war as a blind force of destiny that disrupts the human order and strive to deflect it. Ulysses, being moved, tells Hector: "*Understand me, Hector! ... You can count on my help. Don't blame me for interpreting fate. I only wanted to read the great lines of the universe, the routes of caravans, the paths of ships, the lines of flying cranes and races. Give me your hand. It too has its lines. But let's not look to see if their lesson is the same. Let's assume that the three little wrinkles at the bottom of Hector's hand say the opposite of what the rivers, flights and wakes say. I'm curious by nature, and I'm not afraid. I am willing to go against fate. I accept Helen. I will give her back to Menelaus. I have much more eloquence than it takes to make a husband believe in his wife's virtue. I'll even make Helen believe it herself. And I'm leaving now to avoid any surprises. Once we're on the ship, perhaps we can outwit the war*" (Giraudoux, 1935). We might therefore ask whether Ulysses really deserves to be placed in the Lower Hell, given that he could have been a stranger to the massacres caused by the Trojan War, at least in the eyes of the most renowned intellectuals.

It is perhaps for this reason that Dante has profoundly transformed his story. He gave it a nobler role. We see the poet telling Virgil a story that departs from the Homeric canon. After many years of travel and exploration throughout the known world, Ulysses' insatiable thirst for knowledge drives him to undertake a final voyage to cross the columns of Heracles (Hercules), which mark the limits of the Mediterranean world, and to venture out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Here, Dante departs considerably from the original story: in Homer, Ulysses' main objective is to return to his beloved Ithaca. The hero does everything to return home, even resisting Circe's offer of eternal youth and immortality if he agrees to stay with her. But he is not tempted; home is the ultimate meaning of his existence.

¹⁴ What is the Divine Comedy? YouTube Documentary 2006.

¹⁵ What is the Divine Comedy? YouTube Documentary 2006.

However, Dante chooses to overlook this vital impulse of Ulysses' and to assign him a new quest, marking a significant innovation in relation to his Homeric origins. Ulysses is seeking to transcend the limits of the known world, putting intellectual virtue – knowledge – above even his own life and that of his friends. He is once again a positive hero, one of the geniuses of the Renaissance *avant la lettre*. What's more, intellectual virtue also represents a form of temperance: it guides the individual in the development of moral virtues, helping to discern and choose the right course of action in various situations.

As we have seen, Aristotle calls this *eudaimonia*, the supreme good that man attains by transcending himself, under the light of grace, if we accept an analogical interpretation, because Ulysses was unable to experience it directly, having been born before Christ.

This quest, motivated by the desire to discover the secrets of the world, ends in disaster. Ulysses and his companions are engulfed by a storm. But their intention was noble, and they went from taking a measured risk to extreme peril. And yet this is what sealed his fate. He was a “transhumar”, in the full meaning of the word. Following Aristotle's dialectic of virtues, he has often been described by specialists as a man in the generic sense, the Man with a capital letter par excellence.

This implies the intellectual virtue that aspires to explore and know the perceptible world. Ulysses pushed back the limits and tried to go beyond what was known. The *Odyssey* reports that, like Aeneas, he visited the world of the dead to bid his companions a final farewell. Halfway through his own life, Dante undertook a similar journey that took him beyond the boundaries of the known. What's more, he experienced his own catastrophe: to be banished, particularly from Florence, was to be deprived of family, property, civil rights, and ultimately of life. He was condemned to death. A return to his hometown would have meant the execution of that sentence. His fate was worse than Job's, considering what the city had done to him. The chronicles are exhaustive on this subject: “*The charges brought against these four men were not based on any tangible evidence, but only on public rumors. They were accused of having disturbed the peace of Pistoia by persecuting the Blacks, of having opposed the Pope and the Valois, of having influenced the ecclesiastical elections, which exposed them to accusations of corruption. The penalty was a fine of 500 pounds, which none of them could pay, a two-year exile from Tuscany, the confiscation and destruction of their property, lifelong exclusion from any public office and the entry of their names in the municipal registers as counterfeiters. The sentence added derision to the verdict: the accused, having received the reward they deserved according to the text, had reaped what they had sown. As the accused had not appeared in court, they were considered to have confessed. And because they were not present to pay the fine, on 10 March, they and ten other companions were given a second sentence in absentia, condemning them to be burnt at the stake.*” (Montanelli, 1972).

To save his life, Dante took to the road. The *Comedy* was born of the pain of eternal separation from Florence. Dante's journey is a path from darkness to light, towards new perspectives and self-transformation. It is a “transhumar” in the full sense of the word. It is also a *mise en abyme* of the journey undertaken by Aeneas, Virgil's hero, and by Ulysses, Homer's hero. From this point of view, the position of Ulysses in the eighth circle of Hell, where he embodies the fusion of Aristotelian values, combining intellectual and moral virtue in a hitherto unknown synthesis, is surprising. Especially as the hero is

once again a kind of alter ego of the poet himself. Once again, the term “transhumar” comes to mind.

This is only possible because this position is relative, not absolute. Dante does not think that Ulysses deserved such a punishment. On the contrary, he does not judge according to the criteria of the catechism. In that case, Hell would be absolute, and any poetic dramatization of such a position would be doomed to failure from the outset, because it would be reduced to a mere thesis poem, as we have seen, for example, in totalitarian systems. This is literature written to illustrate an ideological thesis a priori. But in doing so, it has exhausted its *raison d'être* and remains outside any artistic or philosophical reference. It has no aesthetics of its own, and its value is therefore nil.

The *Divine Comedy* and its protagonists are a far cry from such a thing. The geniality of the work is due to the tragic nature of its figures. It lies once again in a paradox, this time far greater than the one concerning the people both damned and at the same time described as guides by the man who immortalized them in his masterpiece. The *Comedy* ends with the lines:

“*Ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*” (Canto XXXIII,
Paradiso)

These lines sum up Dante's spiritual and intellectual journey, which ends with his vision of God. In this passage, Dante affirms that his desire (“disio”) and will (“velle”) are now completely aligned with divine love, which is the driving force behind the whole universe, including the sun and the stars. The similarity with the “*rota ch'igualmente è mossa*” suggests perfect balance and harmony in his soul, which is now moving in sync with divine love, with no more conflicts or uncertainties.

The meaning of these lines is profound: they indicate man's aspiration to achieve complete union with God and with the universal order, a central theme of the work. They represent the pinnacle of Dante's theological and philosophical vision, which sees divine love as the ordering principle of the entire cosmos.

And yet, when we look back at the most anthologized verses of the *Comedy*, those that have become part of our collective memory over the centuries, we are immediately surprised by a new paradox.

“*Per me si va nella città dolente,
per me si va nell'eterno dolore,
per me si va tra la perduta gente.
Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore:
fecemi la divina potestate,
la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.
Dinanzi a me non fur cose create se non etterne,
ed io eterno duro.
Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate*” (Canto III, Inferno)

The gates of Hell have indeed addressed Dante and Virgil, revealing that Hell was conceived by divine power, supreme wisdom and, above all, first love. These terms are all expressions by which human language attempts to define the nature of God. Dante also glimpses what might be described as the face of God: at this transcendent moment, his will and intellect are harmonized with the universal principle, in a perfect illustration of the Thomist-Aristotelian synthesis. If Hell was indeed created by God – and it was, as its eternal nature proves, since only a divine entity could engender eternity – then it was forged in a surge of

love. This love represents a chance for man to mature and rise towards God, like Dante who, in the middle of his life, finds himself lost in a dark forest, like a homeless person, an exile, condemned to death. He then begins his journey towards light, love and knowledge, a journey during which his life seems to merge with the profound meaning of the word “transhumar”.

Even though his loved ones in Hell are subject to rigors, they are also turned towards a higher mission, a mission that they had already undertaken in part while they were still alive. They accompany Dante in his quest for love, which animates the sun and millions of stars and gives meaning to even the most desperate situations. In this way, Dante’s *Inferno* is not an absolute, but rather a relativity; it is, while at the same time not being, as Jacqueline Risset accurately expresses it in relation to Brunetto Latini¹⁶.

Far from being limited to a Thomistic reading, it is the Aristotelian-Thomistic, even Aristotelian, interpretation of moral issues, virtues and characters that predominates. This allows the gates of Hell, despite their apparent irrevocability, to remain eternally ajar. Moreover, it could not be otherwise, for Dante, in his last letter to the patron Cangrande della Scala, gave a “*Clear guide not only to the interpretation, but to the (ultimate) purpose of The Divine Comedy: whether in its parts or as a whole, it should lift humanity out of the misery of this life and lead it to a state of happiness*”. And again, in accordance with Aristotle’s thinking, that philosophical discourse serves ethical purposes and that in the *Comedy* it is present not just for ‘reflection, but for action’” (Capuder, 1991).

It is now easier to grasp the deeper meaning of the verb “transhumar”. The term represents an ascent, a quest for self-improvement through the virtues, and more specifically, a move towards God, by mobilizing what is divine in us. Aristotle shared this vision, as we have already emphasized: “*But if happiness (eudaimonia) comes from an action in accordance with virtue, it is logical that this action should be in accordance with the highest virtue; this will be the virtue of the best part of ourselves. Whether it is the intellect or anything else that is thought to guide and direct us by nature and to have a perception of what is noble and divine, whether it is really divine in itself or is relatively the most divine part of us, it is the action of that part of us in accordance with its own virtue that will produce perfect happiness.*”

As for Dante, he did not initially call his work “*The Divine Comedy*”, but simply “*Comedy*”. This choice of genre is fully justified here: this is a story that ends on a positive note¹⁷, a victory that transcends even Hell. Indeed, love cannot engender anything that is contrary to it, including Hell, its portals and its eternal ruin. But what are these elements if not the ultimate understanding, the definitive synthesis of the concepts of “eudaimonia” and “transhumar”, both of which express the same feeling: a state of completeness and happiness envisaged in the perspective of eternity? This is the heart of the *Comedy*. This is the very essence of life.

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¹⁶ What is the Divine Comedy? YouTube Documentary 2006.

¹⁷ In the literary world, this is not unusual. Pierre Corneille, a pillar of classical French tragedy, sometimes gave his works the subtitle of “tragi-comedy”. Although the plots were often marked by dramatic and bloody twists and turns, they were generally resolved with a favorable outcome. The most illustrious example of this genre is *Le Cid* (2009, Paris, Flammarion).