

Dan Brown and the Case of the Wrong Dante

Let me begin with a personal note. This is the first Dan Brown novel that I have read. I accepted the invitation to think about Brown's *Inferno* because I have spent my life studying the "real" *Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri. As a scholar I have an interest in making sure that information about Dante is accurate (Mr. Brown graciously included our website, Digital Dante at Columbia University, in his Acknowledgments). I figure I owe something—if not to the public that reads Mr. Brown's novels then certainly to Dante, who has given me a lifetime of intellectual pleasure.

In Brown's book, Professor Robert Langdon is pitted against an adversary who is a Dante fanatic. Bertrand Zobrist, a biochemist, is "a proponent of the Population Apocalypse Equation" (177), the alleged mathematical recognition that only a mass extinction event can save our planet. Based on the conviction that the fourteenth-century Black Death conferred long-term socioeconomic benefits on Europe by having "thinned the human herd" (177), Zobrist has worked out his own scheme to save humanity by unleashing a virus. With a young doctor whom he meets in a Florentine hospital (Sienna Brooks), where he awakens with his head full of terrifying infernal visions, Langdon is on a desperate quest to decipher the clues that Zobrist has left behind, hoping to prevent the release of the virus.

Beginning with a projected image of Botticelli's map of Dante's *Inferno*, various clues lifted (and twisted) from Dante's *Divine Comedy* direct Langdon to extraordinary works of art and architectural monuments in Florence, Venice, and Istanbul. The eastward directionality of the quest ("St. Mark's was so eastern in style that guidebooks

often suggested it as a viable alternative to visiting Turkish mosques” [324]; Istanbul is called the “waystation between two worlds,” where West meets East) suggests a reversal of the human itinerary from its cradle in Mesopotamia. Reversals are programmatic in Brown’s *Inferno*, as they are in the original: “*Dante’s Inferno. The finale. The center of the earth. Where gravity inverts itself. Where up becomes down*” (409).

The principle of reversal, “where up becomes down,” governs the plot, and makes this not your typical thriller: here the crime succeeds (and is perhaps not even a crime). Langdon does not succeed in stopping the dispersal of the virus (which he ultimately learns will not kill but randomly cause sterility in one-third the human population). Nor is his failure viewed as a bad thing, since at the end of the book “a breed of new thinkers” will tackle the crisis. These new thinkers—Zobrist’s follower Sienna Brooks ends up working with the World Health Organization—belong to the Transhumanist movement. Transhumanism, which is to Langdon’s “old-fashioned” Darwinism what Darwinism is to Dante’s Catholicism (“Bertrand’s rare insight into genetics did not come as a flash of divine inspiration” [453]), believes “that we as humans have a moral obligation to participate in our evolutionary process” (453).

Following the principle of reversal, Brown’s *Inferno* really has no villain; in fact, it has an anti-villain. The book’s two Dante enthusiasts—Zobrist and Langdon—end up not diametrically opposed, but morally convergent. The book’s epigraph, “The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis,” turns out to be Zobrist’s credo (163, 319). By the Epilogue it has become Langdon’s credo as well: “*The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.* For Langdon, the meaning of these words had never

felt so clear: *In dangerous times, there is no sin greater than inaction.*” Moreover, Langdon confirms in the Epilogue that Zobrist taught him to think about overpopulation, and acknowledges that he was previously in denial: “Langdon knew that he himself, like millions, was guilty of this. When it came to the circumstances of the world, denial had become a global pandemic. Langdon promised himself that he would never forget this.”

Dante too was committed to cutting through denial, and wrote the *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno* is the first of the three parts of the *Divine Comedy*, followed by *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*) as a poem that he hoped would “save the world” in moral terms—as Sienna Brooks the Transhumanist wants to “save the world” in biogenetic terms (“Then I met Bertrand—a beautiful, brilliant man who told me not only that saving the world was *possible* . . . but that doing so was a moral imperative” [436]). Brown has meditated on the psychology of denial, pernicious among the best and the brightest (“Langdon recalled a recent Web-tracking study of students at some Ivy League universities which revealed that even highly intellectual users displayed an instinctual tendency toward denial” [214]) and has given considerable thought—as Dante did—to the use of entertainment (etymologically, that which holds our attention) for didactic purposes: “According to the study, the vast majority of university students, after clicking on a depressing news article about arctic ice melt or species extinction, would quickly exit that page in favor of something trivial that purged their minds of fear; favorite choices included sports highlights, funny cat videos, and celebrity gossip” (215).

In his *Inferno*, Brown has imitated Dante in writing entertainingly for didactic purposes, as a means of circumventing readers’ denial. The use of Dante in Brown’s *Inferno* is thus programmatic, sutured into its DNA through the deep didacticism that is

“hidden” under the entertaining clues that are intended to offer a cryptographer’s paradise of delight. Brown is following in the path laid out by Dante’s address to the reader cited on p. 253: “O you possessed of sturdy intellects, observe the teaching that is hidden here beneath the veil of verses so obscure” (*Inf.* 9.61-63).¹ The imitation here is not just at the surface level—Langdon reads these verses and learns that he must probe the symbols—but at a deeper level: under the veil of the cryptographic thriller Brown intends to save us by teaching us about overpopulation and the Transhumanist movement.

A key part of the fascination of the *Divine Comedy* for Brown is the great art that it inspired: “Throughout all of history, with the sole exception perhaps of Holy Scripture, no single work of writing, art, music, or literature has inspired more tributes, imitations, variations, and annotations than *The Divine Comedy*” (83). He mentioned in one interview that he had never before dealt with a great work of literary art, as compared to visual art, and we get the impression that he has now checked “Great Literary Work of Art” off his list.

At the core of this book, and perhaps of all of Brown’s books, is a complex dynamic between mass culture and elite culture, and its author’s astute self-fashioning with respect to that dynamic. He is happy to exploit mass culture, but at heart he considers himself an exponent of elite culture. This dynamic is similarly present in his relationship to the tourism industry, which his books both depend upon and contribute to, while at the same time making it clear that he is no typical tourist: the Acknowledgments of Brown’s *Inferno* are a paean to the kind of rarified access that in the past was afforded only to scholars who had spent their lives toiling on specific manuscripts or paintings. All

¹ I applaud Brown for using Allen Mandelbaum’s translation of the *Divine Comedy*, which Langdon considers “dazzling” (228). Many years ago I persuaded Allen to allow his translation to join Longfellow’s on the Digital Dante website. I wish he were still with us to enjoy this reference.

of these secret places are open to Dan Brown, no doubt given red carpet treatment at all the museums and libraries of Europe (with the exception of the Vatican, of whose animosity he is quite proud; see p. 269). He uses his access both to promote a voyeuristic desire on the part of his readers and to remind them that he is special, that he belongs to a vanishing elite which mass tourism has displaced.

So, what grade shall we give Brown as a Dante user? Given his commitment to erudition and his obvious intelligence, he should have done better. He does a decent job of harvesting clues from a wide range of texts that include *Purgatorio* (the 7 Ps), *Paradiso* (the reference to the Florentine Baptistry in canto 25), and even Dante's youthful *Vita Nuova* (Zobrist proclaims his love for Sienna in language from this text on p. 320). However, there are errors, such as the bizarre and meaningless distinction Langdon makes between "formal Italian" on the one hand and the so-called "vernacular" or "language of the people" of the other (82). The word "vernacular" refers to Italian as opposed to Latin, not to a less formal Italian. The Italian vernacular encompasses a full gamut of stylistic registers: it can be both high and formal and low and plebeian, as Dante explained in his treatise *On Vernacular Eloquence* and demonstrated in his *Divine Comedy*.

Another error is Langdon's statement that "Treachery is one of the Seven Deadly Sins—the worst of them, actually—punished in the ninth and final ring of hell" (276). Treachery is indeed punished in the ninth and final ring of Dante's hell, but Dante's hell is not structured according to the Seven Deadly Sins, and the Seven Deadly Sins do not include treachery. Rather, it is Dante's purgatory that is structured according to the Seven Deadly Sins, more accurately called Seven Deadly Vices, because pride, envy, anger,

sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust are *inclinations to sin*, rather than the sin itself, and purgatory is the realm where those sinful inclinations are rooted out of us. Hell is where sinful acts for which one has not repented are eternally punished, and Dante classifies those sinful acts according to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*Inferno* 11). The discussion of "saligia" on p. 58 indicates that Brown knows that the Seven Deadly Sins do not include treachery and suggests that he got confused by the discrepancy between the moral order of *Inferno* and that of *Purgatorio*.

More troubling than such errors is Brown's resistance to the essence and deep logic of Dante's poem: Brown's relentless insistence on terror and misery leads him to characterize the souls of purgatory as "naked figures trudg[ing] upward in misery" (249). And yet the overriding emotion of purgatory is hope, and all parts of the *Divine Comedy*—even the *Inferno*—are stunningly beautiful, psychologically riveting, and illusionistically compelling. There would be no way to know any of this from a reading of Brown's book. Even though illusionism is a theme of Brown's book, given that the Consortium is in the business of making illusions, Brown does not convey Dante's greatness as the ultimate illusionist. He does not acknowledge that the provost's claim "The best illusions involve as much of the real world as possible" (367) is verifiable throughout the *Divine Comedy*, which may well be the most successful virtual reality in history.

Many pages are devoted to Botticelli's map of hell, Brown insisting always on its forbidding qualities, its grimness (I have never seen students respond to this map as grim), while the brilliance of Botticelli's map lies in its precise spatial rendering of the possible world that Dante renders in words. Far from forbidding, it is *attractive*: it makes us want

to pull out microscopes to examine all the little tiny figures that are perfectly executed in their perfect virtual reality.

Brown doesn't seem to have grasped the lesson that the centuries-old tradition of illustrating the *Divine Comedy* offers. Illustrators are drawn to the *Commedia* for its *realism*, topographical but especially psychological. In a Western literary tradition devoted to mimesis (art as representation of reality), Dante took realism to a new level. And his realism takes the form not only of virtual renderings of the landscape of the otherworld, but of deep psychological insights into the souls whom he meets along the path. The staying power of the *Divine Comedy*, the reason there is a market for translations and that we teach it today, is that its realism is in the service of psychological penetration, and generations of readers have been dazzled by what they learn from its pages—for good and for ill—of the human spirit. This is why the illustrators of the *Divine Comedy* do not limit themselves to illustrating the otherworld topography. Rather, many of the most famous illustrations and paintings depict the souls' stories of *their past lives on earth*: Francesca holds the book she was reading when she and Paolo kissed; Ugolino and his sons are in the tower where he died without consoling them.

At the very end of his book Brown shows that he does respond to the humanist energy of Dante's poem, apparently contradicting much of what he has said about the *Divine Comedy* heretofore: "Dante's poem, Langdon was now reminded, was not so much about the misery of hell as it was about the power of the human spirit to endure any challenge, no matter how daunting" (Epilogue). The *Divine Comedy* as an intellectual and indeed "transhumanizing" quest, in the sense of Dante's coinage *trasumanar* in *Par.* 1.70 and as distilled in his Ulysses' "yearning in desire / To follow knowledge, like a sinking

star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought" (*Inferno* 26; citation from Tennyson's *Ulysses*), thus seems to be Brown's true reference point.

Brown also perhaps shows awareness of Dante's lack of orthodoxy in his epigraph on the dangers of neutrality. Dante's invention of a space in the vestibule of hell for neutral souls who "lived without disgrace and without praise" (*Inf.* 3.36), and are consequently rejected by both heaven and hell, is utterly unorthodox: it makes no theological sense to despise a lack of commitment to evil. This unorthodox idea reflects Dante's own zeal to commit, a spirit of action versus inaction that trumps orthodox theology, and leads him to create a category of cowards who are not received in hell, since "even the wicked cannot glory in them" (*Inf.* 3.42). Brown deliteralizes Dante's handling of the neutrals, moving them from a vestibule to "the darkest places in hell" but he is faithful to Dante's activist spirit, which is radical in its flouting of theology in order to disparage neutrality and inaction.

So, Brown has an idea of Dante the humanist. But rather than articulate this idea, he goes to his default comfort zone and defines Dante's greatness in bogus and historically inaccurate fashion, as part of the Catholic Church's drive to force sinners into compliance: "'Dante's *Inferno* created a world of pain and suffering beyond all previous human imagination, and his writing quite literally defined our modern visions of hell,' Langdon paused. 'And believe me, the Catholic Church has much to thank Dante for. His *Inferno* terrified the faithful for centuries, and no doubt tripled church attendance among the faithful'" (84). Catholicism seems to override Brown's capacity for research and historical accuracy, triggering reflexive blinders that make him say absurd things.

The history of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Dante's *Divine Comedy* is not remotely as Brown states it. Very briefly: the *Divine Comedy* raised the hackles of the Church, and for good reason, given what Dante had to say about the corruption of the Church and many of its most prominent figures. After all, the "half-buried body pedaling its legs in wild desperation in the air" (38), a recurring but decontextualized image in Brown's book, refers, in Dante's book, to a pope. The Dominican Guido Vernani called Dante a "vessel of the devil" and the Dominicans banned the poem in 1335.² Special and culturally new in Dante's hell are not the tortures but the Aristotelian framework of his hell and the many classical elements³; the tortures were old hat. It is not true that "Dante's work solidified the abstract concept of hell into a clear and terrifying vision" (64); that work had been done many centuries earlier, and not just by the Bible and Greek mythology, as Brown repeats in interviews: there was a long post-biblical Christian tradition that Dante inherited.⁴ It is not true that Dante invented the "modern vision of hell," as Brown has been claiming in interview after interview. If anything, he invented the modern vision of purgatory. Purgatory was a relatively recent idea in Dante's time, compared to hell or paradise.⁵ Dante invented the very idea of purgatory as a mountain, and thus conditioned later religious thought, as we can see, for

² See Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1992), p. 6.

³ See Teodolinda Barolini, "Medieval Multiculturalism and Dante's Theology of Hell," in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham U. Press, 2006), pp. 102-21.

⁴ See Eileen Gardiner, trans. and ed., *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante* (New York: Italica Press, 1989), Alison Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁵ See Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (1981; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

instance, from the title of Thomas Merton's 1948 religious autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*.⁶

What Dante did was to complicate immensely the already codified vision of hell by adding psychological depth and realism that compelled his readers to sympathize with sinners. Generations of readers have sympathized with characters from *Inferno* such as Francesca, Farinata, and Ugolino. Dantefurther created a moral quagmire for his readers by populating Limbo, against theological orthodoxy, with great classical poets and philosophers, and by making his beloved guide Virgilio one of these same classical poets destined to return to hell, to the dismay of generations of readers. He goes further, using the heaven of justice as an opportunity to question God's justice. How can it be just, he asks, to damn a perfectly virtuous man who happens to be born on the banks of the Indus, with no knowledge of Christ: "And that man dies unbaptized, without faith. / Where is this justice then that would condemn him? / Where is his sin if he does not believe?" (*Par.* 19.76-78). Dante made things less black and white, not more so, as reflected also in the fact that his social positions are frequently more tolerant than those of his contemporaries. Elsewhere, I have shown this to be the case with respect to his treatment of women, of homosexuals, and of racial others.⁷

Dan Brown seems to intuit something of who Dante is. The idea that motivates him, that we will make a hell of earth if we don't change paths, is Dante's. What a shame, then, that Brown does not present *that* Dante to all the potential new readers who will pick up his book.

⁶ New York, Harcourt Brace, 1948.

⁷ See Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante's Sympathy for the Other, Or the Non-Stereotyping Imagination: Sexual and Racialized Others in the *Commedia*," *Critica del Testo* 14 (2011): 177-204, and posted on the Digital Dante website.