“Dark Wood: Cantos 1-2”
Guy P. Raffa

Dark Wood

The dark forest--*selva oscura*--in which Dante finds himself at the beginning of the poem (*Inf. 1.2*) is described in vague terms, perhaps as an indication of the protagonist's own disorientation. The precise nature of this disorientation--spiritual, physical, psychological, moral, political--is itself difficult to determine at this point and thus underscores two very important ideas for reading this poem: first, we are encouraged to identify with Dante (the character) and understand knowledge to be a learning process; second, the poem is carefully structured so that we must sometimes read "backwards" from later events to gain a fuller understanding of what happened earlier.

Characteristic of Dante's way of working, this "dark wood" is a product of the poet's imagination likely based on ideas from various traditions. These include the medieval Platonic image of chaotic matter--unformed, unnamed--as a type of primordial wood (*silva*); the forest at the entrance to the classical underworld (Hades) as described by Virgil (*Aeneid* 6.179); Augustine's association of spiritual error (sin) with a "region of unlikeness" (*Confessions* 7.10); and the dangerous forests from which the wandering knights of medieval Romances must extricate themselves. In an earlier work (*Convivio* 4.24.12), Dante imagines the bewildering period of adolescence--in which one needs guidance to keep from losing the "good way"--as a sort of "meandering forest" (*erronea selva*).

Three Beasts

The uncertain symbolism of the three beasts--a *leopard* (or some other lithe, spotted animal), a *lion*, and a *she-wolf*--contributes to the shadowy atmosphere of the opening scene. Armed with information from later episodes, commentators often view the creatures as symbols, respectively, of the three major divisions of Dante's hell: concupiscence (immoderate desires), violence, and fraud (though some equate the leopard with fraud and the she-wolf with concupiscence). Others associate them with envy, pride, and avarice. Perhaps they carry some political meaning as well (a she-wolf nursed the legendary founders of Rome--Romulus and Remus--and thus came to stand as a symbol of the city). Whatever his conception, Dante likely drew inspiration for the beasts from this biblical passage prophesying
the destruction of those who refuse to repent for their iniquities: "Wherefore a lion out of the wood hath slain them, a wolf in the evening hath spoiled them, a leopard watcheth for their cities: every one that shall go out thence shall be taken, because their transgressions are multiplied, their rebellions strengthened" (Jeremiah 5:6).

It is perhaps best, at this early stage, to take note of the salient characteristics of the animals--the leopard's spotted hide, the lion's intimidating presence, the she-wolf's insatiable hunger--and see how they relate to subsequent events in Dante's journey through hell.

**Virgil**

As guide for his character-self--at least through the first two realms of the afterlife (hell and purgatory)--Dante chooses the classical poet he admired most. Virgil (70-19 B.C.E.), who lived under Julius Caesar and then Augustus during Rome's transition from republic to empire, wrote in Latin and was--he still is--most famous for his *Aeneid*. This epic poem recounts the journey of Aeneas from Troy (he is a Trojan prince)--following its destruction by the Greeks--eventually to Italy, where he founds the line of rulers that will lead to Caesar and the Roman empire of Virgil's day. The poem, in fact, is in one sense a magnificent piece of political propaganda aimed at honoring the emperor Augustus. Two episodes from Virgil's epic were of particular interest to Dante. Book 4 tells the tragic tale of Aeneas and Dido, the queen of Carthage who kills herself when Aeneas--her lover--abandons her to continue his journey and fulfill his destiny by founding a new civilization in Italy. Book 6, in which Aeneas visits the underworld to meet the shade of his father (Anchises) and learn future events in his journey and in the history of Rome, provides key parts of the machinery of the afterlife--primarily mythological monsters and rivers--that Dante uses to shape his own version of the afterlife, hell in particular.

Virgil also wrote four long poems, the *Georgics*, which deal mostly with agricultural themes (though they contain other important material--e.g., the famous story of Orpheus and Eurydice in the fourth *Georgic*). And he wrote ten pastoral poems (*Eclogues*), the fourth of which celebrates the birth of a wonderchild and was thus commonly interpreted in the Christian Middle Ages as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus.
Straight Way

When Dante says he has lost the "straight way"--diritta via (Inf. 1.3)--he again leaves much to our imagination, with the result that we can perhaps relate to the protagonist by imagining many possible meanings for this deviation from the "straight way" (also translated as the "right way"). In medieval thought, abandonment of the "straight way" often indicates alienation from God. However, Dante certainly views such veering as a grand metaphor for the moral and societal problems of his world in addition to any spiritual or psychological issues the phrase may suggest. Dante's notion of the "straight way" appears in all three realms of the afterlife as well as in the world of the living.

Simile

Dante uses numerous similes--comparisons usually with "as" and "so"--to help us imagine what he claims to have seen by describing something similar that is more likely to be familiar to us. The first simile occurs in Inferno 1.22-7. Here Dante compares his narrow escape from danger to the experience of a man who, after arriving safely on shore, looks back at the sea that almost claimed his life. Look for other similes in cantos 1 and 2.

Synesthesia

Meaning a "mixing of senses," synesthesia occurs when one of the five senses is used in a description that normally calls for one of the other senses. When Dante says he was driven back to the place "where the sun is silent" (Inf. 1.60), we wonder how the sun--usually associated with light and therefore sight--can have somehow lost its voice. Look for another example of synesthesia in canto 1. What is the effect of these strange descriptions? How do they contribute to the overall atmosphere of the scene?

Greyhound

The greyhound (veltro) is the first of several enigmatic prophecies in the poem to a savior figure who will come to redirect the world to the path of truth and virtue (Inf. 1.100-11). Although Dante may be alluding to one of his political benefactors--Cangrande, whose name means "big dog"--he probably intends for the prophecy to remain as unspecific (and therefore tantalizingly open to interpretation) as the three beasts and the overall atmosphere of the opening scene.
Aeneas and Paul

Declaring himself unworthy to undertake this journey to the realms of the afterlife, Dante compares himself unfavorably to two men who were in fact granted such a privilege (Inf. 2.10-36). The apostle Paul claims in the Bible to have been transported to the "third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2), and Aeneas visits the underworld in book 6 of Virgil's Aeneid. These two otherworldly travelers are linked through their association with Rome, seat of both the empire and the church. Dante, contrary to Augustine and others, believed the Roman empire in fact prepared the way for Christianity, with Rome as the divinely chosen home of the Papacy.

Three Blessed Women

Similar to other epic poems, the Divine Comedy begins in medias res ("in the middle of events"). This means something has happened prior to the opening action that provides a catalyst for the journey. In this case, Virgil explains in canto 2 that he was summoned to Dante's aid by Beatrice, who was herself summoned by Lucia at the request of a woman able to alter the judgment of heaven (Inf. 2.94-6). This last woman, who sets in motion the entire rescue operation, can only be Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus according to Dante's faith. "Lucia" is Saint Lucy of Syracuse, a Christian martyr closely associated with sight and vision (her name means "light" and she was said to have gouged out her eyes to protect her chastity). Beatrice, who will reappear as a major figure later in the poem, was the inspiration for Dante's early love poetry (she died in 1290 at age 24) and now plays the role of his spiritual guide as well. Along with Virgil, these "three blessed women"--Mary, Lucia, Beatrice--thus make possible Dante's journey to the realms of the afterlife.
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