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### Transformations and Dante

*The Divine Comedy* is a narrative poem written by Dante Alighieri. It depicts a journey toward God. Its first component, *Inferno*, depicts a journey in Hell toward Purgatory. During the journey, Dante had observed the punishment of individual souls. Their punishment related to the sin that they had committed when they were alive. Their punishment had resembled their sin or had contrasted with their sin. That being said, souls had been punished in the second ring of the seventh circle of Hell. These souls took on the appearance of plants. And souls were punished in the seventh ring of the eighth circle of Hell, too. These souls took on the appearance of serpents. That implied that souls would have had their bodies transformed as punishment for their sins. In this paper, I will argue that this punishment—transformation—had related to their sins.

When he had entered the second ring of the seventh circle of Hell, Dante had entered a wood. He had said that there were “no green leaves in the forest, only black; no branches straight and smooth, but knotted, gnarled; no fruits were there, but briars bearing poison” (*Inf.* 13, 4-6). He saw only trees and bushes. But because he had heard screams emanating from within the wood, Dante became confused. So, Virgil suggested that he break the branch of a tree. When he had, the tree had cried out in pain. This was a branch from the tree of Pier delle Vigne. Pier had been an advisor to Emperor Frederick II. But while his advisor, Pier had been accused of treachery. He had committed suicide while imprisoned. Afterward, Pier said that his soul had been sent to Hell. His soul had “sprang a sapling, and a forest tree” (*Inf.* 13, 100-101). That meant that these plants—these trees and bushes—were the transformed bodies of those who had

directed violence toward themselves. Namely, these plants were the transformed bodies of suicides. Why should these plants have been the transformed bodies of suicides, however?

Pier was a human. But his human body had been transformed into a tree once he had entered Hell. While plants can grow, animals can grow and feel. Humans can grow and feel and think. Humans can speak. So, Pier had “used his freedom of bodily movement only to deprive himself of it, robbing himself, by his own act, of that which corporeally distinguished him from a plant” (Leo Spitzer, pp. 81). Because he was a tree, he could no longer grow and think as humans could. And he could no longer speak unless he had had his branches broken. That implied the “tyranny of the need for self-expression by language, the self-mutilating sadistic power of speech which while seeming to give consolation only aggravated the wound” (Spitzer, pp. 91). Pier had wanted to speak with Dante about the accusations made against him before he had died. And he had spoken with Dante, despite it causing him harm.

Ironically, Pier had wanted to avoid harm when he had committed suicide. But that had required that he separate his soul from his human body. Anne Leone said that “what was sinful about suicide was not simply the fact that it involved the separation of the soul from the body. The sinfulness of suicide was predicated on the agency of the perpetrator—the individual separating his soul from his body instead of waiting for God or nature to separate them” (pp. 116-117). Because he had separated his soul from his human body, so his soul was forcibly separated from his human body in Hell. That had damaged his capacities for growth and feeling and thinking, as well as his capacity for speech. Those were capacities that God had given him for being human. So, speaking now caused Pier harm. He cried out in pain and bled. But speaking would not have caused him harm, had he acknowledged the value of having that capacity previously.

Recall what Pier had said to Dante after his branch was broken. He had said, “your hand might well have shown us greater mercy had we been nothing more than souls of serpents” (*Inf.* 13, 37-39). Pier had been referring to souls featured in the seventh ring of the eighth circle of Hell. Entering the seventh ring of the eighth circle, Dante saw humans. They had had their hands bound; their hands were bound by serpents. Among them were Agnello and Cianfa. And among them were Buoso and Francesco.

Consider Agnello and his transformation. Cianfa had previously had his human body transformed into the body of a serpent. And he had intertwined their bodies in a display of copulation. Dante said, “they stuck close, as if of heated wax they had been made, and intermixed their color; nor one nor other seemed now what he was” (*Inf.* 25, 61-63). Copulation is a process whereby two became one while simultaneously remaining two. Meaning, Cianfa had had Agnello transform into what was neither serpent nor human. Effectively, “every original aspect there was canceled; two and yet none had the perverted image appeared, and such departed with slow pace” (*Inf.* 25, 76-78). Their heads had become one. Their faces had become one. Their sets of arms had become one. And their sets of legs had become one as well.

Meanwhile, the serpent Francesco had pierced Buoso’s navel. They had been enveloped in smoke that emanated from his mouth and from the pierced navel. That had begun a process by which the human was transformed into a serpent and the serpent was transformed into a human. Dante said, “Because two natures never front to the front has he transmuted so that both the forms to interchange their matter ready were” (*Inf.* 25, 100-102). Francesco’s tail had become legs, his front legs had become arms, his back legs had become a penis, and his skin had loosened. His posture had changed. And his snout had become a face. Thereafter, Dante

understood that serpents were the transformed bodies of thieves. Why should these serpents have been the transformed bodies of thieves, though?

Theft is the appropriation of personal property. But the fraudulence of these thieves distinguished them from thieves in the first ring of the seventh circle of Hell. Fraud “involves the alternation between the posture which inspires confidence and the act which harms, between the surface appearance and the hidden purpose” (Joan Ferrante, pp. 84). Because they had had an appearance of honesty, they had been able to appropriate property. They had eluded harm by their fraudulence. However, Dante could see them as they were while in Hell (Ferrante, pp. 94). When they were in their serpent bodies, they had had to deceive their fellow thieves. And while they were in their human bodies, they were deceived by their fellow thieves. When they were deceived, their human bodies were transformed into the bodies of serpents. That could have been because they had stolen property when they were alive. Because they had stolen property when they were alive, so had these thieves had their property—specifically, their human bodies—stolen from them when they were dead. That had damaged their capacities for growth and feeling and thinking, as well as his capacity for speech.

By writing *Inferno*, Dante had argued that transformations would occur when we had died and entered Hell. Souls of those who were violent would be souls transformed, and souls of those who were fraudulent would be transformed. Human bodies would be transformed into plants; these were bodies of people who had directed violence toward ourselves, or who had committed suicide. And human bodies would be transformed into the bodies of serpents; these were bodies of people who had been fraudulent in their thievery. Between suicides and fraudulent thieves had been the element of elusion. They had wanted to elude harm. However, transforming their human bodies would only harm them in Hell. Transforming their human

bodies, they would not be able to elude harm. That was because we would remain human—in essence—after our bodies had been transformed. Those whose human bodies were transformed into plants remained human, in essence. Those whose human bodies were transformed into the bodies of serpents remained human, in essence. And that was how we would be held culpable for our sin. We would be held culpable for our suicide by having had the appearance of plants. And we would be held culpable for our theft by having had the appearance of serpents. According to Barolini, that was because “selfhood could not be undone.”

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