HOW DOES IT FEEL?

DANTE'S INFERNO IN 7 EMOTIONS

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PREFACE

What happens when 21st-century people from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic communities reflect on their emotional language by confronting the seven main emotions – fear, courage, hope, love, compassion, desire, and joy – displayed in the opening scenes of Dante's *Commedia*, one of the most celebrated works of medieval times and world literature? Emotional language is subjective and cultural at the same time.

How individuals feel and express their emotions is not entirely "personal". It originates from highly codified vocabularies that vary across time, space, and groups. Vice versa, communities are shaped by shared beliefs and emotional communication alike. Since the 2000s, scholars have applied the notion of "emotional community" to explore the socially constructed nature of emotions, as well as the role played by emotional expression in community-making. Remarkable relics of emotional communities from the past, literary texts also contribute to their fashioning across time, thanks to their empathetic force. Literature indeed creates affective bonds that connect even distant readers to the subjects represented and, ultimately, to the author's emotional landscape.

Due to both its richness and legacy, Dante's *Commedia* is particularly helpful to explore this vital dynamic. The initiative "How does it feel? Dante's Emotions Today" engages the U of T community to confront and creatively reinterpret the emotional display nourishing the opening scenes of Dante's masterpiece. Our intent is to foster collective reflection on the relationship between emotional experience, literature, and community-making, while also prompting critical thought on empathy, otherness, and emotional plurality.

1

FEAR/PAURA

Dante's *Inferno* begins under the sign of displacement (*smarrimento*) and fear (*paura*). The character who says "I" throughout the whole poem – Dante the Pilgrim – has lost the right path. Midway in his life, he finds himself alone in the darkness of a wild, impenetrable, and terrifying wood.

Even just the memory of this forest suffices to scare him again (*Inf.* I, 4-6). But fright does not paralyze him, and he somehow manages to reach the foot of a hill. Reassured by the first rays of the rising sun, he begins ascending the mount. Soon after, however, he faces terror once more. Three beasts suddenly block his way up. First a leopard, then a fiery lion, and finally a famished she-wolf, whose sight brings so much fear in his heart that he gives up hope of making it to the summit. The vocabulary of fear – consider that the word *paura* occurs five times just within the first 54 verses of *Inferno* I – is amplified by the vivid depiction of its physical effects: Dante the Pilgrim is shaking with tremors and tears.

But is all "fear" the same? The scary emotion that Dante the Pilgrim feels when facing the three beasts seems different from the fear that almost froze him when lost in the dark wood. This is indeed a positive sense of fear that urges him to flee and later embark on his journey of conversion. When a shade appears from nowhere, he verbalizes this strong emotion by crying out the words: "Have mercy on me" (*Inf.* I, 65). That's the beginning of his relationship with the soul who will become his guide throughout hell and purgatory, the Roman poet Virgil. By

comprising both fear of God's punishment and fear of losing God's love, the sentiment of anguish that Dante felt has helped him become aware of his own moral and spiritual perdition and becomes the premise to overcome it by seeking help (Rea 2012).

Virgil will explain to him that he must traverse hell, purgatory, and heaven to escape the perils of the wilderness. In learning this, however, Dante the Pilgrim develops yet a third kind of fear: he is afraid of not being able to face such a challenge. Who allowed his exceptional journey and why? Would it not be presumptuous of him to embark on it? Virgil's reaction to his new paralysis is severe, as he should not allow cowardice (*viltade*) to enter his soul. Fear here becomes more like weakness, or, as Virgil puts it sharply few lines later, Dante's feeling resembles the anxious shying of an animal caused by the sight of something deemed erroneously dangerous (*Inf.* I, 48) (Boyde 1993). However, there is no reason to be frightened: God Himself has allowed Dante's journey throughout the afterlife.

Inferno I-II thus reveal the complex psychology and meaning of fear, offering a clear distinction between fruitful and destructive feelings of fright (Maldina 2015). As Beatrice will later explain, "we should fear those things alone that have the power to harm. Nothing else is frightening" ("temer si dee di sole quelle cose / c'hanno potenza di fare altrui male; / de l'altre no, ché non son paurose"; *Inf.* II, 88-90). After all, Dante declares from the very beginning that, in the wood, he found good things: "But to set forth the good I found I will recount the other things I saw" ("ma per trattar del ben ch'I' vi trovai, /dirò de l'altre cose ch'I' v'ho scorte; *Inf.* I, 8-9). By undertaking their own journey with Dante the Pilgrim, the readers of the *Commedia* are encouraged to understand and work through their feelings, in a way that aims to reveal the transformative power of both emotions and literature.

2

COURAGE/ARDIRE

What does it take to overcome fear? At the beginning of *Inferno* II, Dante the Pilgrim feels intense insecurity about his journey, whether he is authorized to undertake it and, moreover, whether he is up to it.

Dante's doubt resembles the wavering of the protagonist of Virgil's epic poem, the classical hero Aeneas (Hollander 2000). Not by chance, in the *Commedia*, it is Virgil who responds to Dante's misgivings, asking him, "Why are you not more spirited and sure?" ("perché ardire e franchezza non hai?"; *Inf.* II, 123). The term he uses, sureness (*franchezza*), is a common element in medieval prayers beseeching God's aid (Consoli 1970). Later in the same canto, Dante frees himself from fear as he learns his journey is granted by three ladies in heaven – the Virgin Mary, Saint Lucy, and Beatrice – and hence by God. Emboldened by divine support, he finds courage, which here signifies both self-confidence and promptness in action (Onder 1970). In other words, his faith in God enables him to position himself as a foil to the classical warriors of ancient tradition, transforming himself into a hero endowed with a new vision of strength and willpower.

Dante describes his renewed sense of determination with a vivid simile. He feels like a little flower, closed in the night, but blossoming in the new rays of the morning, "So much courage poured into my heart" ("tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse"; *Inf.* II, 131). While we might find the association between courage and a delicate flower rather singular, it serves to underscore the

language of light, thus connecting the new sense of security he feels with the providential nature of his journey. This link is crucial in Dante's emotional landscape: this is what distinguishes *good* courage ("buono ardire") from negative examples of the same feeling, such as the depiction of Eve's sin as "impudence" ("ardimento"; *Purg*. XXIX, 24), or the hero Odysseus's "fervor" when he embarked on a journey similar to that of Dante the Pilgrim but against divine will ("ardore"; *Inf*. XXVI, 97). Blossoming like a flower, Dante's courage does not spring from himself, from self-entitlement, pride or egoism; it springs from the celestial powers above.

Rather than the anxiety of guilt and condemnation which is often characteristic of medieval Christian spirituality, Dante the Pilgrim's courage is an ideal emotional state, the condition of a calm, settled and untroubled mind. Does this mean that he has now overcome all of his fears, that there is no more space for anguish in his heart, and that he will never be emotionally affected again? Dante the Pilgrim's courage is also a condition of openness and readiness that will bring him to confront the intense suffering and anguish of hell. Thus, good courage is a two-faced emotion: it is confidence in God, but also the acknowledgment of his all-encompassing power. By comparing himself to a blossoming flower, Dante signals the realization of his humanity, the beginning of his realigning of himself with the vision of humanity which he will confront in the depths of hell. Courage, then, is the emotion one feels while going through a process of reconfiguration in the context of flux and chaos (Took 2013). Ultimately, his journey underlines the meaning of the courage to both be – and change – ourselves.

3

HOPE/SPERANZA

What does it mean to feel hopeful? In *Inferno* I-II, Dante the Pilgrim starts learning all the complex dynamism of hope, as well as its shortcomings when faced with dismay, fear, and above all solitude.

Since his very first steps out of the dark wood, hope is more than the passive status of one who expects to achieve happiness; it is the impulse prompting to overcome the obstacles that impede the path towards goodness. However, as Dante the Pilgrim finds out very soon, momentum alone is not enough. Neither the light of the rising sun, nor the sweetness of springtime that had initially filled his heart with good hope ("bene sperar", *Inf.* I, 41) will help him face the lion and the she-wolf blocking his way up to the mountain. Even worse, the dreadful sight of the latter instills so much heaviness in his heart that he loses hope of reaching the heights ("perdei la speranza de l'altezza", *Inf.* I, 54).

Although prompted by the vigor of hope, then, Dante the Pilgrim's first attempts at salvation fall short in no time. This failure, however, does not imply that hope is a vain feeling – after all, medieval theology conceived hope as one of the three virtues (the other two being faith and charity) that divine Grace bestows on human beings to attain heavenly bliss (Salsano–Truijen 1970). Much more simply, this failure teaches him that hope has little to do with individualism. Only the encounter with Virgil will restore Dante's courage and renew his hope in God. Besides, three blessed women – the Virgin Mary, Saint Lucy, and Beatrice – have

contributed to his rescue. Hence, Virgil makes it clear that the rekindling of hope is nothing but a community endeavor favored by the divine. No wonder that the Biblical epistle of Saint James conceives patience as an industrious condition in which Christians prepare their hearts to receive and put into practice God's Word, in a way that encompasses caring for one's neighbors' material and spiritual needs (James, 1, 21-25; 2, 14-26; 5, 7-11; 5, 19-20; Gianferrari 2019). In other words, hope fights off inertia, apathy, and separateness, and as Dante the Pilgrim discovers since the very beginning of his journey, it takes a village to keep trusting in both one's own strengths and God's salvific plan, especially when one's capacity to see and feel what is true is somehow blurred.

The value of collectivity in the reviving of hopefulness will become much clearer when Dante the Pilgrim will be examined on the virtue of hope, later on in *Paradiso*, by Saint James himself. Dante will then present himself not only as a champion of hope but also as someone who will share and divulge the teachings of the Biblical authors in matters of hope. Indeed, the poetry of the *Commedia* has the ambition to spread the Word of God among the vast community of its readers, and the account of Dante's providential journey serves precisely the purpose of both personal and collective redemption. Dante was granted access into God's realm to instill, in himself and in others, the hope that makes one fall in love with the true good (*Par*. XXV, 40-45). Thanks to the ardent hope in humanity's future salvation, people on Earth will be able to direct their desire towards God, and the poem becomes a powerful tool of Christian community-making through the shared emotion of hope.

4
LOVE/AMORE

Can one find love amid a dark wood? In *Inferno* I-II, *amore* is what saves Dante the Pilgrim. As Virgil relates, Beatrice urged him to come to the rescue of "*her* friend, who is no friend of Fortune" ("l'amico mio, e non de la ventura"; *Inf.* II, 61). True friendship, which is rooted in virtue and disinterested benevolence, unites her with him even beyond death (Casella 1943; Chiavacci Leonardi 1991-1997). Their emotional bond dates many years before, and even predates their births.

In late medieval Europe, many attempted to explain what love is. In his influential handbook *On love*, Andreas Capellanus maintains that this feeling is "an inborn suffering (*passio*) proceeding from the sight and immoderate thought upon the beauty of the other sex". Because of it, one wishes "to embrace the other and, by common assent, in this embrace, to fulfill the commandments of love" (*De amore*, I, i). Poets often worked along these lines. For instance, the 13th-century Sicilian poet Giacomo da Lentini explains that love is a desire (*desio*) originating from the eyes and nourished by the heart (Lansing–Kumar 2018). This is what "love" was to Dante, even before he experienced it. Even so, he soon contributed to changing this, quite physical, vision. Following in the footsteps of Guido Guinizzelli, one of the key figures of the previous generation, when still an unknown young poet, Dante postulates the full identity between love and the nobility of the soul: "Love and the gracious heart are a single thing" ("Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa"; *Vn*, XX 3). The *Vita*

nuova articulates this idea further. Here, Dante celebrated his spiritual and poetic metamorphoses thanks to the miraculous effects emanating from Beatrice, a human creature that testifies to the power of the divine on Earth. Thanks to her, he learned how to love disinterestedly and overcome idle pleasure and bodily fulfilment. The *Commedia* goes even further. By conceiving love as an inner force that may incline either towards the good or towards the evil, with Augustine, Dante envisions it as the crucial striving force, the one that can bring men either eternal salvation or damnation (*Purg*. XVIII, 103-105). Love might be foolish (*folle*, *Par*. VIII, 2) (Pasquini–Favati 1970), but the *Commedia* aims to guide its readers' love towards the true good – God.

And here we are again in the dark wood. Indeed, like hope, redemption cannot be achieved on one's own. From Virgil we know that not only Beatrice but also two other compassionate women in the heavens have contributed to saving Dante: the Virgin Mary, whose love is capable of bending God's judgment, and Saint Lucy, who has exhorted Beatrice to help her once-upon-a-time lover (*Inf*. II, 104-105). The love that Dante praised in the *Vita nuova* thus plays a vital role in the narrative device and the spiritual enterprise of the *Commedia*, and Beatrice's "friendship" with Dante is more than what we label as such today. As she proclaims, she was prompted by love (*Inf*. II, 72). This emotional bond is also very different from Andreas Capellanus's passion, and much closer to *caritas*, that form of divine love that founds the relationship between God and human beings in Christian theology (Delhaye 1970; Livorni 2000). As per Jesus' say, "This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15, 12-13). *Inferno* I-II bring to light the force of love rooted in Christ's friendship towards humanity.

5

COMPASSION/PIETÀ

At the beginning of *Inferno* II, the journey throughout hell is labeled as "the struggle of the way and of the pity of it" ("la guerra / sì del cammino e sì de la pietate"; *Inf*. II, 4-5). This definition captures both the challenging physical path that Dante the Pilgrim must endure and the extremely intense emotion which sprouts from this experience. So, why does pity trigger a struggle?

Differently from nowadays, in Dante's language, compassion (or pity) is not only a feeling of sorrow caused by the suffering of others but, more broadly, the capacity to feel the emotions of those around us. Compassion exists in empathy. Throughout his infernal descent, Dante the Pilgrim's empathetic response to the damned is hinting at his own moral failings. His empathy sometimes expresses leniency and even solidarity towards sinners, who, from the medieval perspective, deserve their places in hell (Cranston 1968). Pity is thus here a sign of the Pilgrim's fractured psychology, as he does not yet fully grasp the nature of divine justice, nor the functioning of divine mercy, which embraces and forgives human fragility as long as there is true repentance. Dante's experiences reflect the complexity of our compassion towards those who have done wrong, as well as the difficulty, for human beings, to welcome and be inspired by God's wisdom and justice.
But compassion isn't always a weakness, on the contrary. Traditionally counted among the gifts of the Holy Spirit, one that prepares to give and receive love and charity, compassion also

testifies to the relationship with the divine (*Conv*. II, x, 6; Lanci 1970). Not surprisingly, Dante the Pilgrim's first spoken word in the *Commedia* is a plea for compassion. Seeing Virgil's shade approach him, he cries out, "Have mercy on me!" ("*Miserere* di me!"; *Inf*. I, 65). And, to reassure him, Virgil replies that, ever since he met Beatrice, he "felt compassion" for Dante ("nel primo punto che di te mi dolve"; *Inf.* II, 51). In Christian culture, this emotion is also strongly associated with the Virgin Mary, whose understanding of human suffering makes her the intermediary between men and God. This is her role in *Inferno* II as well: she is the "gracious lady in Heaven so moved by pity" ("donna è gentil nel ciel che si compiange"; *Inf*. II, 94), who paves the way for the Pilgrim's rescue. Dante's description of Beatrice herself echoes this same feature: "O how compassionate was she to help me!" ("Oh pietosa colei che mi soccorse!"; *Inf*. II, 133), the Pilgrim exclaims, full of gratitude and hope for salvation. Their "love" for Dante is a "compassionate" one: they feel his contradictory feelings and respond by nourishing his hope for mercy and his aspiration for redemption. Through pity, Virgil is carrying out not only a chain of divine command, but the chain of empathy which finally re-connects Dante the Pilgrim to God.

Humans, according to Dante, always feel for one another and compassion is the essence of any human bond. Only, they do not always know how to regulate their closeness or, to put it differently, how to align the affective bonds that unite them with the highest – and perhaps ultimately incomprehensible – power. Hence the "struggle". The journey of Dante the Pilgrim is also a journey to understand how compassion works, when our openness to the feelings of others may be beneficial, or, on the contrary, when empathy may become dangerous, thus prompting us to abandon "wicked and witless companions" (*Par*. XVII, 61).

6

DESIRE/DESIDERIO

For Dante, desire is movement. It is the impetus of seeking, driven by an affective bond between a desiring subject and the object towards which it reaches. As we might expect, desire is often characterized as one of the phases of love, the incomplete stage of longing before the subject joins into a union with the beloved (Salsano 1970). Surprisingly, though, in the *Inferno*, the first character who confesses to the feeling of desire (*disio*) is Beatrice.

Descending into limbo from paradise, her first appearance is shaped by the impetus of desire: as she tells Virgil, "I come from where I most desire to return" ("vegno del loco ove tornar disio"; *Inf.* II, 71). Virgil later amplifies this self-presentation: paradise is the destination to which Beatrice is "burning" – in the metaphorical fire of desire – to return ("l'ampio loco ove tornar tu ardi"; *Inf.* II, 84).

But how can a blessed soul desire so ardently? Beatrice's intense longing for paradise, even during this short absence, illuminates a crucial dimension of Dante's Christian imagination: the soul's aspirations for goodness and for salvation marry the most human emotions. What is more, Virgil's retelling of Beatrice's longing ultimately triggers Dante the Pilgrim's own desire (*disiderio*) to embark on the journey which will finally lead him to Beatrice and to paradise. As he tells Virgil, "Your words have made my heart so eager" ("Tu m'hai con disiderio il cor disposto"; *Inf.* II,

136). Represented as a strengthening of the will, the feeling of desire intervenes and disrupts Dante the Pilgrim's misgivings about his abilities.

What is the relationship between desire and will? In medieval theology, the longing for the good is often understood as the driving force behind all human activity (Boyde 1993). According to a definition inspired by Augustine and Aquinas, and as Beatrice has taught, the proper destination of desire corresponds to the soul's union with God, positioning desire as an obsessive instinct that pulls the soul back toward its true homeland. Ideally, then, desire should reinforce the rational and conscious inclinations of individuals toward God.

Finally, does desire always align with will? Or, to put it simply, are all desires good? Later, Dante will stage desire as a chaotic force, operating beyond all reason: the desire of the two lovers, Paolo and Francesca, is so strong that it enslaves their will and even their reason is subject to it (*Inf.* V, 38-39; Lombardi 2012). As his journey through Hell is filled with encounters with those who desired unwisely, Dante prompts reflections on the complex relationship between the longings of human desire, the contradictory impulses of emotions, and the many ways in which instinct can fail us and instigate the decision to do wrong.

7

JOY/GIOIA

Having witnessed his struggle with the three beasts, Virgil exclaims: “But you, why are you turning back to misery? Why do you not climb the peak that gives delight, origin and cause of every joy?” (“ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia? / Perché non sali il dilettoso monte ch’è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?”, *Inf.* I, 76-78). Either interpreted as the mount of purgatory or, more generally, as the path towards goodness, the sunlit mountain that stands out in *Inferno* I is a promise of joy.

Even if only in glimmers, then, in the opening scene of the *Inferno*, Dante the Pilgrim discovers the emotion of joy. Joy is the feeling of fulfillment. The Italian *gioia*, like the English joy, stems from the realm of poetry. It derives from Provençal troubadours, who used it to name the pleasant feeling of satisfaction that comes from loving. However, taking his distance from his predecessors, with this word and, interchangeably, with terms coming from Latin, such as *letizia* (delight) and *felicità* (happiness), Dante refers less to sensual gratification than to the emotional fulfillment of heavenly bliss. More technically, “beatitude” is nothing but eternal joy, delight, and happiness (Mariani 1970).

Not by chance, a few lines later, those who repent of their sins in purgatory are defined as those “who are content to burn because they hope to come, whenever it may be, among the blessed” (“color che son contenti / nel foco, perché speran di venire /

quando che sia a le beate genti"; *Inf.* I, 118-120): while burning, they are happy, literally satisfied by their hope of future fulfillment. A paradox, no doubt. The same paradox that, in late medieval theological discussions and penitential practices, envisions meditations on and partaking in Christ's pain on the Cross as forms of relief. Insofar, as Christ's sacrifice led to humanity's salvation, His suffering coexisted with joy. Hence, during their pilgrimage towards the divine, penitents in this world should embrace their condition with delight.

Provided that feeling joy is possible in this life too, does it always have to do with sensual satisfaction or delightful penitence? Though less fully than in heaven, Dante maintains that, here and now, one may enjoy happiness in a twofold way. The first way consists of acting in accordance with the dictates of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice; the second entails contemplating God's own operations (*Conv*. IV, xvii, 9-11; IV, xxii, 11-18; Consoli 1970). In other words, in this world, joy may spring from bringing to fruition the full potential of our most noble part that distinguishes us from animals: our reason. On the other hand, however, Dante's reflection on happiness highlights the unavoidable fragility of human rational nature, which may risk pursuing false images of good (Naitana 2013).

Inferno I-II precisely dramatize the loss of the paths leading towards earthly and eternal beatitude, while also bringing to light the importance of using reason and welcoming divine help to regain confidence in one's own virtues to embark on a journey towards joy. By learning to distinguish between sterile and fruitful pleasures, Dante the Pilgrim, and we readers with him, will have a chance at experiencing the incomparable delight of eternal bliss.

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