

Dante's Terza Rima in *The Divine Comedy*: The Road of Therapy

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Wisdom's pursuit through symbols, metaphors, poetry, and therapy is a path of indirection, less available the more one's pursuit is direct. Wisdom may be gained through particular processes of knowing, pilgrimages towards the truth of things. Dante's 14th century poem engages a new rhyme scheme to further this pursuit of knowing towards wisdom. He called it terza rima, or third rhyme. Its structure, the essay argues, embodies two movements of the soul: the journey towards knowing, one which is always bending back in memory, and the movement of therapy itself, wherein one becomes more conscious by seeing in the present a confluence of one's history and one's destiny at the same instant.

Love and the gracious heart are but one thing,
As that wise poet puts it in his poem;
As much can one without the other be
As without reason can the reasoning mind.

(Dante Alighieri, 1290/1992, p. 39)

The pursuit of gnosis seems a perennial desire of being human and feeling that fire of desire in the belly to gain greater consciousness. Perhaps *knowing*, a present participle and a gerund, is both an action from the verb and a condition from the noun. As a part of speech, gerunds may comprise the linguistic structure of the new physics because of their ability to include at once both movement and matter. As such, present participles not only represent a part of speech, but more to our concerns, may indeed be archetypes of rhetoric because they allow something like knowing to be both an action and a state of being, which encourages a new pattern of awareness, as in the following two sentences:

Knowing that Italy would be warm in July, Sandy packed several sleeveless blouses.

In this structure *knowing* is an action. But a crucial shift occurs in the second sentence:

Knowing is one corridor that may lead to wisdom.

Here is the same word, but strolling now in a new neighborhood, *knowing* is a condition of being.

To pursue what may be archetypally resolute about wisdom traditions invites a few earlier questions:

What is knowing? Is there a stream of consciousness that leads from perception to reflection to knowledge to wisdom? Does wisdom erupt, full blown, when the goddess Athena is deployed in all of her resplendent warrior wisdom from the forehead of her father, Zeus, as an icon for consciousness itself? The Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset (2002) called that condition faced by all human beings, "to have it out with their surroundings...they have to know what to abide by about it" (p. 198). He referred to this condition of figuring out what to believe about one's surroundings the construction of "a primordial reality" which is "to set in motion their intellectual apparatus, the main organ of which—I contend—is the imagination" (p. 198).

Is there inherent, therefore, in the nature and indeed the structure of poetic knowledge, an organizing principle that offers a particular angle of vision on wisdom as part of a poetic tradition? My thesis here is that poetry is *mimetic* precisely because psyche is analogic, metaphoric, and mythic in both its posturings as verb and as noun. We could, with some reward, open psyche up to a discussion of adjectives, pronouns, prepositions, even the psycho-dynamics of commas and semicolons, but that is another essay on psyche's grammatical proclivities.

By asserting the above observation, I want to create a short but richly endowed pearl necklace, the beads of which include Aristotle, Dante, and C.G. Jung, in that historical order, but not necessarily in that same mythic beadwork. The reclusive and profound poet of New England, Emily Dickinson (1960), gathered so much of what will be explored here in one of her most pithy poetic pronouncements:

Tell all the Truth—but tell it slant,
Success in Circuit lies;
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise.
As Lightning to the Children eased,
With explanation kind
The truth must dazzle gradually,
Or every man be blind (#1129, pp. 506-507)

The truth must be grazed, perhaps leaving a discernible burn mark on the exposed arm as it passes intimately by; it must not be assaulted directly from front or behind. Rather, it must be taken in subtly, with nuance aforethought. So might the same be said for wisdom itself. The slant part of telling the truth is a poetic move because it suggests that the major vehicles to carry the tenor of truth are metaphor and analogy, both eager presenting symptoms that encourage indirection to find direction out—which the obsequious Polonius suggested to his daughter Ophelia during the early warning storms of deceit in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Moreover, my sense is that metaphorical knowing is archetypal, what Jung (1971) himself called an archetype of transformation. In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, his first chapter, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," was devoted to outlining the physiology of archetypes. As he neared the end of an in-depth discussion of three archetypal figures—the shadow, the anima and the wise old man—those figures which he believes "can be directly experienced in personified form" (§ 80), he decided to include, in what feels almost like an after-thought, another brand of archetype, what he referred to as *archetypes of transformation*. They are not personalities, he insisted, but are rather akin to typical situations, places, ways and means, that symbolize the kind of transformation in question. "They are genuine symbols because they are ambiguous, full of half-glimpsed meanings, and in the last resort, inexhaustible" (§ 80).

Symbolic reality then, if we cull Jung's insight, is a valid and perennial way both of knowing and

of seeking wisdom. Symbols, like metaphors, which the mythologist Joseph Campbell called "the native tongue of myth" (2002, p. 8), includes as well similes, correspondences, analogies, all of which offer pathways to wisdom through knowledge that is figural in their intention, indirect in their focus, and precise in their structure. The importance of such power to direct the soul towards knowledge and wisdom Campbell corraled in the following assertion: "The life of a mythology springs from and depends on the metaphoric vigor of its symbols" (p. 6). By the rich word *vigor* I understand him to mean it must contain enough psychic libidinal energy to further the knowledge contained therein. Like a particularly powerful dream, it must amass enough energy to break through into conscious awareness and settle with surety in the memory. When a metaphor, or even an entire mythos, loses vigor, it collapses like a wet rag into a personal or cultural cliché.

Knowing, in addition, is by indirection, one of the hallmarks of poetic intuition or instinct, what I choose to call a *gnosopoetics* or *mythopoetics*, for it requires something to be taken in by perception, imagined anew, ordered in its content, and then articulated through some medium of coherence to form a complete experience. Not meaning but an experience of life itself is what Campbell believed people sought in their lives. Meaning is often overrated while life itself remains on the shelf, in the back, un-lived and perhaps *underrated*.

Moreover, the physicist and educator, Donald Cowan (1988), informed us in *Unbinding Prometheus: Education for the Coming Age*, that fundamentally learning occurs in three moments: 1. an apprehension or *grasping*; 2. a *mapping*; and 3. a *making* something from the previous two moments (p. 85, emphasis supplied). This last condition activates *poiesis*, what the philosopher Aristotle referred to as a making or a shaping into a coherent form what had hitherto been untended and unexpressed. Knowledge grows directly from such a process, a pilgrimage of sorts, through just such an imaginal working. It carries with it a tendency to cultivate, a tending, as one does to a field of crops. As such, it is intimately connected with culture, for culture itself is a consequence and a product of cultivating. As the philosopher, poet, and Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry (1978) articulated so elegantly in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, "A fully vibrant culture, it seems to me, is one which cultivates the soil of wisdom herself; wisdom is indeed soiled and of the earth" (p. 43).

In his *Poetics*, if we leave Jung and poetry for a moment and return to 5th Century BCE Athens, Aristotle (trans. 1969) made a profound discovery when he explored in detail Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as a paradigm for the genre of tragedy and as a fitting launch pad for remarks on poetry's general nature. In what may be perhaps the first work of literary theory in the West, Aristotle set out in rather rigid prose to catalogue and differentiate the parts of tragedy as drama. In his exploration, however, I believe he anticipated some major insights of depth psychology, hence his inclusion here. He founded his sense of imitation in pleasure, the kind of pleasure a child experiences by mimicking or imitating, often in exhaustive repetition, some action in play: "For the process of imitation is natural to mankind from childhood on: Man is differentiated from other animals because he is the most imitative of them, and he learns his first lessons through imitation" (p. 7). I want to set in motion here, but not extend it, a relevant connection between repetition and the more subtle recursivity of psyche's perennial motion to return, to retrieve, and to renew what already enjoys a certain familiar domicile in memory. My last observation here serves as a brief prolegomenon to Dante's *Commedia*, which will shortly enter this discussion.

Learning is a pleasurable act, Aristotle (trans. 1969) believed. It grows from "viewing representations because it turns out that they learn and infer what each thing is—for example, that this particular object is that kind of object" (p. 7). Knowing by analogy gives pleasure, if not joy, in the act of learning. To think, remember, and articulate by analogy is joy-full because it affords pleasure in the act of creating one-in-relationship to what may be unfamiliar, and then successfully yokes it to the familiar. The heartbeat of poetry throbs right here, as does the pleasure which accrues from such a sustained blood pressure.

Aristotle (trans. 1969) suggested this is an inborn impulse; perhaps like an instinct it has its corollary in the archetypal realm of psyche and in an archetypal "ways and means" of Jung's definition of *archetypes of transformation* cited earlier. Poetry, here tragedy specifically in Aristotle's calculus, imitates an action, "not of men, but of life, for life consists in action" (p. 8). Not only is this action the origin of poetry, it is the origin of learning, itself. I further assert that it is the origin of archetypes and of their study in archetypal psychology, their aesthetic presence in art and poetry, and the origin of the road to wisdom. Such an action resides at the center of therapy itself and may constitute a central motion in all healing.

I say this because of a dependent adverbial clause of Jung's (1970) that arrested me years ago, and that I contend carries the payload inherent in depth psychology. I cite it here from *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*: "Since analogy formation is a law which to a large extent governs the life of the psyche..." (§ 441). I sidestep the main clause of this sentence; it is not needed for my purposes here. But I do believe this dependent clause is worth a moment of meditation for what it implies.

In this clause Jung is Aristotelian in a very specific way: both Aristotle and Jung shared a belief that innate to the human being is an impulse towards analogy formation, or an instinct to imitate. Advertising knows this implicitly and any successful marketing campaign is predicated on this core insight. Both Aristotle and Jung share as well a similar sense of the power of analogy's presence as a way of knowing. The subtle slide from knowledge is yet to be explored. Analogy, moreover, is the cloak worn by symbol, metaphor, simile, and myth, often of a brightly colored fabric.

Let us add Joseph Campbell (2002) to the discussion in order to reveal his connection to both Aristotle and Jung. He insisted at the end of the first chapter of *Thou Art That*: "A system of mythological symbols only works if it operates in the field of a community of people who have essentially analogous experiences, or to put it another way, if they share the same realm of life experience" (p. 8); not duplicate lives, but the same realm, which allows sufficient latitude for one to achieve an original journey in this sublunary realm.

In our story, *plot* for Aristotle (trans. 1969), was the soul of tragedy (p. 13) and we could add, the soul of poetry; character is second in importance, for character is the vehicle that carries the tenor of the plot. Tragedy, Aristotle further asserted, "is an imitation of an action; and it is, on account of this, an imitation of men acting" (p. 13). Francis Fergusson, commenting on the word *action* in this edited volume of the *Poetics*, believed it is not overt action, but rather, citing Dante, whom we will welcome in a moment, "a movement of spirit" (p. 8)—and even that is invisible but no less real, taking place *sub rosa*, in the realm of the invisible movement of psyche; what Aristotle suggested of the action of Tragedy I believe can be extended to include other plot structures as well: "Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality" (p. 62).

Such an action, furthermore, does not occur without the presence of psychic energy that gives the action its impetus and its sustained motion towards completeness. Paul Ricoeur's (1997) in-depth work on mimesis yielded this observation: "mimesis performs the same kind of guiding-concept function for poetry that persuasion does for prose in the public arena" (p. 36). Poetry and prose both persuade with a force that while shared are not identical. Their energy valences are quite different but not unrelated.

To say we are "moved" by a film, a story, a painting, or a piece of music, even a personal memory, or that we feel the power of a poem or an image, is to be mimetically engaged in something profound and transpersonal being imitated in our own being that resonates and mirrors the plot or soul of the work's movement even while it sparks a vague intuitive knowing within us. Dualistic responses that split self from world, spirit from matter, and soul from mimetic art—all collapse here under the weight of imaginal involvement. In an insightful foreword to a recent book on Jung and Henry Corbin, spiritual psychologist Robert Sardello (2005) called this form of perception "subjectively-objective," wherein in an "imaginal metaphysics all dualism is resolved so that there is no longer a subject-object distinction; rather, subject and object are one" (p. xv). Dante's *Commedia* reflects, as a poetic artifact, such a collapse or resolution by deploying the reader into the actual pilgrimage of the poet who recollects that experience. By extension, moreover, the reader is cast upon the story of his/her own growth into consciousness, realized in the pilgrimage of reading and imagining Dante's own fabricated journey.

Mythopoiesis, then, includes not just the creation of the work of art, but the way in which the myth inherent in the work is reshaped in our own imagination by this universal mimetic faculty or capacity to imagine. Wisdom, archetypal wisdom, is spawned in just this mythic backwater through the sluice of imaginal knowing. One important implication here is that psyche is fundamentally aesthetic, that *aisthesus* is its ground of being, its fundamental ontology.

Let me conjecture at this juncture, a metaphor:

Plot is to character
as
Action is to wisdom.

The first part of the metaphor—plot is to character—is the embodied, incarnate, and perceivable reality. But underneath the hood beats the engine of action-wisdom,

the power source that, like a poetic delivery system, offers plot-character both its energy and its motion—even its motivation. Moreover, under this same hood resides the intensity of vigor that, as Campbell reminded us, the metaphor must contain if it is to unleash the energy necessary to both raise and shape consciousness and with it, perception. Here reside the words of O. B. Hardison (1968), scholar and commentator of the *Poetics*. In discussing Aristotle's critical apparatus, he sprang forward in time to the neo-platonist Plotinus. Hardison interpreted Plotinus' understanding of *nous* as "a creative force seeking to emanate outward, to fill all possible gaps in the scale of being, and to realize itself in material creation" (p. 282). John Dillon in "The Extracts from the First Edition" of *The Enneads* called *nous* "Divine Mind" or "Divine Intellection" (Plotinus, trans. 1991, p. xxxiii).

The poet begins to take shape here (this is my abiding hope) as a divinely-chosen individual, one numinously inspired, not one who creates falsehoods, illusions, and wretched simulacra of the *Truth*, a word Dickinson's poem earlier encouraged us to consider. What the poet creates is "charged with divine *energia* and...has a priest-like function of revealing truth to men's clouded vision" (Hardison, 1968, p. 283). One key passage into such a revelation, Hardison insisted, is by imitating the world through "looking to their divine archetypes and producing images of them as they might or ought to be" (p. 284). His thought is in line not only with Jung's but with the profound meditations of anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong (1981).

Writing in the same imaginal grooves as the above two thinkers, Armstrong (1981) diligently developed in a beautiful and complex way the idea that all works of art carry or embody a force or presence which "tend to gratify the human psyche" (p. 4). Briefly, works which carry the power of "affecting presence" have a certain *mana* personality about them: "they are special kinds of things ('works') which have significances not primarily conceptual (they are 'affecting'), and which own certain characteristics that cause them to be treated more like persons than like things ('presence')" (p. 5). Moreover, like persons, they "exist in a state of ambiguity" (p. 5). Yet they also carry the status of a thing, so they are both subjective and objective. "In fact, 'power' seems the most appropriate name for those distinctive though elusive properties.... It is power which quickens us so that we greatly prize such things and, thus, so universally make them" (p. 6).

Through the powers of affecting presence, things have the capacity to assume mythic qualities, which once again implicate vigor, power, energy: “These universal, generative energies and states are ‘mythologems’ (a word I borrow from Jung, who uses it to mean ‘archetype’), and they occur in fairly stable form from people to people” (pp. 48-49).

From this weaving of the various voices collating the different energy sources, I discern that without contact with the myth in the matter, wisdom remains ever-elusive. Wisdom in some manner or condition resides in the ability of the energy innate in affective presence to work on us, to shape us poetically as we imagine the work. Of course, the relationship is reciprocal: what are the effects of my own affective presence on the work of art?

The discussion grows even richer when we remember that etymologically, the word *plot* translates as *muthos*, and for Aristotle (trans. 1969) the plot must follow “the inner logic of poetic art” (p. 31). In other words, present is an organizing principle at work in the plot, which I suspect finds its correspondence in the *inner logos* of the audience members. Active, therefore, is an interior logos in the plot that finds its analogies in the guiding mythos of each individual. Mythos, therefore, is an invisible inner logos, as a visible analogy of a deeper mystery that mythos taps, provokes, incites. The plot of a work of art is then both a content and an action, since each of our lives shuttles between noun and verb. The plot itself, then, is the aperture into wisdom, gleaned through the deeper reservoir of the action, a reservoir of the mythologems.

I understand now how Plotinus (trans. 1991) himself can ask in the Seventh Tractate: “Is There an Ideal Archetype of Particular Beings?” (pp. 406-409); this is the title of his very short chapter of *The Enneads*, which in this Tractate rests on a principle of doubling and analogy. Plotinus puts forth the idea that each of us has a Soul which “contains the Reason-Principles of all that it traverses, [then] once more all men have their (archetypic) existence” (pp. 406-07). Not only is this so, but he further suggests that “every soul contains all the Reason-Principles that exist in the Cosmos: since the Cosmos contains the Reason-Principles not merely of man, but also for all individual living things, so must the Soul” (p. 407). He tells us clearly, lest we become confused over the term “Soul,” that for him it means “principle of Life” (p. 409).

This very principle of life is the fuel for the

engine of mimesis in poetry itself. Aristotle, if I grasp at all Stephen Halliwell’s (1998) excursus on the nature of imitation (mimesis), as well as the structure of poetic unity, tended us closer to the poetic wisdom, archetypally-grounded and psychologically-oriented, that set the stage for the pilgrim-poet Dante’s life’s journey both as pilgrim and as poet in the *Commedia*.

If poetry is an imitation of an action that must through its plot, “represent one complete action ‘whole and complete and of a certain magnitude’” (Halliwell, 1998, p. 14), as Aristotle insisted, then some imaginal dance must arise between the world we know and the world that poetry makes visible—and most crucially, *possible*—to our discerning aesthetic gaze. Here Halliwell is very helpful: “the events of a dramatic poem should exhibit a higher intelligibility, particularly *causal* intelligibility, than is usually to be found in life” (p. 135). He further argued that “the plot of a dramatic poem, which is its essential structure of action, is not to be understood as simply corresponding to reality past or present...but as representing a heightened and notional *pattern of possibility*, and as therefore more accessible to rational apprehension than are the events of ordinary experience” (p. 135, emphasis supplied). Let us pause for a moment on the phrase “representing a heightened and notional pattern of possibility.” Aristotle, as understood through Halliwell’s interpretation, suggested that poetry contains or perhaps *is*, an aesthetic expression of a more deeply intuited pattern of psyche that may just establish a power of *affecting presence*. More time would prompt me right here to develop how this last sentence conveys the genesis of one’s personal mythos.

Nonetheless, I believe this notional pattern of possibility is the realm of the archetypal. Unless the poem generates sufficient “wisdom energy,” it does not have the *sforza*, as Italians label it, or the strength, the Eros, or the libidinal power to shape our imaginations into an awareness of this “pattern of possibility.” Therefore, in its proportions and in its expression of a single action that itself is whole and complete, it inaugurates a certain joy in witnessing it because it aesthetically delights the senses, the intellect, and the emotions, as well as the more collective archetypal level embedded in the specific action. Moreover, at least in any discussion of poetry and wisdom derived therefrom, one that inclines towards Aristotle, the apprehension of beauty is part of this experience. Aesthetics itself has its own hydraulics—its own turbines of energy, to extend the metaphor a bit.

To achieve it, however, perhaps on the first,

the fourth, the fifteenth reading, is to gain wisdom inherent in the action. The biologist Brian Goodwin (2001) reminded us that “ideas have their time, and if you happen to discover something before people are ready to recognize its significance, you might as well leave it in the bottom drawer until the climate is receptive” (p. 46). So with a deepening mimetic understanding of a poem: it has its own time to reveal itself. Mimesis is achieved on some level, determined of course by our growing capacity to discern this pattern of possibility. We are speaking less of content than of coherence, discerned, wisely enough, from an expanded and deepened awareness of the work’s action. Not its message, not its meaning, not its character development, but its internal form is most relevant to shape matter into meaning.

To touch this formative principle by the fingertips of our imaginal involvement is the goal of the reading— itself a complex pilgrimage through the poem’s lush or austere landscape—as well as by apprehending at least a fraction of its generic form. Now all of the above is in the service of getting us to Halliwell’s (1998) final insight:

It is not immediately to life that the poet must turn for his material, but to an imagined world (including that of inherited myth) in which the underlying designs of causality, so often obscured in the world as we encounter it, will be made manifest. (p. 135)

By turning to myth, I suspect, the poet reshapes and reforms the lineaments and contours of it to suit his/her vision of patterned possibilities (general) by means of the specific plot, wherein characters interact, think, feel, and react to their surroundings and to one another (particular). The general or universal or archetypal action is thus embedded squarely in the particular sinews of the concrete narrative.

The reader then experiences deeply in his/her soul the imagined world in the making—what I would term a *mytho-poetic* achievement of consciousness. To enter such a realm is to know, to come to a knowledge unavailable any other way or through any other disciplines. Poetic knowledge is its own form of ontological awareness. It deepens and expands, even makes elastic, our own limited world view. It does so, not by trying to match its reality to the one we swim in daily, but by creating an imagined form of a reality that exists only in the poem. Not sociology, politics, theology, or political correctness but *poiesis* is what the poet seeks to imagine into a formed experience.

The Commedia’s Force Field: Terza Rima

The depth psychologist Michael Conforti (2003) has explored the self-organizing dynamics in the natural order in *Field, Form and Fate*. He began in that study by deploying, in part, Jung’s (1971) analogy between the nature of the archetype and “the axial system of a crystal which determines the crystalline structure in the liquid, although it has no material existence of its own” (¶155). The analogy here in poetry is the substance of the form of a poem. I remember reading this comparison for the first time and being moved to assent to the wisdom inherent in its power.

My intention in this essay is to suggest that a similar action occurs between the nature of the archetype and the axial system of a poem, such as Dante’s, within the imaginal life of the reader. The reader in the act of reading is a pilgrim companion, and no less analogous to Dante’s voyage as pilgrim, and his second pilgrimage as writer of the voyage we, he assumed, have signed on and submitted to.

I wish less to interpret the almost incomprehensively brilliant content of this poem but to reside and dwell instead in its rhythmic and constant dance pattern: the *terza rima*. Dante, scholars assert, invented such a rhyme scheme for this poem, written between 1310-1313; he then backfilled its plot to 1300 to assure that his prophetic pronouncements would enjoy a certain historical veracity. I underscore or place in italics the pattern of the poem’s rhyme scheme, for in it, of course married to the content of the lines, is a pattern of wisdom, if such a property is possible, both of learning and of therapeutic healing. I am indebted to the last chapter of the Dante scholar, John Freccero’s (1986) superb study, *Dante: the Poetics of Conversion*, for introducing me to the subtle motions of the poem’s patterned canzone.

At the outset I suggest that the *terza rima* is an archetype of transformation; to be transformed is predicated on being in motion. *Terza rima* is both noun and verb. Much more can be said of the tri-partite or trinitarian structure of the entire poem; however, my goal is to explore just this rhyme scheme in its triune structure. As a structure and an action it is as well a gerund in its dramatic role in the poem. Perhaps therapy itself must be willing to oscillate between the noun and verb forms of the psyche.

The entire 100 cantos of Dante’s *Commedia* relate in memory the plot, or *muthos*, of one soul waking in a dark wood to recognize that he has lost the path of his life, his connection to himself and to any allegiance or presence of the divine. In short, he has stepped out of

the coherent mythos that gives meaning and coherence to life. Almost immediately, and spurred by fear, he attempts the hero's journey on his own but is quickly rebuffed by three beasts who confront him; they can be understood as figures of Dante's own excessive appetites. Only with the help of three primary guides and mentors, originating in their call by the Blessed Virgin Mary—the classical poet Virgil, the lovely and forceful historical figure of Beatrice Portinari, whom Dante knew in Florence, and, in the last steps in *Paradiso*, the holy figure of Bernard of Clairveax—is the pilgrim led to confront the paradox of his final vision. Each figure assists him differently on his therapeutic journey towards wholeness.

In the course of his pilgrimage deep into the offal of *Inferno*, up into the wounding, then cleansing habitation of Mount Purgatory, and finally through the celestial highways of the planets to the Primum Mobile in *Paradiso*, Dante meets, argues with, feels pity for, chastises, loves an entire population of figures that populate variously myth, poetry, and history. The poem is, among other things, the richest and most detailed exemplum of what Joseph Campbell discovered was inherent in so many mythologies world-wide: the hero's struggle to enter the woods of unknowing, to confront oppositions and aids, and to return to his/her community with the boon of new knowledge, indexed and catalogued now under "M" for *mystical wisdom narrative*.

To tell his story, Dante (Alighieri, 1313/1982) adapted the rhythmic rhyme scheme of *terza rima* in which three lines, akin to the poem's footsteps, or footprints, detail the motion of the poem and our involvement in both its sustained rhythm and content. Let us look at the first examples of this structure in *Inferno* 1 that begins with these lines:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita **A**
 mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, **B**
 che la dirritta via era smarrita. **A**
 Ahi quanto a dir qual era e cosa dura **B**
 esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte **C**
 che nel pensier rinova la paura! **B**
 Tant' e amara che poco e piu morte; **C**
 ma per trattar del ben ch' I' vi trovai, **D**
 diro de l'altre cose ch' I' v' ho scorte. **C**
 Io non so ben ridir com' I' v' intrai, **D**
 tant era pien di sonno a quell punto **E**
 che la verace via abbandonai. **D** (lines 1-12)

Allen Mandelbaum's translation follows:

(When I had journeyed half of our life's way,

I found myself within a shadowed forest,
 for I had lost the path that does not stray.

Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was,
 that savage forest, dense and difficult,
 which even in recall renews my fear:

so bitter—death is hardly more severe!
 But to retell the good discovered there,
 I'll also tell the other things I saw.

I cannot clearly say how I had entered
 the wood; I was so full of sleep just at
 the point where I abandoned the truth path).

Dante has entered as awakened pilgrim the wisdom path which he now relates to us in the residue of memory through narrative. That the poem begins midway carries a reflection in the middle term of the *terza rima*. Form and content cannot be separated; knowing grows, I believe, from the interstices, the *metaxes* of the rhyme scheme, and the rhythm of each line's syllables, which remains more or less consistent throughout, the conversation that ensues between cantos that precede and follow the one being read.

Indeed, perhaps the current cliché that life's progress is often comprised of two steps forward and one step back was born here, in the rhyme scheme. But as with most clichés, it skips across the surface of what treasures might dwell in a lower layer. The movement of this scheme, moreover, is for one thing the motion of psyche herself as she seeks understanding and indeed, wisdom. *Terza rima* is psyche's rhythm, its method, its scheme, for knowing; its repetition of rhymed words suggests it is a patterned knowing, a duplicative knowing in fact, wherein some insight is mirrored both backward and forward and gains in the motion a texture and profundity that rests on imitation and remembrance. The rhythm is based, moreover, on what Freccero (1968) installed as a constant "recapitulation" (p. 263).

Consider first the forward movement of A to B. But at this step in the pilgrimage forward, something happens to return one to A that in the word that ends the line at the same instant rhymes with but is not identical to, or an exact copy of, the original A. Not a repetition compulsion is active here but a retreat back into something familiar as well as a step into newness. What is crucial to see is the simultaneous motion into the familiar and unfamiliar at once. The dramatic genius of this structure is that the familiar is new and what newness sprouts here in the retreat to the original rhyme is indeed familiar territory. The second A therefore

completes the first “foot” of the terza rima, yet it is and is not the first A. What has intervened to interrupt the two As not being duplicates is of course, the middle term: B. What the middle term signifies will be suggested in a moment. Nevertheless, we can venture that intervention of the new term saves the similar but not identical terms from rigidifying into a trap of repetition, entrapment, and loss of motion in a shuttling rhythm that is a constant recapitulation into new ground.

Nor is it the first A even if the word *vita* was repeated in the second A such that the first *terza rima* would then read *vita, oscura, vita* (instead of *smarrita*), because something crucial has intervened: history itself, in the form of B (*oscura*). Between the forward movements—a two-step—and the backward motion—a one-step, history erupts into presence as a specific modality of temporality, both in the motion of the body’s movement in the pilgrimage and in the motion of the poem’s movement in the language. History itself becomes a way of knowing—both personal memory or biography and a larger vessel of history itself; not just Dante’s own personal memory and biography, but history itself becomes known, both as a structure for understanding the great patterns that seem to govern human life collectively, and as the specific cultural history of his own era.

Such is Dante’s archetypal genius: to wed *poiesis* (imagination’s shaping capacity) to history, perception to memory, body to spirit, and motion to myth. I include this last term because in the language of the poem, what has been first experienced as a literal event—the journey through inferno, purgatory, and paradise—is now recollected. But this recollection is also a new form, a fresh telling or expression of the original journey. It is more a recollection deeply imagined for its further possibilities. Therefore it is a recollection in hope. The journey has taken on mythic proportions, or better said, *mytho-poetic* proportions in the recollection that is also an imaginal motion forward. I should note as well that in this microcosm of the *terza rima* is the complex journey of the hero as Campbell adumbrates it repeatedly in his writings, but most fully in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1973, pp. 49-244).

Therapy as Terza-Rimic Motion of Soul

The meaning of the poem, but only after the experience of the journey that is its content and structure, stirs to the surface like sea life from fathomless depths, through the oscillating rhythm of the rhyme scheme. Structure

is archetypal and yields its own form of knowing; it connects intimately with the movement or rhythm of the reader-pilgrim-interpreter that is the poem’s Trinitarian audience. The poem’s wisdom stretches out in sympathy to meet the reader’s own psychic rhythm; we learn, the poem seems to insist, by recollecting into newness. I say this with one eye on the rhyme scheme:

A—B—A
to
B—C—B

so that the first B (*oscura*), the middle term of the first *terza rima* becomes

B (*dura*)—C (*forte*)—B (*paura!*)

The middle term of the preceding *terza rima* metamorphosis into the first and last rhymes of the next *terza rima*. In that transformation, moreover, what do we discern and experience as readers?

Memory herself in the figure of the Greek goddess, Mnemosyne, stirs the heart’s vessel of forward motion, of breaking into new ground, or seeing anew by means of what has just passed. Now the past is retrieved into new envisionings. If we pull the lens back just a bit for a moment, we as pilgrim-readers (and it appears that all deep reading is a pilgrimage of memory wedded to imagination), do sense that the first *terza rima* deals with the past—“I found,” “I had lost”—the next with the present—“it is hard to speak of what it was”—as it unfolds, unfurls, curls or spirals back into the past—“which even in recall renews my fear” (*che nel pensier rinova la paura!*)—and the third envelops the future—“But to retell the good discovered there/I’ll also tell the other things I saw”—which wraps past/present/future into a tightly corded knot of omni-temporal meaning. My own sense is that in therapy, all three dimensions must be operative, provoked, evoked so that the entire person as client is present in his/her past-future being.

Such complexity, to thicken the baroque quality of the poem’s structure further, is braided into another figure, one that Freccero (1986) discerns in this manner: “The geometric representation of forward motion which is at the same time recapitulatory is the spiral” (p. 263). Therefore, the reader must assuredly tread this poem wearing non-skid hiking boots, for he/she is going to be asked to traverse tough terrain with often cantankerous talus slipping under one’s feet; to move backward and forward in the *terza rima* rhythm, and to spiral down, then up, through the first 67 cantiche that comprise the

Infernal and Purgatorial realms, is the dance Dante's poem insists we engage if we are to grasp its moving meanings. A rough and tenuous pilgrimage indeed, not for the faint of heart or the visually unchallenged reader.

Finally, and for the ritual of therapy itself, something that might seem obvious here should not be missed or down-sized: the middle term of the *terza rima* scheme becomes the first and last terms of the next step in the poem. Now if we think of the three parts of the foot of *terza rima* comprising past, present, future, and the middle term as present becoming both past and future of the next foot, then the notion of the linear trajectory of past—present—future is an illusion that Dante's poem exposes. In other words, rather than there being a past—present—future, there is only present. There is a present of the past, a present of the present, and a present of the future. *Presencing* is the heart of therapy; the idea that the past is recollected or that the future is anticipated is true with the caveat that it is their presentness that is always exercising its sovereignty, not a past being recollected, but a presencing of the past as well as a presencing of the future. Not linear but rather mythic time is the frame for therapy, for poetry, and for increasing one's orbit of being conscious.¹

For practical application to therapy—and recall that I am not a therapist—is to assist the client in collapsing the notion that the past is back there and that the future is out there; quite to the contrary: both past and future are imbedded in the middle term of the *terza rima* temporal scheme. One's ability to imagine time differently through the rhyme scheme would elicit, it seems to me, very different responses to one's relation to the story of their past and the trajectory of their future.

Finally, let us allow Jung (1960) in on the conversation at this juncture since his insight bears directly on the rhythmic rhyming structure of the poem. In developing his discussion on the qualities of psyche that leads to understanding, Jung centers on intuition, which he understood as a way of feeling: "But intuition, as I conceive it, is one of the basic functions of the psyche, namely, *perception of the possibilities inherent in a situation*" (§ 292). Implicit in his remark is Dante's *terza rima* structure, to this extent: the movement forward from A—B and then a return to A—advances a particular perception based on re-cognition that is much richer than one afforded the pilgrim as he journeys from A to B before retreating back to a new A!

What is gained in this reversal, or backward

motion, which both prepares and anticipates another movement forward, is a new horizon of possibilities, what one could not see at first, but sees forward in retrospect. In other words, each step of the *terza rima* opens up its own brand of perception or reflection. A sensibility that there are more possibilities inherent in the situation at any step of the poem's forward thrust is deployed through a greater consciousness when one returns to the first term in the third "moment" of the *terza rima* unity: A—B—A. The second A is the moment of intuiting what might be possible, based squarely on what has been certain. At every step of the epic pilgrimage, then, certainty consistently collides with uncertainty, clarity with ambiguity, paradox with potentialities, the light of greater understanding with the darkening aspect of the soul's mystery. Such is the psychic rhythm of the poem's organic life throughout the 100 cantos. Such as well is the psychic life of the individual in the therapeutic encounter.

Memory itself, the act of imaginably remembering the future, is the pivot or hinge of the poem's action, exactly marking where the present and the future receive their energy, their direction, and their resolve. Memory for the individual reader-pilgrim blossoms out to become history for an entire people, as Freccero (1986) traces later in the chapter. What at one moment in time and space is *anticipated*, is in another moment *remembered*, and in another moment *perceived*, so that the dance of *terza rima* is a constant pirouette between past and future with something of the eternal *Now* of the present embodying or incarnating the life force or principle of soul's poetic dynamism.

My sense is that the poem's wisdom is revealed in multiple ways, but here specifically in the rhyme scheme as it weds the content of each three-line foot. What is created in the space of the relation of what is anticipated growing back and down into what is remembered? I suggest it is a metaphorical awareness, a figural sensibility that expands and deepens our capacity for consciousness itself. That Dante makes this abundantly clear in the poem's insistence that one traverse its landscape incarnately, not just intellectually, points us to the primary but not exclusive myth that drives its engines—the incarnation, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ as an archetype of the Self.

May not the *terza rima* structure also mirror this mythos—the movement forward into some new event and insight being birthed, that grows and develops, suffers, falls back into the past, but is then resurrected—

not quite as a recapitulation but as *rejuvenation*. Such is the structure, complex and recursive, of the pilgrimage of life itself, what Aristotle intuited was the real subject matter of poetry mimetically tailored for the audience.

The spirit of rejuvenation through memory, history, mimesis, and myth is the constantly oscillating heartbeat, the systole and diastole, of the poem. I am not certain where a more profound archetypal wisdom may be found than in the texture and textual structure of such a living, breathing art form that asks each of us to pilgrimage it in his/her own style, in unison with one's own heart rhythm, but always with a certain abandon, so that one is saved from abandoning the true way that is one's destiny, with its origin in the will of He or She who moves and designs all things.

Note

1. I am indebted here to James Olney's (1998) work on St. Augustine's *Confessions* and his development of the all-inclusive presence of one's life (pp. 2-11).

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