

The Four Last Things, III

There are five different words for beauty in the Latin language; one of them is *forma*, from which comes our English word "form." To deform then is make ugly, to transform is to make beautiful.

We can only imagine how deformed Adam and Eve were when they thrown out of paradise. Their condition was transmitted to humanity and to all later generations. This condition was not some newly acquired variation like the biologists talk about – this was the emergence of a new species. The Adam and Eve whom God created and put into the Garden were not the same Adam and Eve that walked out of it. This new species had not been made by God but had sinned itself into existence. We call this Original Sin, not original bad luck, because our religious experience does not allow us to regard it in any other way.

I say we can only imagine the deformation that happened to them, but there are hints as to the extent of the deformation. For instance, I had been ordained maybe three months when the parish secretary said there was a lady who wanted to see a priest. The pastor and the other two priests weren't there, so it was my task. I was taken aback to say the least at the look on her face. It was a deformed face – deformed as it turned out from years of abuse and living in despair. She left her home when her husband was too drunk to stop her, and in desperation just began driving around not knowing where to go or what to do. She spotted our church and rang the doorbell. Her story was horrifying, and I did not sleep well for days afterwards. After we spoke for a while I called a police officer who was a friend, and this set in motion a series of events, among which was her husband receiving 12 years in the state penitentiary for what he had done to her.

Five or six years later, at a different parish, the secretary said a lady wanted to see me. I met with her, and she was beaming, radiant with joy. "Do you remember me?" she asked. I said I was not so good with names, but pretty good with faces, and I didn't think we had met. It was the same woman, only now her face had become transformed. She had converted to the Catholic Faith, had discovered joy, and it transformed her face.

So Dante has difficulty sometimes recognizing those in the inferno, as they have been terribly deformed by sin. He and Virgil leave the circle of the souls of the indifferent and approach the river Acheron, the river-entrance to hell proper. There the boatman, the demon Charon tells the souls on the bank waiting to be taken across the river, that they have no hope of ever seeing *lo cielo*, the heavens. They shall never see the stars or the sky again.

This stopped me when I first read the Divine Comedy, for I do love to look at the stars, and the moon, and sunrises and sunsets and the clouds. The thought of an eternity where I could never do that most human of things – looking up at the sky – made me stop reading for a while.

Charon's speech is short, but horrible. And when the souls hear it from the mouth of the demon, they react.

But now those souls, those naked, weary souls grew pale, and seemed to gnash their teeth in rage as soon as they had heard those cruel words. They cursed the name of God, their parents' names, the human race, the time, the place, the seed that had begotten them, and their descendants. Then all of them together, with loud cries withdrew themselves from that accused shore which waits for every man that fears not God.

The wicked men fall by the weight of their evil love into Charon's boat. Then all of hell shudders and quakes with a tremendous blast of hot wind, and Dante shudders – like we do if we had any sense – and he swoons.

With a thunderclap, he is awakened. He stands up and tries to get his bearings, and looks down.

In truth I found that I was on the brink that rims the gulf of the abyss of woe, which echoes with eternal cries of grief. So deep it was, so cloudy and obscure, that nothing there could possibly be seen, however I might peer into its depths. "Into that sightless world let us descend," the poet said, his face as pale as death.

Virgil is afraid for the first time. As terrible as are the things he has seen, this is worse. What frightens him so? Or is it fear that pales him? The answer lies in the nature of the first circle of hell, into which they go. It corresponds to a medieval notion of Limbo. It has two levels; one is for the virtuous pagans, who did not give God the loving homage He deserved, because they did not know Him. Virgil says,

You do not ask me who these spirits are we see about us. Ere we pass beyond, I wish to tell you that they have not sinned. Though they are worthy, this does not suffice, because they never have received the joy of holy baptism, essence of your faith. But those who lived before the time of Christ could never worthily adore their God: and I myself am of this company. For this defect, and for no other wrong, our souls are lost: for this we must endure a hopeless life of unfulfilled desire."

So the look on Virgil's face turns out is not one of fear, but of compassion, which Dante mistook. His confusion is most understandable. We have it too, because we are living in a time which perceives the goodness of God as meaning almost exclusively His lovingness. And by love, in this context, most men mean a rather vague sort of kindness – the desire to see others happy; not happy in this way or that, but just happy. What would really satisfy modern man would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing; "What does it matter so long as they are contented?"

Our times want in fact not so much a Father in heaven as a granddad in heaven – some senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see the young people enjoying themselves," and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, "a good time was had by all." Not many would express it that way perhaps, but something like this conception lurks in the back of many minds. So many do not feel that anything is really good except kindness, or anything to be truly evil except cruelty.

Dante has this in him. But he has not yet grasped what Limbo truly is. And for that, he must see for himself the upper part of Limbo, where there is no suffering, no torments, no remorse no memory of evil deeds gnawing at the heart, but only the sighs of resignation. For this first level of Limbo is a place for those who strove to use the good things in this world in an upright way, following the great cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.