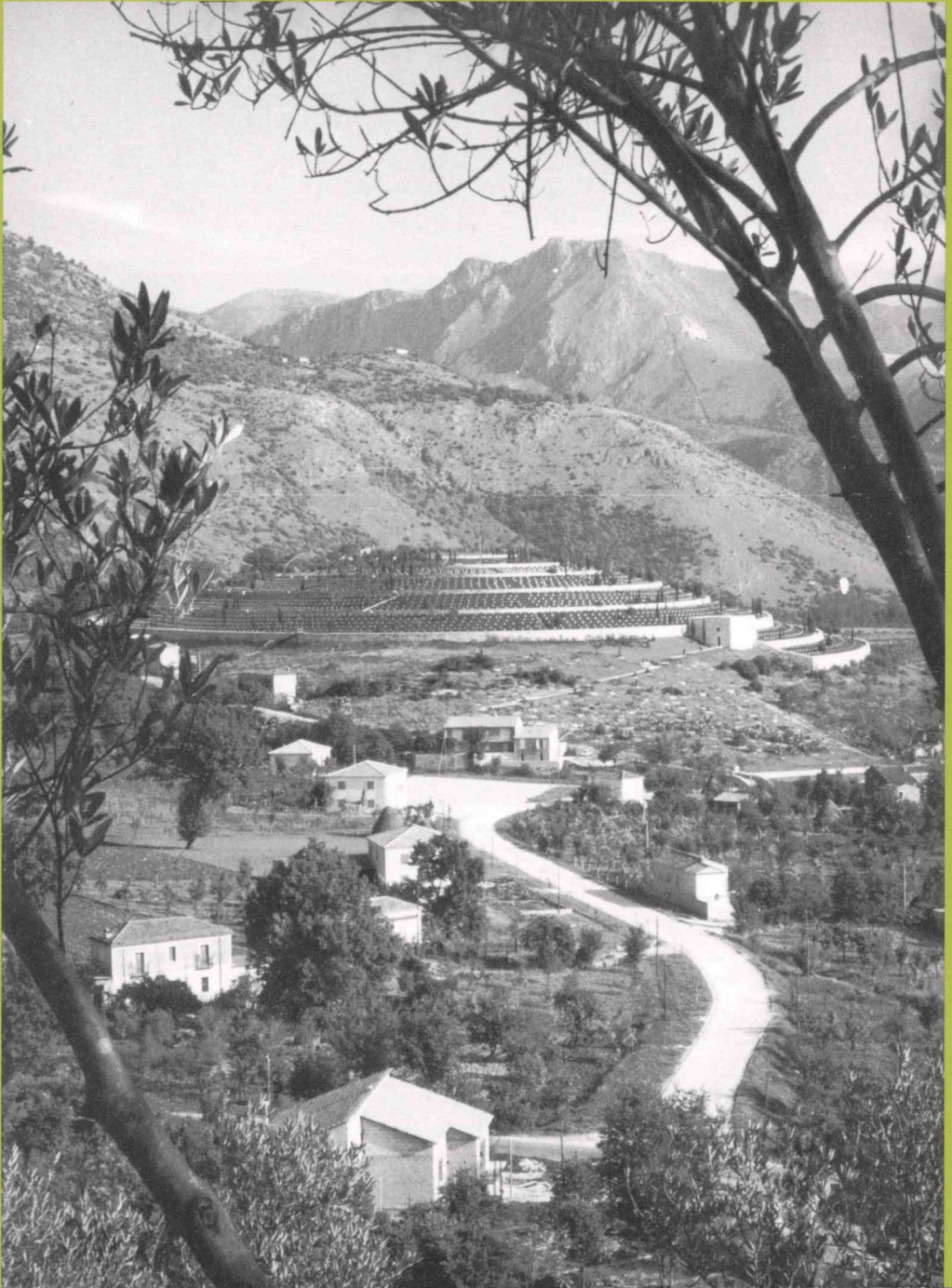


LOGOS

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The Caira cemetery near Monte Cassino for German soldiers of World War II on its inauguration day, May 4, 1965. Image: VDK Archives, used with permission. For more information see the first article by Alan Perry and a related Postscript by editor Raymond MacKenzie.

“The brutal 1944 Battle of Monte Cassino lasted for five months, and many of the German Wehrmacht soldiers who fell in the vicinity are buried here under the long shadows of the abbey in a purpose-built cemetery at Caira. The cemetery’s architectural composition itself proves fascinating when viewed through the lens of Dante Alighieri’s *Purgatorio*, the second cantica of the *Divine Comedy*. Here, upon a material, terraced Purgatory, the arrangement of the dead offers a bid for atonement, a request for suffrage, and a message of hope instilled in the Christian mystery of salvation.”

From “Dante’s Purgatorial Trench Art:
The German Military Cemetery at Cassino”

By Alan R. Perry

Contents

ALAN R. PERRY, Dante’s Purgatorial Trench Art: The German Military Cemetery at Cassino

MARY NICOLE NIKITKOVA, Art, Faith, and Russia’s Soul: Mikhail Nesterov’s *The Vision to the Youth Bartholomew*

JOHN D. SYKES, JR., The Porous Characters of Flannery O’Connor and the Buffered Characters of Walker Percy

JOSHUA HREN, *Finnegans Wake* and the Foenix Culprit: Here Comes Everybody’s Original Sin

JONATHAN VOWELL, From Nowhere to Someone: Personalist Realism as an Alternative to Academic Critique

JOSHUA P. HOCHSCHILD, The Divine Gaze: Aristotelian “Intuition” and the Gift of Understanding

RAYMOND N. MACKENZIE, “The City of the Dead”: Dante’s Cemetery of Dis and the Poetics of the Threshold

Contents

- 5 Preface
- 11 ALAN R. PERRY, Dante's Purgatorial Trench Art:
The German Military Cemetery at Cassino
- 39 MARY NICOLE NIKITKOVA, Art, Faith, and Russia's Soul:
Mikhail Nesterov's *The Vision to the Youth Bartholomew*
- 60 JOHN D. SYKES, JR., The Porous Characters of Flannery
O'Connor and the Buffered Characters of Walker Percy
- 93 JOSHUA HREN, *Finnegans Wake* and the Phoenix Culprit:
Here Comes Everybody's Original Sin
- 111 JONATHAN VOWELL, From Nowhere to Someone:
Personalist Realism as an Alternative to Academic Critique
- 133 JOSHUA P. HOCHSCHILD, The Divine Gaze: Aristotelian
"Intuition" and the Gift of Understanding
- 151 RAYMOND N. MACKENZIE, Editor's Postscript, "The City
of the Dead": Dante's Cemetery of Dis and the Poetics
of the Threshold

PREFACE

THE SPRING 2026 ISSUE OF LOGOS BEGINS AND ENDS WITH the theme of the cemetery and its cultural and spiritual meanings, including its call to the virtue of hope. Our issue also features thoughtful explorations of Catholic art, specifically painting and fiction, and moves from there into philosophical investigations of, first, what must underlie any responsible artistic critique and, second, the role of Aristotelian intuition, its own kind of knowing, in our intellectual as well as our ordinary daily lives.

Our first article, by Alan R. Perry, “Dante’s Purgatorial Trench Art: The German Military Cemetery at Cassino,” examines the German Military Cemetery at Caira, near Monte Cassino, through the lens of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, proposing that its architecture expresses atonement, collective guilt, and hope within a Christian framework of salvation. Located about four kilometers from Monte Cassino Abbey, the cemetery stands in the shadow of one of Christendom’s most important Benedictine sites. The abbey itself was destroyed in February 1944 during the Battle of Monte Cassino, when Allied bombardment sought—mistakenly—to eliminate German defensive positions believed to be inside. More than 20,000 German soldiers who died in southern Italy are now buried at Caira.

After the war, the Italian government and the Federal Republic of Germany reached a 1955 agreement to create a permanent burial site. The German War Graves Commission (Volksbund Deutsche

Kriegsgräberfürsorge, or VDK) appointed its longtime chief architect, Robert Tischler, to design the site. Tischler, known for his post-World War I “Totenburg” (“city of the dead”) style—fortress-like mausoleums crowning hillsides—initially conceived a similar monumental structure for Caira. However, this proposal was rejected. Instead, he produced a markedly different design: a flat summit overlooking seven semicircular terraces descending the hillside. After Tischler’s death in 1959, Gerd Offenbergl completed the project without altering the revised plan. The cemetery was inaugurated on May 4, 1965, in the presence of German and Italian officials and families of the fallen. Regular commemorations, often at ten-year intervals, have reinforced the site’s ongoing ritual significance.

Professor Perry’s central claim is that the cemetery’s design strongly echoes Dante’s Mount Purgatory in the *Divine Comedy*. The terraced hillside and open summit resemble the ascending structure of Purgatory, culminating in the Earthly Paradise at its peak. To frame this interpretation, the article draws on the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, places where communities invest symbolic meaning in order to shape collective identity. Through this purgatorial reading, the cemetery offers a spatial theology of mourning: a structured ascent from devastation toward reconciliation, embedding the memory of war within a Christian narrative of guilt, suffering, and the possibility of peace.

We turn next to the topic of sacred art, with Mary Nicole Nikitkova’s study, “Art, Faith, and Russia’s Soul: Mikhail Nesterov’s *The Vision to the Youth Bartholomew*.” Ms. Nikitkova discusses the work as both a religious painting and a response to the social and spiritual upheavals of late nineteenth-century Russia. She begins by situating Mikhail Vasilevich Nesterov within Russian art history as an artist who combined realism, symbolism, and religious devotion in a highly personal style. At a time when many artists turned toward social critique or European modernism, Nesterov focused on spiritual longing and questions of national identity. This painting, his most celebrated work (dating from 1889–1890), depicts a formative episode from the childhood of St. Sergius of Radonezh. According to tradition, the boy Bartholomew

struggled with his studies until receiving a divine blessing that marked the beginning of his spiritual vocation. Nesterov renders this miraculous event as occurring within a quiet, contemplative atmosphere, using soft colors, balanced composition, and a harmonious natural setting. The sacred dimension emerges through stillness and intimacy rather than theatrical gesture. In emphasizing inward transformation, Nesterov—and Ms. Nikitkova—invites viewers to reflect on the possibility that holiness unfolds in silence. The painting seems to propose that Russia’s renewal might come through spiritual reflection rather than political upheaval.

We turn from visual art to verbal, with John D. Sykes, Jr.’s article, “The Porous Characters of Flannery O’Connor and the Buffered Characters of Walker Percy.” Sykes explores the profound difference between the fictional worlds of two Southern, almost contemporary Catholic writers by employing terms developed by Charles Taylor to indicate whether a character is open to divine or supernatural influence and possibility (the porous self or literary character) or closed off from such influence (the buffered self). As Professor Sykes puts it, “O’Connor’s characters, with their residual memory of what it is like to be a porous self grounded in a cosmic order, are open to the divine jolts of grace they receive. Percy’s characters represent the buffered self of modernity, with their armor of instrumental rationalism and autonomy.” This is not to denigrate Percy’s accomplishment, for we might conclude that the world he depicts is more recognizably modern than O’Connor’s.

Our next article stays with the subject of Catholic fiction—or, perhaps, the subject of how Catholics might read fiction. Joshua Hren’s essay, “*Finnegans Wake* and the Foenix Culprit: Here Comes Everybody’s Original Sin,” takes on James Joyce’s notoriously difficult modernist masterpiece and offers readers a clear, thoughtful path into the book and its essential concerns. Hren notes that the text is a tissue of multilingual puns, which “give rise to a play of the mind, heightening our attention to each passing syllable, cracking open a plurality of beautiful (and sometimes true-but-ugly) meanings.” The essay focuses on the topic of the “fortunate sin” of Adam and Eve, the *felix culpa*, which Joyce twists playfully into the “foenix culprit.” The essay shows the centrality

of this subject to the larger, rambling text and as such serves as an excellent introduction to both the novel and its highly challenging stylistic extravagances. Much of the critical writing on *Finnegans Wake* is almost as forbiddingly opaque as the novel itself, but Joshua Hren manages the rare and most welcome feat of providing a readable, enjoyable discussion.

Beyond being at least readable or intelligible, what ought we ask of literary criticism, or indeed critique in general? This is the subject of our next, provocative essay: **Jonathan Vowell's "From Nowhere to Someone: Personalist Realism as an Alternative to Academic Critique."** Dr. Vowell begins by noting that most contemporary critique leads to a kind of dead end. As he puts it, critique today, "the general model for literary and cultural studies in Western universities and academics . . . has run out of steam. Its postures of suspicion and negation, its various methods of interrogation and unmasking, and its general orientation towards deconstruction and subversion (as opposed to construction and position), has ceased to produce returns politically, intellectually, and ethically." Vowell turns to the personalist philosophy developed by Karol Wojtyła, which holds that each person's self has a "fundamental substantive center," a core, and a core idea, which modern critique rejects, insisting instead that the self exists in relation but not, somehow, in substance. "The solution, as proposed by realist personalism, is neither to reject substance in favor of relation nor to subsume one into the other (as this simply creates opposite yet equal errors) but rather to affirm both as existing in an integrated simultaneity of substance and relation." Dr. Vowell's analysis is probing and subtle, offering a rich philosophical groundwork for a renewal of a responsible and fruitful critique.

Our next essay continues in the philosophical vein, **Joshua Hochschild's "The Divine Gaze: Aristotelian 'Intuition' and the Gift of Understanding."** Professor Hochschild explores the role of intuition as Aristotle conceived of it, arguing that this kind of knowing, involving attentive engagement with the concrete details of the natural world, is not only aesthetically enriching but also deeply meditative, offering both scientific and intuitive cognitive benefits. In a cultural climate saturated with digital distractions,

simple acts such as walking outdoors, observing birds, or identifying trees become ways of reorienting the mind toward reality. This practice, the essay suggests, exemplifies an everyday expression of Aristotelian *nous*—the intuitive grasp of truth through direct apprehension rather than abstract reasoning.

This theme of intuitive perception extends to the moral life as well. Moral confusion, the text contends, often stems less from failures of argument than from failures of perception—an inability to see beings, especially human beings, as they truly are. Catholic moral theology's emphasis on "human dignity" reflects this insight: moral vision precedes moral reasoning. Encounters, therefore, can possess greater persuasive power than logical argument alone. The author offers the example of fetal ultrasounds, which—without words or arguments—make the vulnerable humanity of the unborn visible and thus elicit moral recognition more effectively than philosophical debate often can. The virtue of intuitive understanding also shapes the life of prayer, a contemplative prayer grounded in simple, attentive presence. Through icons, music, sacramentals, and especially eucharistic adoration, the believer engages God directly through the senses, uniting physical and spiritual focus. This contemplative openness parallels the intuitive form of knowing described earlier: a receptive, experiential attention rather than a discursive process.

Finally, Professor Hochschild situates this intuitive dimension within the broader framework of Catholic teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in Isaiah 11:2–3. The gift of understanding (*intellectus*) is especially emphasized as the supernatural elevation of Aristotle's *nous*. Through this gift, the Holy Spirit perfects the mind's capacity for grasping truth directly, enhancing the intuitive apprehension that underlies contemplative prayer, moral vision, and the attentive engagement with nature that opens the essay.

This issue concludes with my own brief, and somewhat informal, essay on Dante and the cemetery. Our opening essay by Professor Perry on the Monte Cassino German cemetery gave rise to these reflections, which begin with a consideration of Dante's own "burial," and the strange tale of his own much-contested remains,

and continue with an exploration of the theme of burial as illustrated in Cantos 9 and 10 of the *Inferno*. Though the inscription above the entrance to the *Inferno* warns us to abandon all hope, Dante's treatment of the entombed heretics gives rise to his, and our, meditation on the nature of hope, and how the human cemetery expresses it.

Raymond N. MacKenzie
Editor

ALAN R. PERRY

Dante's Purgatorial Trench Art: The German Military Cemetery at Cassino

THE ABBEY OF MONTE CASSINO IS JUST BEYOND THE LINE OF sight from the very top of the German Military Cemetery at Cairra, about four kilometers (2.5 miles) from one of Christendom's most famous shrines and chief house of the Benedictine Order. During World War II, Allied bombardment and shelling infamously obliterated the ancient abbey in February 1944 (Figure 1). The destruction aimed to dislodge German defenders, mistakenly believed to occupy positions inside the abbey's courtyard and residences, so that troops could strike north both to capture German armies and seize Rome. The brutal Battle of Monte Cassino lasted for five months, and many of those Wehrmacht soldiers who fell in the vicinity are buried here under the long shadows of the abbey.¹ Inaugurated in May 1965, twenty-one years after the war wrought its carnage, the cemetery's architectural composition itself proves fascinating when viewed through the lens of Dante Alighieri's *Purgatorio*, the second cantica of the *Divine Comedy* (the *Commedia*). Here, upon a material, terraced Purgatory, the arrangement of the dead offers a bid for atonement, a request for suffrage, and a message of hope instilled in the Christian mystery of salvation (Figures 2-3).

The site selection and construction of the cemetery are very much worth our consideration. As Birgit Urmson relates in *German and United States Second World War Military Cemeteries in Italy*:



FIGURE 1. Allied aerial and artillery bombardment of Monte Cassino began on February 15, 1944, and caused catastrophic damage to the abbey. Image: VDK Archives, used with permission.

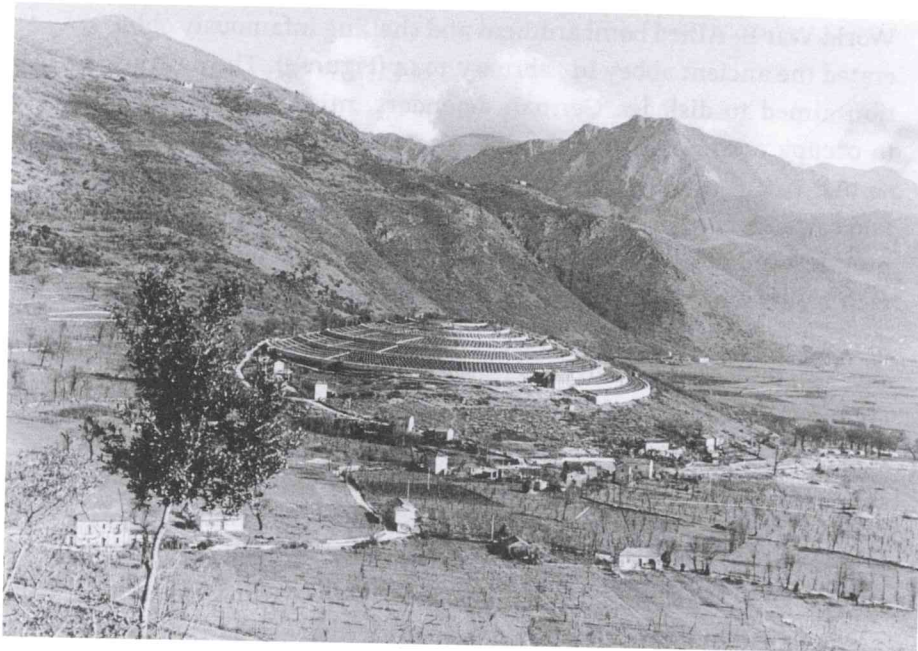


FIGURE 2. The cemetery on its inauguration day, May 4, 1965. Image: VDK Archives, used with permission.



FIGURE 3. Several hundred German families attend the inauguration day on May 4, 1965. Image: VDK Archives, used with permission.

Cultural Perspectives, the Italian government reached an accord with the Federal Republic of Germany in 1955 to purchase land for burial use to accommodate the more than twenty thousand German and Nazi fallen in southern Italy. For more than ten years the remains and bodies of the dead had rested in countless temporary cemeteries and needed a more permanent, prominent, and dignified resting place. Indeed, in 1957 the mayor of Cassino expressed a desire to have a German cemetery built nearby to alleviate the burden of housing the exhumed bodies that had been placed in church basements, Italian army barracks, warehouses, and railway stations.²

The German War Graves Commission, or the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (VDK), enlisted its chief architect Robert Tischler to locate a suitable area near Cassino for final burial. Once he had finished surveying the land around the battleground, Tischler settled upon the Colle Marino in Caira because, as he said, it “had a flat hilltop perfect for a monument visible from afar.”³ Hired by the VDK in 1926, Tischler had long served as Germany’s

preeminent architect of war cemeteries, mostly recognized for his *Totenburg* ("city of the dead") design employed after World War I (Figure 4). This form consisted of a hillside construction, the summit of which accommodated a small fortress mausoleum.



FIGURE 4. Robert Tischler (1885–1959), chief architect of the German War Graves Commission (Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge) from 1926 until 1959. Image: VDK Archives, used with permission.

Tischler's *Totenburgen* in Italy include the cemeteries at Pordoi, Feltre, and Quero. He maintained his position as chief architect after World War II and also designed the cemeteries at Tobruk (Libya), El-Alamein (Egypt), Pomezia (Rome), and La Cambe (Normandy).

Tischler's initial layout for Cassino-Caira as a *Totenburg* did not gain VDK approval,⁴ and he shifted away from crafting an imposing fortress structure on the Colle Marino crest, leaving instead the flat hilltop open and looking over seven semicircular terraces. By the time construction began on the cemetery in 1959, Tischler had died, and the project management had passed to Gerd Offenber, who did not deviate from Tischler's final plan.⁵ Reinterment continued for the next few years, and inauguration took place on May

4, 1965, with both German and Italian delegations in attendance, as well as family members of the fallen.

Over the last sixty years, several official commemorations have taken place to honor the dead, usually at ten-year intervals. A statue composition, *Trauer und Trost* [Sorrow and Mourning] was added by Suse Müller Diefenbach in 1969 (Figure 5). It was placed inside the covered waiting room to add to the gravity of tablets that list the names of the 20,100 Germans buried there, and over the years the barren slopes have been overtaken by vegetation. An eleven-meter-high bronze cross looks over the flat area on top, where the markers indicate the tombs of unknown German soldiers (Figure 6).

Perhaps the most startling aspect of Tischler's design, however, has gone almost completely unrecognized and certainly not



FIGURE 5. Suse Müller Diefenbach, *Trauer und Trost* [Sorrow and Mourning]. Placed in the gathering room of the cemetery in 1969. Image: VDK Archives, used with permission.



FIGURE 6. Bronze cross on the summit of the cemetery. Image: author

analyzed in depth—that of a striking allusion to Dante’s presentation of Mount Purgatory. A research professor of semiotics in Rome, Piero Polidoro, comments upon the configuration, especially perceiving the flat hilltop as an Earthly Paradise:

In questi spazi si legge la presa di coscienza del popolo tedesco, che dopo il 1945 dovette fare i conti con le atrocità compiute del nazismo. Un senso di colpa collettivo che suggerisce un’ulteriore interpretazione di questo spazio. . . . Un piccolo pezzo di paradiso terrestre in cima a una collina a gradoni; quasi un modello di Purgatorio. Il monito a una nazione che deve espiare le sue colpe, ma anche uno spazio intimo in cui ognuno potrà riflettere sulla tragedia insensata della guerra.⁶

[In these spaces we can read how the German people realized after 1945 that they had to deal with the atrocities committed by Nazism. A collective sense of guilt that suggests a further interpretation of this space. . . . A little piece of heaven on earth at the top of a stepped hill; almost a model of Purgatory. It serves as a warning to a nation that must atone for its sins, but also an intimate space in which everyone can reflect on the senseless tragedy of war.]

Indeed, if we do interpret the cemetery as a purgatorial site of memory and mourning, and use Dante as an interpretive key, profound implications of atonement, reconciliation, and peace become apparent.

Before discussing this interpretation in full, however, we need to understand how the physical presentation of war cemeteries transmit and reconstruct memory. As reshaped terrain hewn into the side of Monte Colle, this particular cemetery projects the Italian cultural relevance of Dante’s poem and reflects German architectural norms that Tischler helped shape after WWI.

The French historian Pierre Nora first promoted the idea of a *lieu de mémoire*—a site of memory in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*.⁷ In the English translation’s preface, Nora defines the term as “any significant entity—whether material or non-material which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.”⁸ Museums, monuments, and cultural landmarks often best represent sites of memory where human communities invest historical

meaning upon an object, or artefacts, and receive a sense of shared identity from the past being symbolically recollected. As American historian Jay Winter describes the term, sites of memory necessarily involve groups of people who engage in public activity, usually through purposeful ritual at the site, wherein they recall their earlier meanings attached to the past and add new meanings to them.⁹

Other studies that link material culture to national memory include George Mosse’s *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*,¹⁰ which demonstrates how many nations shaped their monuments after WWI to sanctify the sacrifice of the war. Likewise, Paul Connerton in *How Societies Remember*¹¹ and John R. Gillis in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*¹² both delve deeply into the study of how social groups tap into the lived memory of their past to make meaning in the present through monuments. And finally, Keith Lowe in *Prisoners of History: What Monuments to World War II Tell Us About Our History and Ourselves*¹³ studies how five different types of World War II monuments, found in different nations, communicate cultural norms about their history through them. These scholarly examples help us to frame an interpretation of the German War Cemetery at Cassino. But perhaps we can employ the most intriguing critical approach of understanding the presentation of war graves through a consideration of “trench art.”

Soldiers throughout centuries of warfare have crafted objects and souvenirs from material found at hand, and French troops during World War I were the first to coin the term given the decorative craftsmanship many of them undertook upon expended shell casings. In general, as both the English anthropologist Nicholas J. Saunders and the American art collector Jane A. Kimball detail, the term can easily be applied to crafted objects of war chronologically from humankind’s earliest conflicts through today’s campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, and Palestine. Kimball restrictively labels trench art as “pieces created from spent war materials or from items of military equipment”;¹⁴ however, Saunders defines the term much more broadly as “any item made by soldiers or civilians, from war material directly, or any other material, as long as it and they are associated temporally and/or spatially with armed conflict or its consequences.”¹⁵ Beyond these definitions, a significant point

about trench art centers on its ability to shed light on cultural values related to armed action, combat, and making war.¹⁶

If we use Saunders's definition as a benchmark, the cemeteries of war dead, in a very significant way, also comprise trench art, for the remains of human bodies—bones buried underneath the earth—actually constitute the material that tombstones above the ground denote. And, from cemetery to cemetery, architects shape the landscape into a particular presentation of crosses, Stars of David, crescents, monuments, and memorial lights, all geometrically laid out according to plans and lines of sight.

As trench art, the German War Cemetery at Cassino reflects many aesthetic elements of previous compositions designed under the guidance of Tischler, especially with his predilection for Fortresses of the Dead (*Totenburgen*), an expression of medievalism that culturally aimed to glorify the dead and destruction through centuries-old ideals of chivalry, spirituality, and mythology.¹⁷ Although medieval allusions in cemeterial construction waned after World War II, Cassino's landscape architecture, designed in the 1950s and open to interpretation as a Purgatory without a crowning fortress, most definitely captures the spirit of medievalism. Tischler's octagonal design for the German War Cemetery at El-Alamein functions similarly, with its octagonal design that has garnered comparison to Frederick II's Castel del Monte built in Apulia in the 1240s.¹⁸ Of course, we find Cassino's structural root in the Middle Ages, not through inspiration by a material monument but rather via a literary one and its impact upon the collective imagination.

This aspect gets at the heart of the *Commedia's* cultural meaning for Italians, since the poem is such a treasured object of national identity. Its influence since the fourteenth century has singularly shaped Italian language, song, prose, other poetry, political thought, and the visual arts, and its cultural importance, of course, extends to other nations besides.¹⁹ Indeed, beginning in the late Middle Ages, any university-educated person in Italy or Europe, to some degree or another, learned the major outlines and themes of Dante's poem. Still today, Italians commit tercets to memory, and common references to the poem in different media spark a sense of a shared bond. The poem's three *cantiche* help solidify Italian

cultural memory and identity in the spirit of what the Irish historian and author James Stanfield noted in the early nineteenth century: "There are in every country a certain number of objects . . . that produce in the inhabitants that resemblance of ideas and sentiments to which we give the name and spirit and character of a nation."²⁰ The *Commedia* is one such object for Italians, and perhaps colloquially we could say that Italians have the poem deeply "in their bones."²¹ They treasure its power to organize their societal memory and identity. In crafting a place to bury his fellow countrymen, specifically in Italy, Tischler tapped into this relevance—given that the poem simply marks a shared cultural identity that we can never underestimate.

As the French medievalist Jacques Le Goff fully explicates in *The Birth of Purgatory*, Dante, more than any other person in history, gave the physical shape of a mountain to the medieval theological and popular religious understanding of Purgatory.²² Prior to Dante, Purgatory had coalesced as a medieval doctrine by 1274, but the faithful most often located it alongside Hell in some indistinct netherworld. That understanding changed dramatically through the power of the poem. As Virgil explains in the *Inferno*, when God cast Lucifer out of heaven, he fell to the center of Earth, and all the land that he displaced went upwards in the southern hemisphere, forming the massive mountain of Purgatory as an island (*Inf.* 34.121–126). In the poem, Dante divides it into three parts: Ante-Purgatory, Purgatory proper with seven terraces, and the Earthly Paradise, or Eden, the very top.

All the souls who come to Purgatory are saved and will eventually attain heaven. No soul who makes it here can fail or be reassigned to Hell.²³ In the *Purgatorio*, the examination of salvific atonement begins when Dante and Virgil move from Ante-Purgatory and pass through the Gate of Purgatory proper. They then traverse Purgatory's seven terraces, where the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice/prodigality, gluttony, and lust) are purged. The souls on each of the terraces experience different forms of temporary pain and work collectively to improve morally, thus countering their individualistic, self-centered focus connected with sinning in life. Steep stairways connect each terrace,

and when the soul of a penitent has completed the process of purging, he or she enters the final realm of Purgatory, the Earthly Paradise. Here souls are eventually immersed in two rivers, Lethe, to remove the binding memory of sinful tendencies, and the Eunoe, to restore and strengthen all the good that they have ever done. When the immersion is completed, the souls, pure and willing, are ready to ascend to Heaven.

The material traces of Dante's Purgatory are definitely etched on Monte Colle. As stated previously, a walkway from a parking lot leads to a large stone portal (Figure 7), a gate, and through it, visitors gain access to a welcoming room that has the Müller Diefenbach monument *Sorrow and Mourning*, the composite cited above, which represents two parents or other relatives mourning their loved ones. When exiting this room, visitors come out upon the middle of the cemetery and can look both up toward the upper terraces and top, and down toward two semielliptical bottom terraces (Figure 8). In effect, the exit opens to the third terrace, an important point, for on the third terrace in Purgatory proper, the penitent are purged of wrath, and where Dante the poet, through the voice of Marco Lombardo, discusses free will. This conversation marks the center point of the entire poem. Of course, exiting upon the Terrace of Wrath makes symbolic sense, considering the hellish Monte Cassino battles.²⁴ The cross-marked terraces meet one's eyes, recalling somberly, as with other war cemeteries, the horrors of war, loss of life, and human sacrifice.²⁵

In any event, one can move toward the end of a terrace, climb up a stone stairway that traverses through the terraces, and ultimately get to the open-area top, which has an eleven-meter bronze cross, that we also previously saw, and horizontal grave markers indicating unknown soldiers. To the back of this open spot, a wooded area is located, dotted with maritime pines (Figure 9). As we have noted, this setting recalls the Earthly Paradise, a location Dante specifically describes as a gentle forest; this reference brings readers back to the beginning of the poem, where Dante, the pilgrim, was lost in a terrifying wood of darkness that he could only leave by accepting Virgil's help.

Amazingly, the cemetery's configuration, Tischler's architectural fashioning of a cemeterial Purgatory, provides a reflection

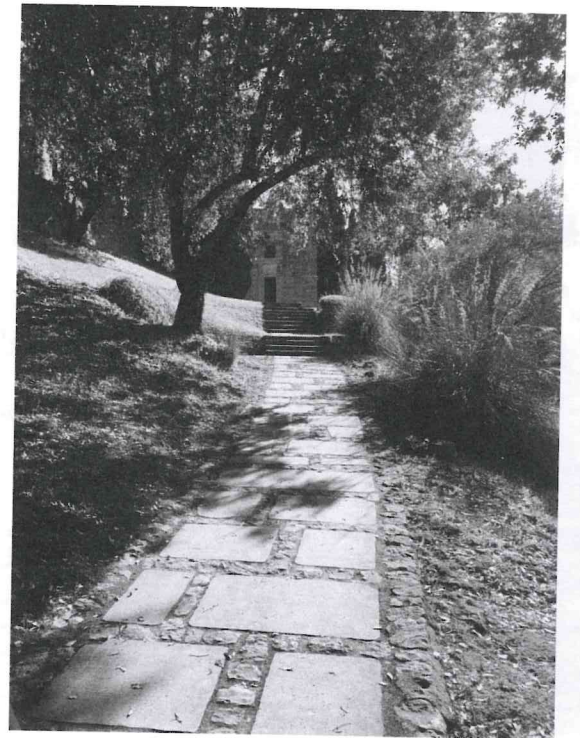


FIGURE 7. Pathway and stone portal. Image: author.



FIGURE 8. Third terrace exit from the waiting room. Image: author.



FIGURE 9. The summit recalls an earthly paradise. Image: author.

of the redeeming role of art itself in this part of Dante's afterlife. Sacred music, prayer, performance tableaux, bas-relief, poetry, and even dance all function to dispose the mind and heart of shades to repentance. Toward the end of *Purgatorio* 10, when Dante and Virgil pass through the Terrace of Pride, Dante sees the repentant carrying huge slabs of stone that curve their bodies, forcing their gaze earthward. The penitent themselves become art as Dante compares them to corbels, stone figures located on medieval cathedrals and lecterns that have scrunched bodies with knees pressed upwards against chests (*Purg.*10.128–135). Of course, all the remaking of souls in Purgatory ultimately leads back to the fashioning hand of God in an artistic sense, but here the reference is clear. God is molding and restoring them according to his design to the unblemished nature that all humankind enjoyed before the Fall. Creators of medieval art—musicians, poets, artists, illuminators—abound in Purgatory, and as literary scholar Jeffery T. Schnapp comments,

their “abundance suggests that Dante viewed art as an ennobling pursuit: a pursuit with a built-in transcendental potential.”²⁶ At Cassino, the German fallen—buried, shaped, and configured as trench art according to Tischler's design—provide a material echo of Dante's *Purgatorio*.

In the same vein, the cemetery, as a terraced purgatory, artfully juxtaposes its sacrality with the hellish grounds surrounding it, where so many soldiers died. As Dante scholar Dino S. Cervigni indicates, Hell's violence and torment, especially in the seventh circle, is a perversion of all the good things that God created—it is literally a world *alla rovescia*, upside down.²⁷ The displaced earth that formed Purgatory reorders all that is good, an apt, upright realm for human redemption, where blood and savagery are absent. At Caira, the cemetery, with its delimited purgatorial space, underlines the contrast between the gruesome brutality of battle and a proper realignment toward peace and salvation.

At first, even Italians, with their cultural memory of the poem, may not readily see Dante's vision tangibly created as a war cemetery,

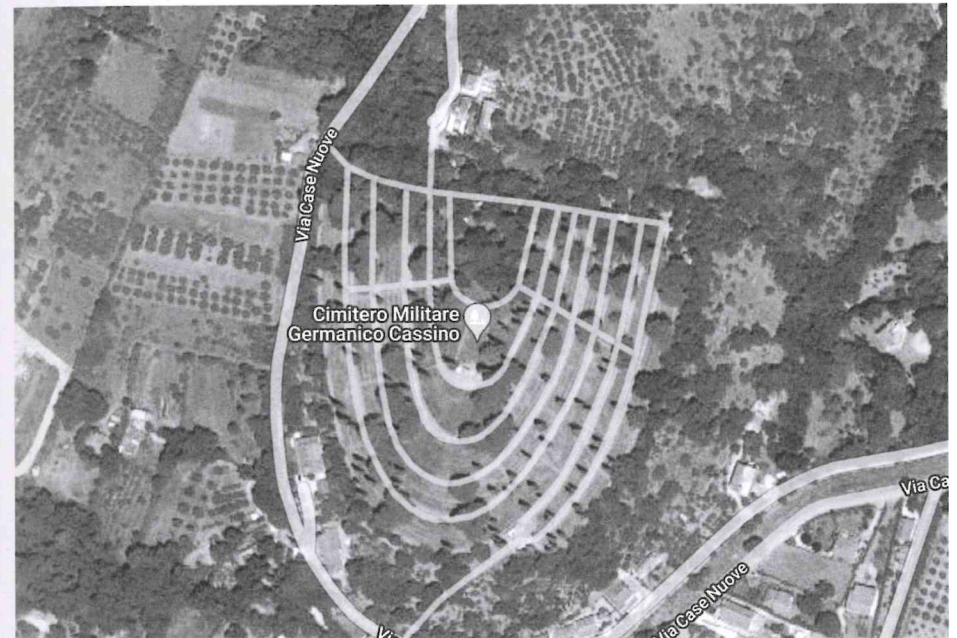


FIGURE 10. Overhead view of the cemetery. Image: Google Maps.

but in examining the structure, the link comes into focus.²⁸ As such, the symbolic meaning of those buried here in this *lieu de memoire* has deep purchase. As Dante stresses time and again in *Purgatorio*, the theological virtue of hope reigns supreme. Le Goff indicates that the “souls in Purgatory . . . are delivered souls, already saved.”²⁹ As a message, hope in redemption from the shackles of sin overlays the entire cantica. In the first canto Virgil himself articulates this point when he tells Cato, the guardian of Purgatory, how it is that Dante, a living man, now appears before him: “May it please you to welcome him—he goes / in search of freedom, and how dear that is” (*Purg.* 1.70–71). Dante has seen the horrors of hell, and now Virgil will guide him to Earthly Paradise to complete the moral regeneration process. Dante’s hope lies in his movement upward toward moral cleanliness, a state that Dante achieves after he passes through the flames on the Terrace of Lust, and then Virgil tells him: “Expect no longer words or signs from me. / Now is your will upright, wholesome and free, / and not to heed its pleasure would be wrong: I crown and miter you lord of yourself!” (*Purg.* 27.139–142).

This spirit of atonement, reconciliation, and hope resides firmly in Tischler’s own presentation of a Dantean Purgatory. He offers a bid of reconciliation for the evils and sorrows of National Socialism, whose proponents collectively killed Allied soldiers, impressed Italians into work gangs, massacred innocent civilians throughout the peninsula, and wrought environmental damage upon Italian soil. But the message of atonement is larger, since the scars of war affect everyone, and though there may be victors in armed combat, the cemetery forces us to ponder how war ravages our collective humanity.

German relatives of the dead who come to Cassino often do so as pilgrims to connect with their loved ones, a common medieval feature of all war cemeteries. As Tony Walter in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* contends:

The battlefield and the grave are sacred because those we love and admire have died there. Like the medieval pilgrim, we come to pay homage to the relics of the saints—though we call them not saints but heroes. This is what makes battlefield pilgrimage different from tourism. And it is why tourists, on chancing by a Flanders

cemetery or a Dachau, may find their cameras falling silent and themselves turning momentarily into pilgrims. . . . The pilgrim is healed and becomes whole, complete, in the presence of the bones of the saints, or at the hero’s grave. Medieval shrines often developed because of stories of physical healing; with the modern war grave, the talk is more of emotional healing.³⁰

Indeed, at Cassino, many relatives and friends of the fallen have an experience very similar to what Reinhard Führer, president of the German War Graves Commission, reported in 2004; a woman visitor had previously told him, “Ich fahre seit 1965 jedes Jahr nach Cassino und besuche dort das Grab meines Mannes und jedes Mal, wenn ich dort war, liebe ich meinen Mann immer mehr.” [“I have been going to Cassino every year since 1965 and visiting my husband’s grave there, and every time I have been there, I love my husband more and more.”]³¹ Nazism and war had a tragic and lasting effect upon her. Our own steps up the slopes, taken as pilgrims seeking understanding, lead us to empathize with her.³²

The spiritual state of the dead here at Cassino gives us true pause. They died fighting for a dishonorable and degenerate regime. But their burial here in a symbolic purgatory, expresses the hope of redemption, where peace finds ultimate expression in being able to follow God’s will through the cleansing process upon the terraces. Tischler expresses this exact notion with a stone monument that he placed at another German cemetery he designed: this one in Pomezia near Rome. A Dantean dedication here cites the character Piccarda, whose words, rendered in both German and Italian, come from the third canto in *Paradiso*: “In His will is our peace.”³³ The Italianist Virginia Jewiss recognizes how the placement of the marker in a national military cemetery of another country startles the viewer “where inscriptions are typically simple declarations of the number of deceased or sober statements about sacrifice. Rarely—if ever—do the inscriptions derive from another national tradition, let alone from a belligerent nation in the conflict.”³⁴ Jewiss then surmises that the poet’s inscription has an apt place in Pomezia precisely because the German War Graves Commission, refounded in 1946 after the war, has as its guiding principle: “Arbeit für den Frieden” [“Work for Peace”].³⁵

At Cassino, the entire cemetery, with its terraced purgatorial hillside and flat apex, serves this very mission, sweeping us forcefully into contemplating the message of moving toward moral rectitude to gain peace. As visitors see the crosses that mark the thousands of the dead, they too can ponder how to take their own steps toward working for peace so that the destruction of war and horrific loss of human life be not in vain.

Indeed, through a Dantean reference, Tischler's landscape creates a special bond between those soldiers buried here—the symbolic saved in purgatory—and us, the living on earth. In the *Purgatorio*, time and time again, the penitent souls ask Dante to inform their living loved ones to pray for them. Likewise, Dante also sees the efficacy of the souls praying for the living, a point that underlines the reciprocity between those living on earth and this part of the afterlife. Knowing this invitation for prayers between the living and dead in Purgatory, the visitor enters into a relationship with the German deceased soldiers. Perhaps at other war cemeteries the



FIGURE 11. Crosses of the dead. The German soldiers ask for our prayers as they pray for the living. Image: author.

intimate bonds between the dead and living are not architecturally as heightened, given how, with the material Purgatory at Cassino, the souls symbolically request prayers to help fulfill their hope in heaven, and, in Dantean terms, that they can symbolically pray for us too.

Of course, the hope for their assured salvation speaks to another one of the *Purgatorio*'s great themes—that of the mystery of salvation. In the poem, Dante's guide Virgil plays a significant role in this regard. Through no fault of his own, and even though he heroically leads Dante toward full redemption, Virgil himself will never get to see God face to face. In contrast, as the gatekeeper of Ante-Purgatory, Cato—a pagan Roman suicide who opposed Caesar and thus the evolution from Republic to Empire—has gained salvation. Similarly, and also in the *Purgatorio*, Statius, once a pagan Roman poet, completes his thousand-year purgation as a penitent Christian. It was Virgil, through his power as a poetic model, who led Statius surprisingly to his conversion, but without benefit to Virgil's own salvation.

Indeed, when Beatrice arrives, Virgil disappears and returns to Limbo. His permanent exile as an upright, noble Roman seemingly makes no sense, but in the economy of the poem, his exclusion from Paradise heightens God's inscrutable ways. Ultimately, as Dante has us understand, God's mercy is simply beyond our understanding.

Besides Cato and Statius in Purgatory, we meet several other souls, great sinners in life, who stunningly nevertheless gain the opportunity to undergo a cleansing and then rise to heaven to experience eternal salvation. Manfred and Buonconte both died violently and managed to seek forgiveness *in extremis*. The historical Manfred, a great warlord, illegitimate son of Frederick II, and a papal excommunicant, was killed at the Battle of Benevento in 1266. In the *Purgatorio*, his shade shows his battle scars to the pilgrim, and he talks about his astonishing deliverance: "As I lay there, my body torn by these / two mortal wounds, weeping, I gave my soul / to Him Who grants forgiveness willingly. / Horrible was the nature of my sins, but boundless mercy stretches out its arms / to any man who comes in search of it" (*Purg.* 3.118–123).

Buonconte da Montefeltro has a similar fate. Son of Guido da Montefeltro who is in Hell (*Inf.* 27), Buonconte was, like his father, a redoubtable Ghibelline military leader. Killed at the Battle of Campaldino in 1289, Buonconte's body was never recovered. Dante the poet constructs a story wherein Buonconte, mortally wounded, makes his faltering way to the banks of a river where he shed a tear and died with the name of the Virgin on his lips: ". . . there / I made my way, my throat an open wound, / fleeing on foot, and bloodying the plain. / There I went blind. I could no longer speak, / but as I died, I murmured Mary's name, / and there I fell and left my empty flesh" (*Purg.* 5.97-102).

Both Manfred and Buonconte attained salvation in Ante-Purgatory by way of a simple gesture or even a tear. Many other souls who met a violent death cry out to Dante: "We are all souls who met a violent death, / and we were sinners to our final hour; / but then the light of Heaven lit our minds, / and penitent and pardoning, we left / that life at peace with God, Who left our hearts / with longing for the holy sight of Him" (*Purg.* 5.52-57). As a group, they too represent the mystery of God's salvation, and this theme, found at the heart of Dante's *Purgatorio*, equally provides a powerful message with Tischler's Cassino Purgatory, and it most definitely engages us with these questions: who are we to say who ultimately deserves God's mercy to be saved or not? Do even those who have harmed us deserve salvation? And how do we respond to their redemption?

The important Gospel parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) undergirds and animates the narrative action in the *Purgatorio*, and ultimately our encounter with the German dead at Cassino. When the younger, wayward son returns to the father after wasting his inheritance, he throws himself at the mercy of the very person he seemingly scorned, but the father instead throws him a lavish feast. The older, envious brother, however, protests the father's lavish generosity shown for his "undeserving" younger brother, and he refuses to participate in the feast. The father pleads with him to join the great celebration that he throws for his younger son, who squandered all his money but returned safely home. Their conversation comes to a head:

He said to his father in reply, "For years now I have slaved for you. I never disobeyed one of your orders, yet you never gave me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends. Then when this son of yours returns after having gone through your property with loose women, you kill the fatted calf for him." "My son," replied the father, "you are with me always, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice! This brother of yours was dead, and has come back to life. He was lost, and is found." (NAB)

Jesus ends the story without a tidy ending; the elder son is left there to ponder what his father has just said, and we do not know if he decides to overcome his resentment and enter the jubilation. What then are we as listeners, the faithful, to do with Jesus's invitation to forgive, and not only forgive but to celebrate the repentance of an adversary? Visitors to the cemetery confront the same reality. The German dead, even those who abetted the Nazis directly or indirectly, are configured in this Purgatory as being welcomed into God's kingdom, repentant, awaiting ultimate glory. Do we too forgive them?³⁶

As we have learned, the entire purgatorial journey upwards to Earthly Paradise consists of Dante and the reader coming to understand what forgiveness involves, and how God freely gives it through his mercy. The point is deeply embedded in the physical notion of a realm itself that was expressly made to purify the soul of sinful tendencies in order to be fully ready for eternal bliss. Purgatory actually serves as an antechamber of heaven, whose last door, so to speak, is Earthly Paradise, from which the souls journey to Heaven. Dante's journey up to and experience in Earthly Paradise has made him "puro e disposto a salire a le stelle" ["immaculate / eager to rise, now ready for the stars"] (*Purg.* 33.144-145).

Tischler's final configuration puts the ultimate seal upon the symbolic meaning of the fallen German soldiers' hope of attained salvation. They are architecturally placed by Tischler at Cassino's Earthly Paradise among the elect whose renewed souls are ready to rise. In our hearts, our mercy for them should affirm the same, doubly so when we see how they are placed as if they seek atonement, one of the great cultural themes that Germans collectively lived after the end of the war.

The historian Keith Lowe provides good insight to this collective emotional struggle. Germans had to accept with shame all the gruesomeness that the war's butchery had wrought:

It is difficult today to fully appreciate the sense of shame that engulfed Germany in the aftermath of the war. The apocalypse that overcame the country was not only physical but spiritual. Germans were ashamed of losing the war; they were ashamed of having to grovel at the feet of those who had defeated them; but more than anything else they were ashamed of what the Nazis had done in their name. They knew that, as far as other nations were concerned, they were now pariahs.³⁷

Tellingly, many years prior to Lowe's affirmation, the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers had articulated this sense of national shame in a series of postwar lectures at Heidelberg University, which addressed the categories of German guilt stemming from inaction and halfhearted opposition to Nazism. As cultural historian Klaus Fischer indicates, although Jaspers rejected the notion that all Germans were criminally guilty, he did hold that they were nonetheless guilty in a moral, political, and metaphysical sense for the horror perpetuated under the Nazi regime.³⁸ Jaspers espoused the necessity to overcome these aspects of guilt through a call to atonement:

We should question ourselves, should pitilessly analyze ourselves; where did I feel wrongly, think wrongly, act wrongly—we should as far as possible, look for guilt within ourselves, not in things, nor in the others; we should not dodge into distress. This follows from the decision to turn about, to improve daily.³⁹

The mental journey toward expiation taken collectively finds material resonance on the burial terraces of the Cassino Purgatory—atonement that also seeks to secure, as Jaspers would envision it, the German moral obligation to never again undertake criminal actions in the name of their entire country.⁴⁰ In this spirit, perhaps another sculptural composition named *Shuld und Selbstbewusstsein* [Blame and Self-Awareness] could be placed near the terraces to complement Müller Diefenbach's *Trauer und Trost* [Sorrow and Mourning]. The act of accepting the blame, with full awareness

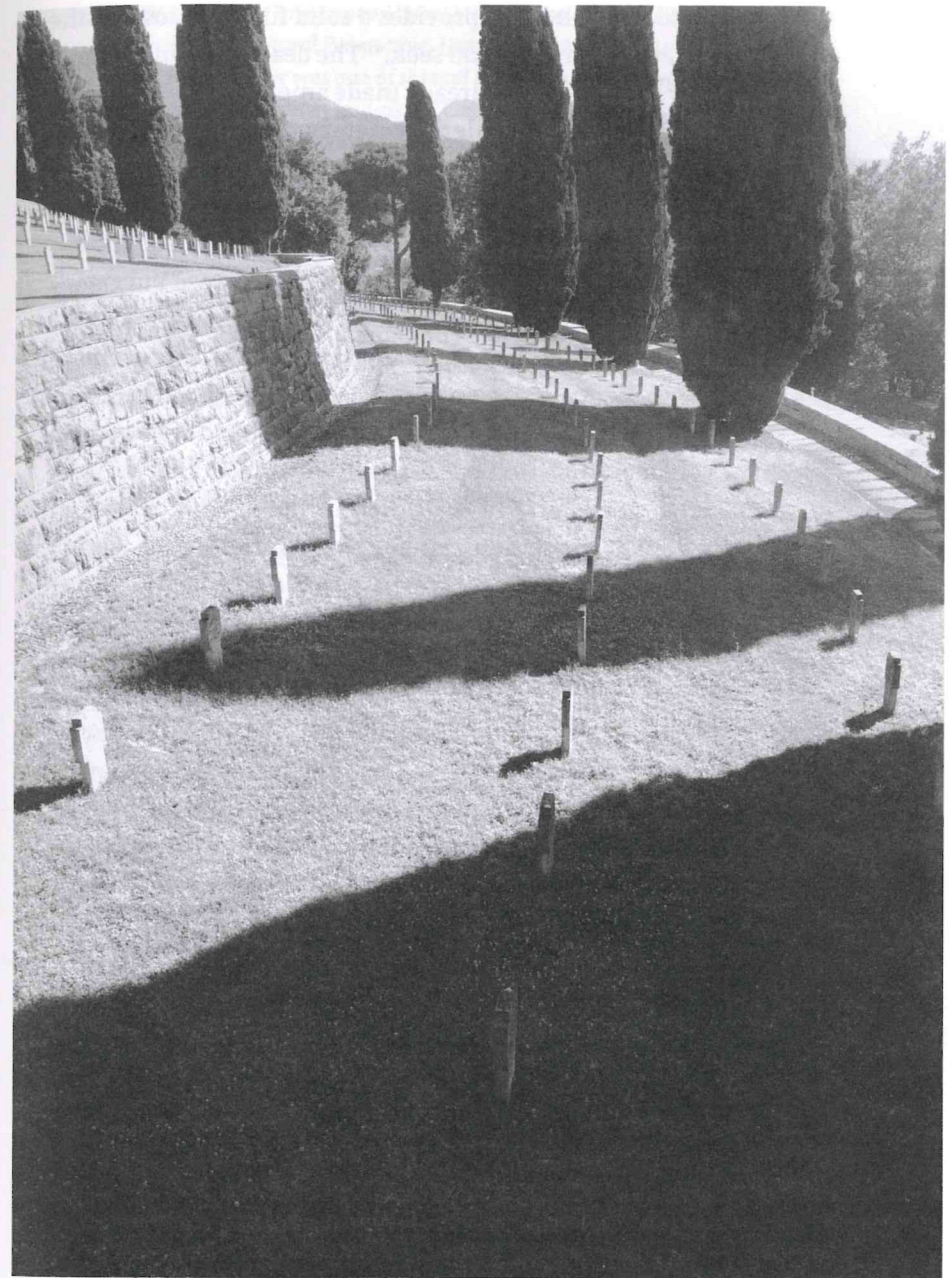


FIGURE 12. Crosses on one of the terraces. How do the living respond to these German fallen, who fought for a horrific Nazi regime? Image: author.

of wreaking so much horror, provides a solid first step toward the atonement that the living should seek.⁴¹ The dead in the meantime, buried as they are here, have already made amends.

In this brilliant way, Tischler's cemetery, as trench art, simultaneously conveys a desire to heal the sadness over the carnage while serving as a harbinger of peace. The structure makes a bid of German collective repentance for Italian material destruction, loss of life, and at times outright murder. As this landscaped Purgatory conveys for all who grasp its poetic and cultural significance, the more than twenty thousand German-Nazi soldiers buried here, express a hope for salvation, of redemption. They all symbolically undergo purification to merit the eventual bliss of heaven—a powerful consideration that speaks to the paradox and mystery of salvation so magisterially embodied in the second cantica of Dante's poem. The invitation remains for us, the living, eighty years on, to ponder in a Dantean sense that God's loving mercy offers deliverance for all, even a fallen enemy who died serving a despicable cause.

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Notes

1. For two excellent studies of the Cassino front and its four ferocious battles of attrition (January–May 1944) see John Ellis, *Cassino: The Hollow Victory: The Battle for Rome, January–June 1944* (McGraw-Hill, 1984) and Matthew Parker, *Monte Cassino: The Hardest-Fought Battle of World War II* (Anchor Books, 2005). James Holland in *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944–1945* (St. Martin's Press, 2008) canvasses the first, second, and third Battles of Monte Cassino before delving into depth with the fourth and final action in May 1944. His full-length, masterful study of the battles can be found in *Cassino '44: The Brutal Battle for Rome* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2024). For a very informative Axis perspective of the campaign, see Rudolf Böhmler's *Monte Cassino: A German View* (Pen and Sword Military: 2015).

2. Birgit Urmson, *German and United States Second World War Military Cemeteries in Italy: Cultural Perspectives* (Peter Lang, 2018), 290–291.
3. *Ibid.*, 291. Tischler was one of several architects who hewed the burial contours around the abbey and city of Cassino, both of which the Germans had incorporated in their Gustav Line during the war. Other national cemeteries that honor the dead include the Polish Cemetery, the French Cemetery (at Venafro), and the British Commonwealth Cemetery. The Italian Cemetery is found close by in the municipality of Mignano Montelungo. As the Italian engineering scholars Cigola, Gallozzi, and Zordan convey: “The shrines were designed by some of the best architects and sculptors of the time; they were able to significantly shape the sites, creating monumental scenarios of particular artistic, symbolic and scenic interest, despite being singularly heterogeneous in terms of style and typology.” Michela Cigola et al., “Memory of Different People in One Territory: WW2 Cemeteries in Cassino & Montecassino,” in *Preserving Transactional Heritage: Your Way or My Way? Questions on Authenticity, Identity and Patrimonial Proceedings in the Safeguarding of Architectural Heritage Created in the Meeting of Cultures*, ed. Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos (Caleidoscópico, 2017), 491. Many US soldiers who lost their lives during the Battle of Monte Cassino are buried at the prestigious Sicily-Rome American Cemetery and Memorial in Nettuno (Anzio).
4. The primary-source information regarding Tischler's survey, selection, and design of the cemetery comes from both the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* archives (consulted electronically) and the Italian government's *Ministero della Difesa Ufficio per la tutela della cultura e della memoria della Difesa* (UTCMD), located in Rome. At the VDK, research associate Franziska Haarhaus was very kind to send scanned letters, blueprints, sketches, and articles directly to me, thus saving a trip to Kassel, Germany. In June 2023, Capitano Riccardo Gallante generously provided me access to the UTCMD archive in Rome. In some cases, both archives provided duplicate documents.
5. Urmson, *German and United States Second World War Military Cemeteries*, 292; Offenberg, Gerd. 1967. Unpublished Interview. Chef Architekt der “Bauleitung Des Volksbundes Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge” in München. [Archives VDK]. In reflecting upon having taken over for Tischler at Caira, Offenberg related in a 1967 unpublished interview: “Der Friedhof liegt etwa 3 km landeinwärts gegen die Abruzzen zu auf einem Hügel beim Ort Caira. Ich bin nun schon ganz heimisch dort und kenne alle Arbeiter, z.T. auch ihre Kinder und Frauen. Der Friedhof war bereits mit Toten belegt, also in seinen Grundzügen angelegt, genau so, wie die Friedhöfe in Costermano und Rom” [“The cemetery is about 3 km inland towards the Abruzzi on a hill near the town of Caira. I am now completely at home there and know all the workers, some of them their children and

- wives too. The cemetery was already filled with dead people, so its basic outlines were laid out in exactly the same way as the cemeteries in Costermano and Rome”] (VDK Archives n.p.).
6. Piero Polidoro, “I luoghi della battaglia,” *@Lumsa: Periodico della Libera Università di Maria Santissima Assunta* 4, no. 8 (May): 21.
 7. Pierre Nora, “Preface to the English Language Edition,” in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora (Columbia University Press, 1996), xv – xxiv.
 8. *Ibid.*, xvii.
 9. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War and Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 322–324. As the Charles J. Stille Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University, Jay Winter is one of the foremost specialists in the field of war remembrance with extensive publications, especially on the First World War. His *Sites of Memory* has helped to ground this present study. See also Jay Winter, “Sites of Memory,” in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Swarz (Fordham University Press, 2010), 312–24.
 10. George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1990).
 11. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).
 12. John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton University Press, 1994).
 13. Keith Lowe, *Prisoners of History: What Monuments to World War II Tell Us About Our History and Ourselves* (St. Martin’s Press, 2020).
 14. Jane A. Kimball, *Trench Art: An Illustrated History* (Silverpen Press, 2004), xi.
 15. Nicholas J. Saunders, *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War* (Berg, 2003), 11. For further information on trench art, see also Saunders’s chapter, “People in Objects: Individuality and the Quotidian in the Material Culture of War” in Carolyn L. White, ed., *The Materiality of Individuality: Archeological Studies of Individual Lives* (Springer, 2009), 3–55.
 16. Another excellent pictorial catalogue of trench art can be found with Judy Waugh’s *Trench Art: The Stories Behind the Talismans* (Vivid Publishing, 2015). Waugh is a collector of small-sized reworked war memorabilia of World War I and collaborated with the Australian War Memorial to showcase her items through this text. Similarly, Joe Lyndhurst’s *Military Collectables: An International Directory of Twentieth-Century Militaria* (Crescent Books, 1983) also has extensive visual examples.
 17. Steven Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.
 18. *Ibid.*, 295.

19. Perhaps given the poet’s prominent reputation within European and American culture, we need not cite this axiomatic point; however, the American scholar and literary critic, Harold Bloom, does affirm that Dante finds space along with Shakespeare at the center of the Western canon. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (Harcourt Brace, 1994), 4.
20. James Stanfield, *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (1813; repr. Garland Publishers, 1986), 283.
21. British scholar F. C. Bartlett provides another important point about societal memory that is relevant to our discussion of the poem and the cemetery: “Every group is organised and held together by some specific psychological tendency or group of tendencies, which give the group a bias in its dealings with external circumstances. The bias constructs the special persistent features of group culture . . . [and this] immediately settle[s] what the individual will observe in his environment and what he will connect from his past life with this direct response. It does this markedly in two ways. First, by providing that setting of interest, excitement, and emotion which favours the development of specific images, and secondly, by providing a persistent framework of institutions and customs which acts as a schematic basis for constructive memory.” F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental Social Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 1932), 255. For Italians, the *Commedia* animates a national spirit that finds a parallel with Americans who are culturally framed by passages from the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and the Preamble to the US Constitution.
22. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (University of Chicago Press, 1984).
23. Beyond these general points, of all the aspects of Dante’s purgatorial creation, his greatest inventiveness comes with crafting Ante-Purgatory. According to Jacques Le Goff, there was no prior official doctrine or popular understanding guiding Dante in its construction (*The Birth of Purgatory*, 342). The poet’s creativity saw the need for a place to retain those who were guilty of certain infractions that kept them from immediately cleansing their sinful tendencies. Dante scholar Teodolinda Barolini echoes Le Goff during a videotaped lecture at Columbia University when she also stresses Dante’s great inventiveness with Ante-Purgatory (<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/the-dante-course/>) during her “Lecture 19” (6 min, 35 sec).
24. Böhmler conveys the ferocity of the last phase of the battle in May 1944 in discussing the Wehrmacht’s need to displace and move north to prevent a full-blown Allied rout: “The German dispatch rider, who on the evening of 17 May brought up the order to evacuate, found only sorry remnants of their companies. The German casualties, and particularly those of the 1st Battalion, 3 Parachute Regiment, had been severe in the extreme. Of No. 1

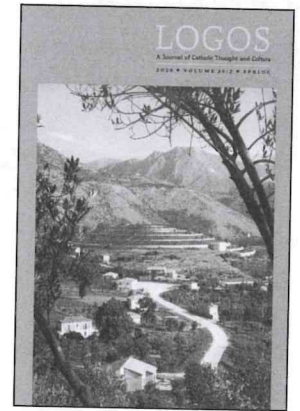
- Company, which for six days had been in the forefront of the fight for the Calvary Mount, only one officer, one non-commissioned officer and one man remained" Böhmler, *Monte Cassino: A German View*, 268.
25. Julie Rugg, "Defining the Place of Burial: What Makes a Cemetery a Cemetery?" *Mortality* 5, no. 3 (2000): 270-271.
 26. Jeffery T. Schnapp, "Introduction to *Purgatorio*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.
 27. Dino S. Cervigni, "Holy and Unholy Violence in Dante: From Hell to Purgatory and Paradise," *Annali d'Italianistica, Unholy & Unholy Violence in Dante's Comedy* 39 (2021): 369.
 28. I have had numerous discussions about the cemetery with Italians without initially disclosing how I see it as a material Purgatory. These interactions have occurred with academics, professionals, nonprofessionals, and those who have only attained an equivalent of a middle-school education. Some immediately recognize a Dantean reference, especially when I show them photographs and a Google Maps aerial image of the grounds. Others take longer for the connection to click. But, if this is the case, I often then hear, "Ehi, sì! Certo, lo vedo adesso. È proprio lì." ["Oh, yeah! Of course I see it now. It's right there"].
 29. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 349.
 30. Tony Walter, "War Grave Pilgrimage," in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, ed. Ian Reader and Tony Walter (Macmillan, 1993), 86.
 31. Reinhard Führer, "Gedenkansprache." Archives of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (VDK), 2004. Rudolph Von Neumann, a former Wehrmacht soldier who fought south of Cassino, provides an important testimony with medieval overtones of his own pilgrimage to Cairra's cemetery twenty years after the war. He states: "Es ist etwa, als stünde man am Fusse der Mauren einer mittelalterlichen Stadt, deren Türme man von eitem sah und an deren Toren man nun um Einlass bitten muss" ["It's like standing at the foot of the Moors in a medieval city whose towers you've seen from afar and whose gates you now have to ask to be let in"]. Then in closing, he brings his thoughts to two dead comrades: "An einem herrlichen September-Morgen des Jahres 1943 in der kleinen Bucht von Sapri, drunten in Süditalien, kamen unvermutet die Jagdbomber durch die Sperrballons hindurch über die Berge gezischt. Es war zu spät zum Deckungnehmen. Am Strand, angesichts der glitzernden See, griffen wir zum Spaten. Ich konnte nicht ahnen, dass ich einmal an ihren Gräbern auf dem deutschen Soldatenfriedhof Cassino stehen würde. Es sind nur zwei Gräber, nur zwei über zwanzigtausend" ["On a glorious September morning in 1943 in the small bay of Sapri, down in southern Italy, the fighter-bombers came whizzing through the barrage balloons over the mountains. It was too late to take cover. On the beach, facing the sparkling sea, we picked up spades. Little did I know that one day I would be standing

- by their graves in the German military cemetery in Cassino. There are only two graves, only two over twenty thousand."] Rudolph Von Neumann, "Der Berg der Gefallenen." *Kriegsgräberfürsorge Pamphlet.*, n.4 (April 1965), 42-43.
32. In discussing twentieth-century war memorials, Jay Winter and Emanuel Sivan discuss the importance of ceremonial interchange between the living and the fallen who are commemorated. They state: "Those in mourning used them not only for ceremony, but also for a ritual of separation, wherein touching a name indicates not only what has been lost, but what has not been lost. Visitors to such memorials frequently leave flowers, notes, objects, which serve as a focus of a ritual exchange. The dead have given everything; the living, symbolically or tangibly, offer something in return." Jay Winter and Emanuel Sivan, "Setting the Framework," in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jay Winter and Emanuel Sivan (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 38. Friends and family who come to the German War Cemetery at Cassino, as well as normal visitors, are subject to such an experience, one that the cited German widow has in visiting her husband's grave.
 33. Robert Tischler, *Rejected Cassino German Military Cemetery Design*. Rome: Ufficio per la Tutela della Cultura e della Memoria della Difesa. Found also at the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (VDK), 35.
 34. Virginia Jewiss, "Piccarda's Peace in a German War Cemetery," *MLN* 127, no. 1, Italian Issue Supplement: *Essays in Honor of Giuseppe Mazzotta* (January), S119.
 35. This uplifting epithet, of course, directly counters the sinister and maliciously misleading greeting found at the entrance gate to Dachau and several other Nazi concentration camps, "Arbeit macht frei" ["Work Sets You Free"].
 36. Giovannino Guareschi (1908-1968), the journalist and creator of the popular serialized *Mondo piccolo* short stories, conveys the unsettling invitation to forgive the violence provoked by the German invasion in *Residuati di guerra* [War Survivors]. The tale concerns Milca, a widower whose wife, unbeknownst to him, had an affair with a German soldier, Fritz, during the occupation. Milca murdered Fritz one night when Fritz had caught him by surprise collaborating with the Resistance. Fritz went to shoot Milca, but Milca's draw was quicker and his aim surer. No one suspected Milca of homicide, and Fritz's body was buried nearby. Because of Fritz's infidelity with Milca's wife, readers know that Milca is also a victim of sorts even though Milca's character is wracked with guilt for having murdered Fritz. Each year after the war, Fritz's widowed wife and son come to visit, and it unfolds that Milca, at Don Camillo's behest, marries this woman, in part so that her son may have a father. Milca atones for his sin and undergoes a form of forgiving penance for the rest of his life by

- serving the wife and son of the German soldier he murdered. Giovannino Guareschi, *Residuati di Guerra in Tutto Don Camillo*, ed. Alberto and Carlotta Guareschi (Rizzoli, 1989), 1653-59.
37. Lowe, *Prisoners of History*, 257.
38. Klaus Fischer, *Nazi Germany: A New History* (Continuum, 2006), 578. Fischer summarizes why Jaspers rejected the notion of German collective guilt for Nazi crimes as such: "For crimes one can punish only individuals; a whole nation cannot be charged with a crime. The criminal is always an individual. Moreover, it would be tragic to repeat the practice of the Nazis and judge whole groups by reference to some abstract 'trait' or character. There is no national character that extends to every single individual. . . . People are not evil; only individuals are" (577).
39. Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Fordham University Press, 2001), 108-109.
40. Fischer, *Nazi Germany*, 578.
41. Nazi SS formations massacred hundreds throughout the peninsula, and together with regular Wehrmacht units laid over a million land mines during their years of occupation (Claudio Biscarini, *Achtung! Minen! Della Storia d'Empoli*, <https://www.dellastoriadempoli.it/achtung-minen-di-claudio-biscarini/>). But the Allied forces, of course, were not blameless, for they also brought harsh suffering to Italians. Their aircraft bombed and strafed Italian civilians, and their troops at times also tragically raped women, men, and children. Black marketeers gouged Italian merchants with exorbitant prices, and Allied troops exponentially baited the practice of prostitution. As liberators, they too unfortunately scarred both land and humans alike. In covering the war in Italy, Hastings succinctly comments: "The principal victims of the campaign were the people of Italy." Max Hastings, *Inferno: The World at War, 1939-1945* (Vintage, 2012), 443. The German dead at Cassino, and the Allied fallen who are buried both nearby and at Nettuno, should ultimately first lead us to consider the Italian victims of war, and then, by extension, all casualties of war, both civilian and military.

“The City of the Dead”: Dante’s Cemetery of Dis and the Poetics of the Threshold

WE OFTEN THINK OF CEMETERIES AND graves in terms of finality—the grave is our *domus ultima*, our “final resting place.” But the etymology of the word *cemetery* shows it was originally meant to suggest a sleeping place, a usage that survives when Jesus says of Lazarus, “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go that I may awaken him out of sleep” (Jn 11:11, KJV). The grave then can be understood as, on the one hand, the end of a person, or, on the other, as a site of transition. In the pagan world, the tomb is a monument to an irretrievable past. But for a Christian, the cemetery is a sleeping chamber (a dormitory, in the etymological sense of the word) oriented toward future awakening. Among the many heresies one encounters in Renaissance-era British literature is mortalism, the belief that soul and body die together; the great poet John Milton was a mortalist. But even the mortalist believes both soul and body will be resurrected on the last day. In Alan R. Perry’s essay, “Dante’s Purgatorial Trench Art: The German Military Cemetery at Cassino,” we read about a cemetery designed and shaped to suggest Purgatory, and thus to concretize the hope that death is not the end, but only a stage in our eternal life.



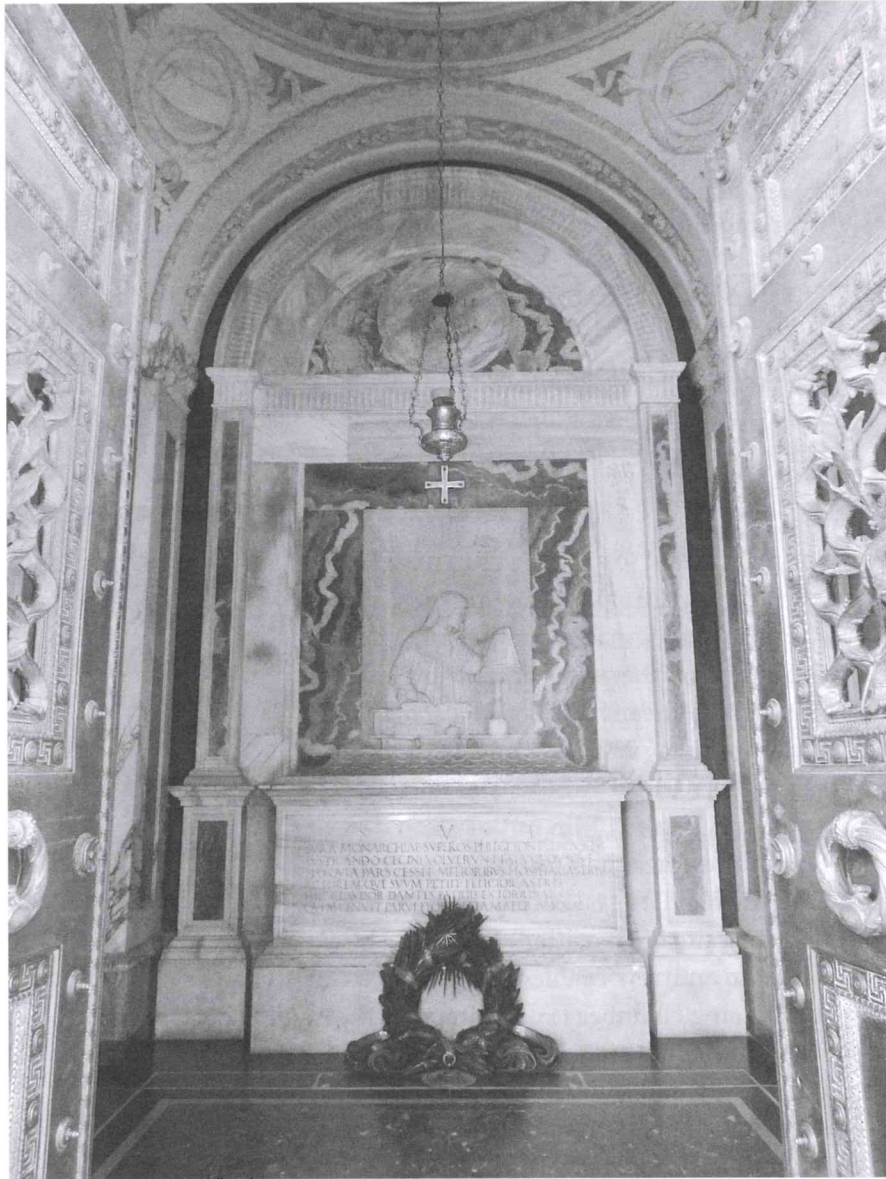


FIGURE 1. Dante's tomb in Ravenna

The great poet of Purgatory was of course Dante Alighieri, and it is in Ravenna, at the edge of a quiet courtyard, close by the Basilica of San Francesco, that Dante's remains lie in a modest neoclassical tomb often described as a small temple—though some think it looks a little like a sugar bowl, because of its compact, rounded form. The surrounding *zona dantesca*, a deliberately hushed pocket of trees and paving stones, a little apart from the noise of traffic and the life of the city, functions like a miniature cemetery of contemplation, a space set apart for memorializing and mourning Italy's—and Catholicism's—supreme poet. Yet the history of the tomb tells a more unsettled story: Dante's bones, originally housed in an ancient Roman sarcophagus, were repeatedly hidden, relocated, and rediscovered over centuries—acts of guardianship and secrecy that reveal a city determined to protect a poet whose very remains remained a matter of political contest. In this small, protected enclave, visitors encounter not only a grave but a narrative of exile extended beyond death, a story written into the very soil that shelters him.

Dante died in Ravenna in 1321 and was buried there next to the Basilica of San Francesco. The independent neoclassical mausoleum that now houses Dante's tomb, still quite close to the basilica, was built in 1780, designed by the Ravenna-born architect Camillo Morigia. The project was commissioned during the pontificate of Pius VI, who became pope in 1775. Before 1780, Dante's remains were in earlier tomb structures on the same site. The remains themselves were—one can't avoid the pun—bones of contention. In 1519, the city that had given him birth but that had also exiled him, Florence, tried to reclaim his bones. Franciscan friars in Ravenna secretly removed and hid the bones in a wooden box to prevent their transfer. For centuries, the box was moved and concealed. During restorations in 1865, workers accidentally discovered the wooden box buried in the wall of a nearby cloister. It bore the Latin inscription "*Dantis ossa*" ("the bones of Dante"). The bones were examined in the nineteenth century and were determined to be consistent with a man of Dante's approximate age and period. They were placed in a new sarcophagus inside the 1780 mausoleum, where they remain.¹

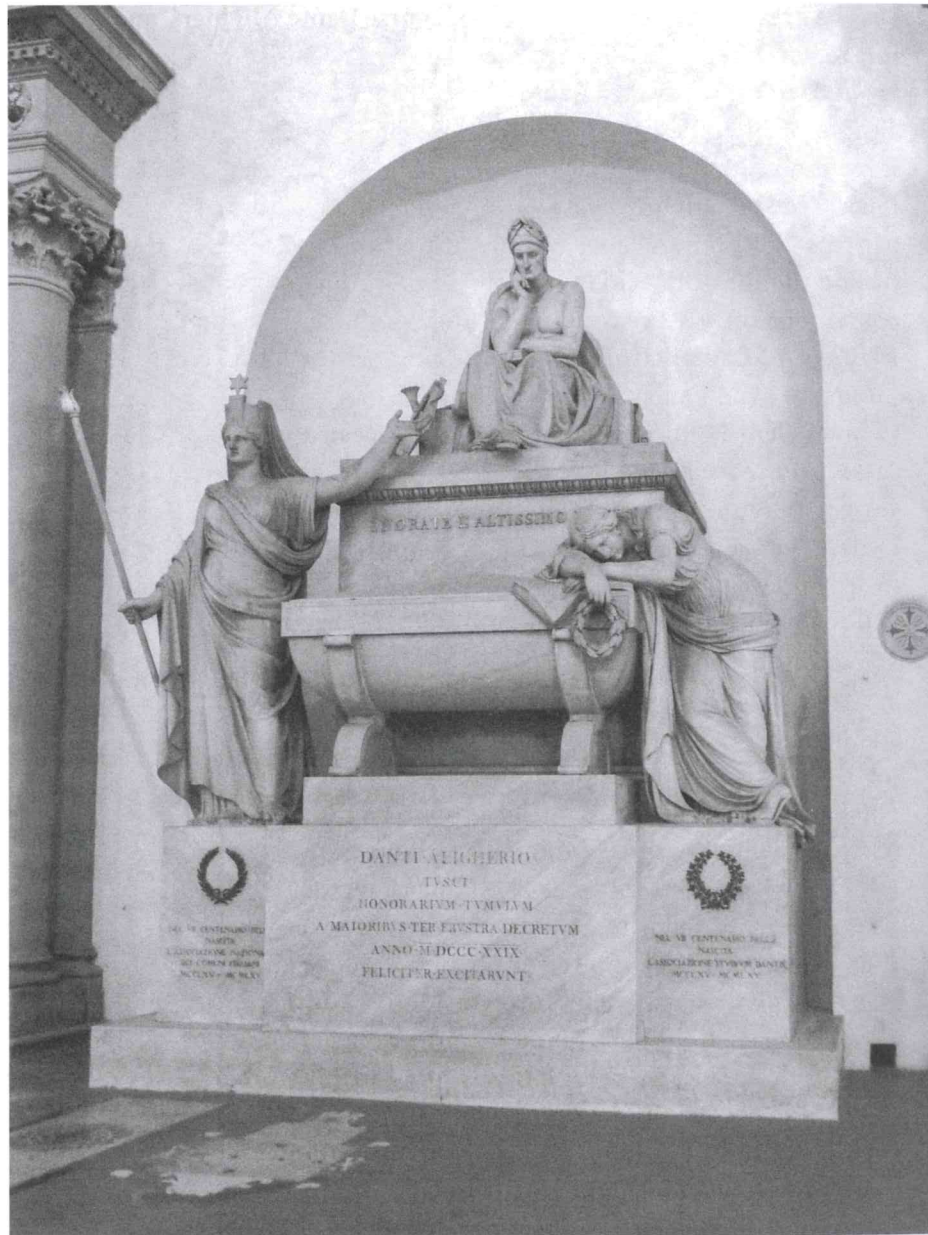


FIGURE 2. Dante's cenotaph inside Santa Croce, Florence. Image: Wikimedia.

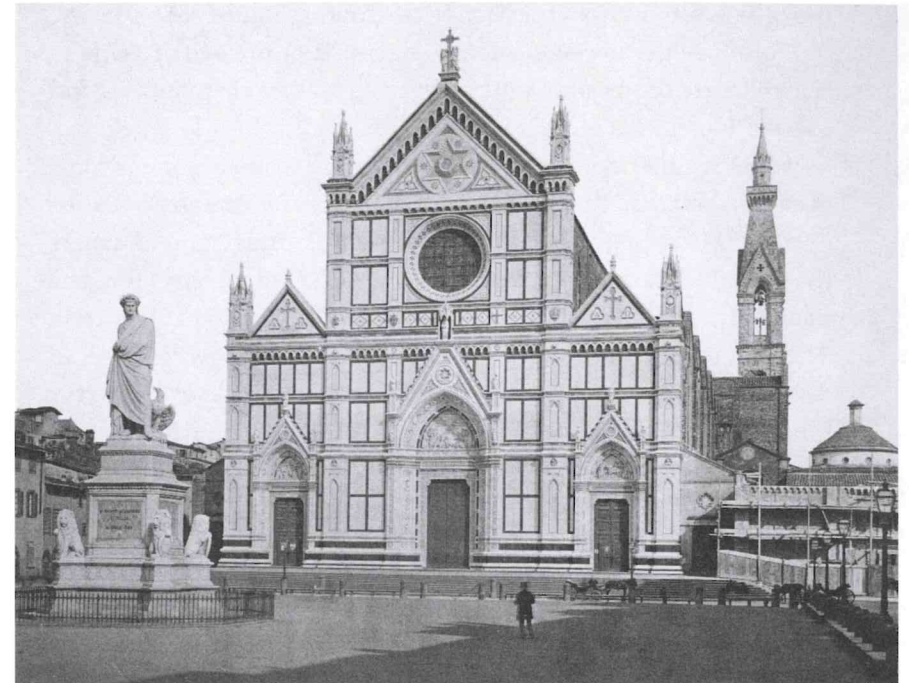


FIGURE 3. Statue of Dante at Santa Croce, Florence. Image: Wikimedia.

Meanwhile in Florence, an elaborate cenotaph rises within the Basilica of Santa Croce, a monumental tomb conspicuously empty. Carved by Stefano Ricci in the early nineteenth century, it shows Dante seated in classical garb above an allegorical tableau where Poetry herself drapes sorrowfully across a sarcophagus, mourning a body she does not possess. Outside the basilica, Enrico Pazzi's 1865 statue of Dante towers, standing watch over the piazza, a stone sentinel placed before a church full of the illustrious dead, including Michelangelo and Machiavelli. (This was the church in which the novelist Stendhal was so overwhelmed by the presence of these mighty dead, and by what he called "celestial sensations," that he almost collapsed on the piazza outside—the phenomenon we now call the Stendhal Syndrome.²)

Taken together, Florence's memorials form a symbolic necropolis rivaling Ravenna's physical one—a city of monuments built to reclaim, in memory and marble, the poet whose actual bones it could never retrieve.³ And so the modern literary pilgrim must

move between the two cities: from Ravenna's secluded *zona Dantesca* to Florence's grand, empty tomb, tracing a bifurcated afterlife in which Dante's body and Dante's legacy lie forever apart, and yet forever entwined.

What would Dante have thought of all this posthumous drama over his remains? The one extended vision of a cemetery that he gives us is in the *Inferno*, specifically within cantos 9 and 10, where the City of Dis functions as a "City of the Dead"—a massive, fortified necropolis that acts as a threshold between Upper and Lower Hell. The area is compared explicitly to the vast Roman necropolises of Arles and Pola (9.112–113). Here in Hell, the area marks a shift in the kinds of sin, from sins of incontinence (evinced a physical, sensual lack of control) to those of malice (which are deliberate and intellectual), with the city walls representing a crucial, nearly impassable boundary protected by demons and Furies. Dante's descent through Hell reaches an arresting tableau here at the walls of the City of Dis: a ruined city, a cemetery in flames, a field of marble sepulchers that seem to breathe and speak. The pilgrim, who has been moving with fearful momentum through successive circles, is forced to stop. The gates close, hissing devils looking down on them. Even his great guide Virgil falters. The topography of Hell, which had been directional and legible because of what had been Virgil's confident pedagogy, now becomes a suspended interval. The cemetery of Dis becomes more than just a setting, or rather, it is a setting that converts a physical threshold into an epistemic and moral one.⁴

What is most striking is how Dante makes the cemetery function narratively. Cemeteries, in Christian and medieval civic experience, are literal borders between the living and the dead, marked by walls and thresholds, and often set at the edge of towns. Dante's cemetery of Dis is emphatically a city within the city—an urban necropolis—whose architecture is itself the punishment. The sepulchers are sealed in hot, glowing stone, their lids momentarily ajar in anticipation of a judgment deferred to the Last Day. Yet this "city of the dead" is paradoxically talkative. The dead speak from below; the tombs seem to emit *sospiri dolenti* (9.126), sighs of anguish.⁵ This paradox—liveliness entombed, speech emanating

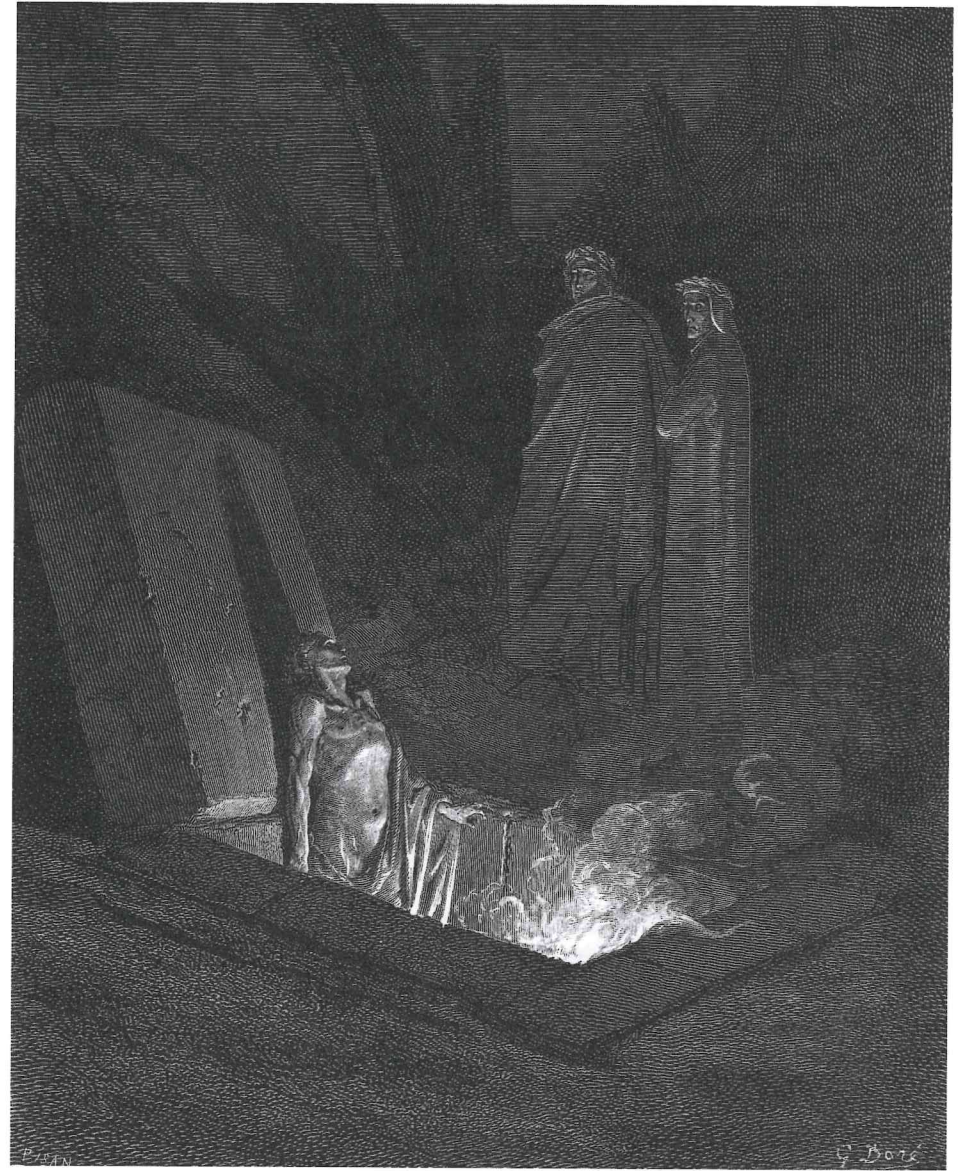


FIGURE 4. Gustave Doré, Woodcut. "Canto X of the Divine Comedy: after passing the rock of the Demons, Dante and Virgil enter the Infernal city of Dis. Farinata Degli Uberti rises from the flames." Image: Wikimedia.

from within enclosure—dramatizes the larger paradox of heresy: an intelligence set ablaze that nevertheless cannot see. Dante makes his reader feel the hush and heat, the stopping and listening, the press of walls and the pressure of time. His cemetery embodies the poetics of the threshold.

Up until this point in the poem, Dante has been constantly moving. From the vestibule to Limbo, from the tempest of lust to the rains of gluttony to the uprisen stench of Styx, the poem's momentum has been steady—a guided descent, a constant movement. Now Dis interrupts this vector. The devils slam the gates; Virgil negotiates but fails; the pilgrims wait for the arrival of a higher envoy. The pause is dramatic enough, but it is not merely theatrical. Dante turns the threshold into a didactic space. In the *Commedia*, thresholds are occasions of instruction: the inscriptions above Hell's gate, the angelic gate at Purgatory, the rose's interior in Paradise. Here at Dis, however, the instruction is different. It is not delivered by Virgil's exposition or by a straightforward exemplum. Instead, the very stoppage has important lessons to teach Dante and us: reason has limits; the civic metaphors we ordinarily accept and even love (walls, gates, the enclosure of our political parties, the borders of our cities) can enclose us spiritually. The cemetery's wall, visually fencing the place off, becomes the image of intellectual enclosure. The pilgrim's forward path is paused so he can learn a truth he would miss if he merely passed through.

While Virgil and Dante are forced to pause, the two are threatened by the appearance of Medusa, and we are reminded that gazing upon her, or meeting her gaze, turns the viewer into stone. The hideous Furies cry out, "Medusa, come, and turn him into stone" (*Vegna Medusa: si l'farem di smalto*, 9.52). Virgil covers Dante's eyes to protect him, and the poet now pauses to address us directly:

*O voi ch'avete li 'ntelezzi sani,
Mirate la dottrina che s'accorde
Sotto 'lvelame de li versi straini (9.58-60)*

O all of you, whose intellects are sound,
Look now and see the meaning that is hidden
Beneath the veil that covers my strange verses.⁶

Turning to stone is to be understood allegorically, the poet reminds us, and indeed we are about to meet some of the damned heretics within the stone walls of Dis, closed off by the walls and by their own tombs—or, allegorically, closed off and entombed by their own embrace of heresy. As John Freccero put it, "The address to the reader is thus not a stage direction, but an exhortation to conversion."⁷ We are reminded not to be satisfied with enjoying or marveling at the grotesque spectacle Dante paints for us; that spectacle is a kind of veil, and we must look behind the veil, focus on its meaning.

The cemetery within Dis is an urban inversion. Dante insists on the civicness of Hell. Dis is a city with walls, gates, towers, and a populace. But where a city is typically marked by houses, streets, and meeting places, here the "houses" are graves. The civic form, which should organize human life toward flourishing, here becomes the architecture of perdition. The political *polis*, to which Florentines like Farinata gave their supreme devotion, has been converted into a mortuary.

This urban necropolis resonates with medieval Italian experience. Cities did have walls, gates, and defined cemetery precincts; burials were clustered near churches and monastic grounds, often at urban margins. Dante's Dis gathers those signs and superheats them: walls are infernal; gates resist the righteous; cemeteries have migrated from the periphery to the center, as if civic identity itself had moved death into the heart of things. The topography is moral: the closer we come to Dis, the more we witness the perversion of human goods—politics, eloquence, reason—into forms of self-enclosure.

These sealed sepulchers offer a condensed theology. Heresy, in Dante's imagination, is a kind of enclosure masquerading as openness and clarity. To believe with Epicurus that the soul dies with the body, or that the resurrection is only allegory, is to lower the lid on eschatology. Thus the punishment: enclosed in stone, heated from within, lids pried up only provisionally until the day the lid will be fixed forever. The architecture is the doctrine made visible.⁸ The cemetery's permanence foretells the heretic's permanent narrowing. The Epicureans are punished in tombs because they denied

the soul's immortality and bodily resurrection and now, ironically, fittingly, they are entombed forever, conscious, trapped in the very bodily permanence they philosophically reduced to dust.

And yet, the lids are not entirely sealed—many are *levati* (10.8). The tombs are, so to speak, half-open for the interval of history, in anticipation of the Last Day, when bodies will reunite with souls and the tombs will lock to match the finality of the soul's chosen destiny. The visual effect is of a city in suspense: a future built into the present, a border within the border.

A cemetery should be quiet. Dante's is not. The reader hears doleful sighs, harsh voices, groans rising from deep recesses. But the speech of the heretics does not rise to the level of discourse in the piazza—instead, it issues from under half-opened lids. Dante adapts the acoustic ecology of the city—cries, calls, civic rhetoric—and inverts it. Eloquence now muffles; argument resounds as lament.

The sound field also teaches a crucial lesson about knowledge. The damned heretics can speak about future events—Dante will develop this further with Farinata and Cavalcante—but once the future arrives, their knowledge collapses (10.97–108). It is a perverse prophetic faculty: an anticipation without presence. The cemetery is thus not only a topography of stone; it is a topography of time. Sounds drift from below, from a precluded present, reminding the pilgrim that true knowledge in Christian time is neither a fetish of futurity nor an idol of the immediate, but a participation in the divine present that gathers past and future in an eternal now. The heretics' speech lacks this plenitude; it stretches forward but cannot hold the instant of grace.

The mingling of noise and silence—some tombs open, others sealed—constructs an aural metaphor for partial knowledge. Echoes may suggest how doctrine, copied and re-copied without living tradition, becomes distortion: sound that has lost its source and therefore its timbre. By obliging the pilgrim to listen in this soundscape, Dante makes the reader undergo a process of discernment too: he, and we, must learn that not every voice is authoritative; whatever clarity we can achieve must be sought through patience at the threshold.

Among the many startling moments in the *Inferno*, few are so theologically pointed as the moment of Virgil's brief powerlessness at the gates of Dis. His presence, his authority, is suddenly insufficient. The devils close the gate; negotiations fail. For the first time, Dante must wait for a heavenly envoy. The scene performs, in miniature, the limits of unaided reason: Virgil (here, a good emblem of reason) is not dismissed—he remains necessary—but his sufficiency is denied. And it is significant that this highly Catholic representation of grace intrudes precisely at a wall, at a city gate, where human systems barricade themselves. Dante's pedagogy here is subtle and nuanced: he does not turn the moment into anti-intellectualism; he does not humiliate Virgil. Instead, he choreographs an essential synergy: reason brings the pilgrim to the threshold, where he must learn a mode of knowing that reason alone cannot give him. The cemetery is the theater of this learning because it makes the stakes visual, even visceral. We come to understand that heresy is not merely bad metaphysics. It is a misrelation to time and therefore to salvation—something reason can half-see but cannot finally cure without grace. The time that elapses waiting for the heavenly messenger mirrors the half-open tombs: time is charged with a future that only divine action can consummate. Dante learns that he must live in the interval.

And such waiting also recalibrates courage. The pilgrim's fear does not evaporate; rather, it is instructed. The cemetery's heat and horror are repulsive; the devils' hostility confirms that the peril is very real. Yet Dante stands. He does not flee the wall. The pause becomes a school of interior motion: patience, attention, docility help him wait for the saving initiative that arrives from beyond hell's regime.

If the cemetery is a grim kind of anti-city, then Farinata degli Uberti is its paradoxical citizen: a figure of civic grandeur entombed in the stone of his world. He is one of those who fell under the spell of the Epicurean heresy. When Farinata rises from the waist up (*de la cintola in su*, 10.33), high and contemptuous, he embodies both the splendor and the tragedy of political devotion scaled to eternity. The man who once defended Florence openly (*a viso aperto*, 10.93) now lives half-emerged from a tomb, noble even

in his damnation. Dante stages the encounter as a rhetorical duel: Farinata's concerns are immediate and civic ("Who were your ancestors?"), his stance rooted in identity and party; Dante answers with a spiritual itinerary. The space of the tomb frames their dialogue: here in the city of the dead, civic history is remembered but cannot save.

The key to Farinata's tragedy is not simply pride; it is temporal miscalibration. He lives as if the political city were the final city; it is as if he thought he could carry the choreography of the piazza into the eschaton. Hence the punishment fits the thing he loved in the wrong, heretical way. The enclosure that once protected a factional city now confines the soul. Dante refuses to diminish Farinata's stature—indeed, he honors it—but insists it is inadequate to eternity. Dante's grief at Farinata's damnation is palpable; his admiration for the man's *magnanimità* increases the pathos. The cemetery here becomes a pedagogy concerning how we ought to love—or how to esteem earthly goods without mistaking their scale.

The parallel with another heretic, Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti, who interrupts to ask about his son Guido (10.52–72), intensifies the temporal theme. Cavalcante's anguish emerges from a form of "future-only" knowledge: he knows the future in outline but cannot see the present moment of grace. Dante hesitates briefly before answering his question, and he falls back into his tomb (*supin ricadde e più non parve fora*, 10.72). The way he so suddenly sinks back into the tomb, so quick to, so oriented to, despair, reminds us, and shows the dark impact, of his Epicurean heresy.

Dante's punishments are moral anatomies. With the heretics, the architecture—and the elements that saturate it—enacts a theory of knowledge. Stone represents enclosure and inertia; fire represents illumination and pain. The heretic's intelligence, self-confident and system-building, becomes a furnace that scorches within boundaries it cannot breach. It is not that heretics lack fire; rather, they have too much of a certain kind—their is a heat without the light that leads to beatitude. Conversely, the lids that will close at the Last Day embody an eschatological finality: choices that harden into forms.

The cemetery itself is laid out like a city: it is not a valley or a cavern but an urban expanse, with districts and rows of tombs like

streets. A modern reader who has visited the ruins of Pompeii will probably superimpose the remembered image of the one onto the other city. Dante's heretics are not isolated cranks but founders and leaders—those who would seem to pattern communal life. The theological warning against heresy, then, is also political: deviant accounts of the soul and of time do not remain private; they form polities. And yet the half-open lids keep alive the sense of a history still unfolding. The pilgrim's presence among the tombs suggests that the living city can still be instructed by the dead. The cemetery does not only portray a final state; it also dramatizes a choice still available to us readers: how will we scale our loves? Will we let the city of man be turned into a sepulcher?

The question brings us back to the image of the threshold, a place of pausing: thresholds are where choices crystallize. The gate of Dis is the most freighted threshold in the *Inferno*: it is the first point where infernal authority resists the righteous passage of a soul under divinely ordained escort. The devils' barricade is a parody of political sovereignty—an antiangelic refusal headquartered at a city's wall. The heavenly envoy's intervention is not only a plot event, an angelic just-in-time rescue; it is a claim about what truly opens history: grace.

For the pilgrim, the threshold compels a new posture—an interior readiness that dislodges him from passive reception of Virgil's competence and trains him to expect from God what the world bars. The poetics of the threshold—slowed tempo, heightened perception, layered symbolism—crafts what we might call a liturgy of attention. The reader, too, must learn to pause. Dante's rhetoric forces us to look and listen, to feel the heat, to calculate the scale of loves, to sense the stakes of time.

Not a mere way station, therefore, the cemetery is a place of learning. It teaches us how to read the rest of Hell and, by contrast, the later ascent through Purgatory, with its multiple threshold moments. Once we have stood among the burning tombs, the terraces of Mount Purgatory appear as the true city under construction—not a cemetery of enclosure but a polity of opening, of becoming. The *Inferno*'s urban antiform sets off the *Purgatorio*'s civic site of becoming, where penance restructures desire in common. The

contrast is pedagogical: the poetics of the threshold at Dis make the pilgrim ready to cross another threshold—the gate of Purgatory.

The heretics' hallmark—they can know the future but not the present—exposes a deeper anthropology. We will learn later the proper view of time, in the *Paradiso*, cantos 24–26 (the cantos in which Dante will be examined on the definitions of Faith, Hope, and Love), cantos that contain some of the most concentrated reflections on time in the *Commedia*. They pair those reflections with an equally rich meditation on human consciousness, including its limits, distortions, and eventual transformation when illuminated by divine vision. Human flourishing, for Dante, depends on an eschatological imagination rightly formed: the capacity to hold past, present, and future in a relation mediated by grace. Memory remembers not only events but promises; hope stretches forward not to a conjectured civic dominance but to a transfigured creation; charity occupies the present with the weight of eternal now.

The cemetery dramatizes the loss of faith, hope, and love. The heretics have severed the sacramental ligament between time and eternity. Their punishment is to inhabit an interval that mocks their pride: aware of what is to come but blind to the moment in which salvation happens. Probably the most famous line in all Dante's poem is the line above the gate to Hell, usually translates as "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" (*lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*: 3.9). As the twentieth-century thinker Josef Pieper said, Dante gives us, in Canto 25 of the *Paradiso*, "a whole theology of supernatural hope."⁹ Hope, says Pieper, echoing Dante, who was echoing Aquinas, "is the confidently patient expectation of eternal beatitude in a contemplative and comprehensive sharing of the triune life of God."¹⁰ One learns patience sometimes with great difficulty, but grace gives us threshold moments in which we can enter into that patient confidence, as Dante must, standing before the closed gates of the City of Dis.

In a sense, architecture is the most civic of arts—it proposes a way of inhabiting space and, by extension, time. A city formed by right loves would arrange its walls and gates to welcome pilgrimage; a city formed by wrong loves arranges its stones to keep the self within itself. The cemetery of Dis is the inner map of a soul that

loved the city as end rather than as penultimate good, a soul that chose party and faction rather than grace.

It is important to note that Dante does not stabilize the cemetery as an "other people's problem." The heretics are exemplary, not exotic. The danger they incarnate is universal: the temptation to enclose the soul within a system—political, metaphysical, personal—that shrinks the scale of eternity to what we can manage. The "city of the dead" is what every city risks becoming when it treats its walls as absolute rather than as protections for a pilgrim people. The lids of the tombs are what every intellect risks becoming when it treats its conclusions as final rather than as provisional rest stops in a search destined for vision.

The threshold pedagogy therefore meets us on our own thresholds: institutional and national loyalties, intellectual identities, talent turned into entombment, even piety reduced to system. Dante's counsel is not to despise cities or systems but to pass through them—to let them be gates and not graves. There is a way to love Florence and still be saved. There is a way to love argument and still be open to grace. The cemetery teaches discernment: we should measure systems, philosophies, and even loves by their capacity to be traversed by the pilgrim soul.

Returning to the opening image—Dante standing before a ruined city of burning tombs—we can see why the poem pauses here. The cemetery of Dis compels the pilgrim to recognize the limits of his guide, the stakes of his loves, and the structure of time. It is a city within Hell that mirrors the city within us: full of eloquence, memory, valor, and yet at risk of tomblike enclosure. The sepulchers' lids, raised for now but destined to close at the Last Day, embody a history charged with decision. The gate that will open by heavenly envoy, the great, proud, silent angel who arrives and with a marvelous disdain opens the city, suggests the only passage that finally matters: grace unlocking the self from the walls it builds. Heresy is intellectual enclosure. The soul is sealed into its own false system. The cemetery that should be a sleeping place becomes instead an everlasting sarcophagus. So, the threshold at Dis is the point where Hell shifts from punishment of disordered passions to punishment of hardened interiors.

Dante's cemetery is not, then, a museum of the dead. It is a revelation of how the living misunderstand eternity—how we absolutize the civic, confuse the operations of grace, enthrone our own intelligence as final law. By halting the narrative and fixing our attention, Dante makes the threshold do what all good thresholds do: it does not merely separate two places; it teaches how to cross over. And it is by learning to cross—out of enclosure, into the pilgrim's road—that the living escape the city of the dead and enter the city where every house is not a tomb but a room prepared.

Raymond N. MacKenzie
Editor

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of the history, see Stephen Bemrose, *A New Life of Dante* (University of Exeter Press, 2000), 216–220.
2. The experience is described in Stendhal's *Rome, Naples et Florence*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Folio Classique, [1817, rev. 1827], 2007), 270–73.
3. But then, Florence was not kind to Dante either in his life or later: the official decree exiling him was not rescinded until a city council vote in 2008, and even then the vote was 19 for and 5 against with several councillors abstaining or not attending the debate. See <https://sputnikglobe.com/20080618/111172236.html>.
4. My focus on the threshold is influenced by Susannah B. Mintz, *Threshold Poetics: Milton and Intersubjectivity* (University of Delaware Press, 2003). Mintz's "threshold space" describes encounters where identities are unsettled and renegotiated. Dante repeatedly places the pilgrim at thresholds, sometimes in ways similar to those of Milton.
5. Quotations from Dante's Italian are taken from Robert M. Durling's bilingual edition, *Inferno* (Oxford University Press, 1996). Citations from canto and verse will be given parenthetically within the text.
6. The translation is by Mark Musa, in his edition of Dante's *Inferno* (Penguin, 1984), 150.
7. On Dante's use of allegory both here and throughout the poem, see John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Harvard University Press, 1986), especially his chapter titled "Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit," 119–135.
8. On the way Dante combines the moral with the topographical, see Hugo Fortin, "Unfolding Dante's Map: Spatial Meaning, Moral Cartography, and Epistemology in the *Commedia*," *Comitatus* 56 (2025): 95–120.
9. Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (Ignatius Press, 2012), 109.
10. *Ibid.*, 103.