ONE of the most puzzling problems relevant to the *Divine Comedy* has been the itinerary traced by Dante in his journey from the Wood of Error to the Wood of Terrestrial Paradise.

However, careful investigation proves that the puzzle was not of Dante's making. His physical journey through both kingdoms is accurately indicated. But, in view of the fact that both Hell and Purgatory consist of a series of concentric circular terraces separated by steep cliffs, his proposed spiral method of procedure entailed a double direction to effect which both right and left turns were inevitable.

It is obvious that a broken spiral along the walls of the conic structure of Hell could move either to the traveler's right or to his left. However, Dante's own assertion that the procedure was "always to the left" happened to be in perfect harmony with the inveterate human habit of associating sinistral movements with physical and spiritual weakness, and also with the ethico-Christian credence attributing to the words *right* and *left* the moral purport of good and evil. If to these factors we add the fact that Dante had a rigidly moral character and that most early commentators were staunch members of the clergy, it becomes clear and understandable why the counterclockwise direction was jubilantly, though heedlessly, proclaimed as being the author's intended course through Hell.

Nonetheless, the wishfully acclaimed Hell-left procedure was not without blemish. Erroneously convinced, as the commentators were, that a sinistral direction did not admit of dextral turns, they were painfully disturbed by the two famous right turns appearing in upper Hell. And since no physical solution was apparent to them, they lost no
time in assigning both turns to the sphere of allegorical speculation.

On the other hand, Purgatory offered no special difficulties. In the first place, the moral idea of Hell-left was utterly meaningless without Purgatory-right. Secondly, there was a strong inclination to believe that Dante, the great moralist, would not tolerate an identical procedure through both kingdoms. The rest was very simple. Since Purgatory was also punctuated with both right and left turns, all the critic had to do was to close both eyes to all left turns and count all right turns as unquestionable evidence in support of Purgatory-right.

Thus it is quite evident that in the course of time Christian emotion and wishful thinking prevailed over factual investigation. Most commentators arrived at the desired objective without giving a single thought as to whether Dante's "always to the left" was intended to apply to the whole of Hell or to a particular section of it. As a result, the direction pursued in lower Hell and in Purgatory was surmised from the evidence found in upper Hell. This, incidentally, explains why most criticism was generally limited to upper Hell, and particularly to allegorical explanations of the two right turns which had been summarily and thoughtlessly branded as deviations from the poet's proposed itinerary.

The history of this age-old problem is not widely known. We shall therefore review the general course of the situation.

To our knowledge, the first to touch upon the subject were Antonio Manetti* and Alessandro Vellutello. The former believed that the direction through Hell was generally to the left; the latter, misled by the right turn effected at the entrance of the City of Dis, pointed out that the left-
hand procedure was not without exceptions; both writers were casual, vague, undecided.

Several years later (1587) young Galileo repudiated Vellutello in favor of Manetti. It would seem, however, that none of these writers was at that time concerned with any moral purport of the words right and left. Nor did any of them explain distinctly the relative direction of the phrases "to the right" and "to the left." As for Galileo, his interest did not go beyond the computation of a purely mathematical problem.

It may be added here that while Manetti's investigations were limited to the kingdom of Lucifer, Vellutello's concern penetrated into all Dantean matters. In this connection, his itinerary of Purgatory, though often randomly traced in its minor details, is sufficiently accurate in its broad lines. With respect to direction, he did not fail to observe that it was to the left. However, either because he felt that it was best to conform with the moral concept of his days, or because he, too, was haunted by sentiments of animosity against Purgatory-left, he finally ended by pronouncing himself in favor of the Purgatory-right direction, stating in support of his decision that antipodal directions are diametrically opposed to those of our hemisphere:

"E perché ancora nell'altro Emisperio, ove tutte le cose sono al contrario del nostro, il suo procedere fu sempre a destra."

About three centuries later (1891) Giovanni Agnelli published his Topo-cronografia del viaggio dantesco, a book which, among other things, was intended to give finality to the subjects of location, structure, dimensions and itinerary of both kingdoms. Agnelli, however, in spite of his feverish ambition and untiring and praiseworthy efforts, was
in more than one way ill-qualified for the exceedingly vast and difficult enterprise. In tracing the itinerary of Hell, he not only repeated many of the errors of his superior predecessors, but also added a goodly harvest of his own. In this, he was the victim of his craving desire of becoming the factotum in every corner of Dante's opus. In order to give his work an air of indisputable conclusiveness, he could do no better than to distort and rehash old ideas so as to serve his manifold purposes. All in all he too ended by approving the pattern Hell-left Purgatory-right, declaring as a priest is wont to do from the pulpit: "Le vie che sono alla destra, ama il Signore, quelle della sinistra sono perverse."

That Agnelli added nothing new to the problem of direction is clearly shown in the following passage:

"Ma una volta entrato per la porta del vero Purgatorio, e salita la prima scala, si volge sempre a destra per dimostrare che il suo viaggio procedeva sempre di bene in meglio, avvicinandosi sempre più al Paradiso: mentre per lo contrario, nello Inferno la direzione sua fu pressoché sempre a sinistra, passando ai peccati sempre più gravi."

Agnelli failed to observe that right and left turns in upper Hell and in Purgatory are identical in direction, and that, therefore, the moral distinction so evangelistically indicated by him was inconceivable.

Not much later (1896), Agnelli's itinerary ideas were incorporated in Dr. Scartazzini's *Enciclopedia Dantesca*. It is obvious that the *Enciclopedia*, being primarily a reference book, was more than likely responsible for the many subsequent recurrences of the same errors. At any rate, by the twentieth century, the procedure Hell-left and Purgatory-right had become the *sine qua non* of almost all those who concerned themselves with the problem of direction. The generally accepted pattern was the one set out by Dr. Scartazzini himself:
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"Ordinariamente il viaggio per l'inferno si fa volgendo a mano sinistra, e il Poeta lo dice ripetute volte espressamente; due sole volte volgono a destra (IX,132; XVII,31), entrando cioè nel cerchio degli eretici e andando verso Gerione, la quale circostanza secondo la mente di Dante ha senza dubbio il suo senso allegorico, difficile, del resto, e forse impossibile a incovinarsi."¹²

It is clear that Dr. Scartazzini, like Agnelli and his immediate predecessors, was also blinded by the moral idea. They were all sure that the two right-hand turns in upper Hell involved an allegorical meaning, and they all tried to solve morally what in reality was a purely physical problem. Dr. Scartazzini’s sober assertion that the allegorical sense was “perhaps impossible to find” served only as an incentive to further and often wilder speculations.

As regards Purgatory, Dr. Scartazzini found Agnelli’s observations so “excellent” as to convince himself that he could do no better than to copy him verbatim. Nevertheless, the only thing new Agnelli could add to the findings of his predecessors was the novel discovery that the direction in Antipurgatory was in its minor details not as uniform as that of the upper circles:

"Ognuno vede però che se nel vero Purgatorio i Poeti tennero sempre costante direzione, non così avvenne nell'Antipurgatorio, dove questa, benché generalmente volta a ponente, tuttavia nelle particolarità non è regolare come quella dei cerchi superiori. Perché dunque nell'Antipurgatorio i Poeti tengono diverso modo di procedere? Agli studiosi la forse non ardua risposta."¹³

Agnelli’s ingratiatory compliment directed to future scholars need flatter no one but himself. He could have found the answer to his recondite question in the unterraced and extremely rough topography of Antipurgatory itself.

Further investigation into the history of the problem would only serve to involve us in recurrences of the same or similar arguments. From the little that has been said it
is quite evident that the principal difficulty that confronted
the critics was rooted in their wishful determination to recon-
cile the more or less accurately traced physical direction
with their assumed moral hypothesis. On the other hand,
we moderns instead of scrutinizing the text with the view
to ascertain whether the moral purport was or was not in-
tended by Dante, have accepted, perhaps thoughtlessly,
their moral hypothesis and, as a result, expended too much
time trying to emulate them in their allegorical explanations
of the supposedly “exceptional” right turns.

In the course of time the problem became more and more
confused by a certain tendency to exclude from our studies
all unexpressed turns and to include many turns that had
no connection whatsoever with the subject. This brought
about such an endless variety of interpretation that today it
can be said with no fear of being contradicted that the
problem has not yet emerged from the nebulous region of
conjecture and hypothesis.

Therefore, faced with such a baffling situation, we come
to the obvious conclusion that the only hope of ever arriv-
ing at a new solution is to steer away from all allegorical
speculations and, with Dante as our only guide, follow him
from Forest to Forest, and try to trace, as clearly as we can
on three appropriate diagrams, the poet’s itinerary through
both kingdoms. And speaking of diagrams, we must hasten
to add with Croce that, although they are “useful in order
that the readers may get the landscape clearly in mind . . .
they are merely imaginary.” Meaning, of course, that maps
of a poetic work must not be conceived as being spatially
and chorographically exact. In fact, even when the poet
gives some accurate or approximately accurate topographi-
cal details he does it in order to focus the imagination of
the reader on the broad lines of his imagined framework,
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and not to provide the scientifically minded critic with the magic yardstick for meticulously exact measurements.

The question may naturally arise whether a problem of so meager literary importance justifies a new investigation. Sober judgment points to a positive answer. Admitting that the problem of direction is not intrinsically connected with the central theme and that, consequently, it cannot in any way modify the permanent value of the poem, it is, nevertheless, an essential part of the overall picture. In addition, a problem that has been the subject of so much inconclusive discussion and so many tiresome recurrences of the same erroneous notes with almost every new edition or translation of the Divine Comedy demands, in our humble opinion, a new effort at solution.

Therefore we have proposed to ourself the tedious task of proving (1) that the direction is not Hell-left and Purgatory-right; (2) that there are no “exceptional” right turns, and (3) that the words right and left have no moral purport.

The itinerary from the Gate of Hell to the Pit of Geryon is indicated a posteriori. Students of the Inferno recall that while the poets were slowly circling along the inner edge of the Wood of the Suicides, careful not to step on the burning sands of the Third Ring, they came upon a rill of sanguinolent water, which, according to Virgil, was the most noteworthy thing that Dante had seen after entering the Gate of Hell. Dante's intense curiosity to know more about the phenomenal importance of the rivulet was turned into deep compassion for the feeble condition of mankind, disclosed in Virgil's magnificent epitome of the history of the gradual degeneration of human society. Having learned the origin and the consequential importance of the rill, Dante wanted to know:
Virgil's answer to the above question shows with geometric accuracy the course pursued in their journey from the Gate to the Rill:

"Tu sai che il loco è tondo,  
e, tutto che tu siì venuto molto  
pur a sinistra giù calando a fondo,  
non se' ancor per tutto il cerchio volto."

Obviously the reference is to an irregularly broken spiral running along an arc of each of a series of concentric circles connected with each other by passages moving progressively from arc to arc toward the center of the conic structure of Hell.

A line connecting the vertices of all the right turns will illustrate the meaning of the verse: "Always to the left descending to the bottom." Thus the procedure was simple and definite: on entering a new terrace, circle, or ring, the poets turned to the right and walked around until they came to a passage-way, where, turning to the left, they proceeded downward to the next circular division.

It is evident that in any given number of terraces there was bound to be an equal number of right and left directional turns. It is also evident that two consecutive right or left turns within the same terrace would inevitably reverse the direction. This explains the necessity for the right-hand turn at the entrance of the City of Dis. It is indeed needless to point out that a left turn at that point followed, as it was, by a second left turn made a little later in the same circle would inevitably have set the poets walking back toward the Gate.

Yet this is the first of the two right turns that have puzzled the allegorically inclined critics for almost a half millennium.
If, instead of racking their brains and of wasting their intelligence with the object of uncovering some mysterious doctrine hidden under an imaginary veil, they had stopped to analyze the factual situation, they could not have failed to perceive that the "perplexing" right turn corroborated the general left-hand procedure. At any rate, in view of the fact that Dante had stated very definitely that the line followed was "always to the left," the exceptional right turn could have been set down as a contradiction on the part of the poet, but not as a voluntary deviation. But, in spite of the fact that the *Divine Comedy*, as all great literary
works, is not immune to contradictions and errors, the allegory-diggers were but too sure that Dante never made an error, nor could they be expected to cheat themselves of their precious pastime by blaming their infallible author.

The substance of the Virgilian formula is very clear. It simply means that on their way to the bottom, whenever they circled, the circling was always to the left, and that, notwithstanding the long circular distance they had already traveled, they had not yet gone around a whole circuit of the conic cavity of Hell. However, the line “non se’ ancor per tutto il cerchio volto” contains an implied forward reference anticipating the completion of the circuit at a not far off point, and, therefore, the continuation for some time of the left-hand procedure.

Inasmuch as the itinerary from the City of Dis to the red Rill presents no difficulties, we may now turn our attention to the next expressed right turn, which, as is well known, took place in descending from the right bank of the Rill to the stony fireless margin of the Pit of Geryon.20 This turn is the second right turn which has been recurrently considered a deviation from the poet’s intended procedure. In this case, however, most commentators, in order to justify the cumbersome turn, availed themselves of a topographical explanation, asserting that the customary left turn was impossible because it would have entailed the crossing of the scalding streamlet. This was, no doubt, an implication that the brooklet was impassable for the living pedestrian. Whether the rivulet could or could not have been crossed at that particular point is irrelevant. The significant fact is that the poets could not have reached its right bank without first crossing it. In fact textual details evince that it had already been crossed at its upper end, just before emerging
from the Wood of the Suicides. Therefore, the conditions that made the crossing feasible at that point need to be clarified.

It is true that Dante does not state explicitly the manner of crossing the rill. This is rather surprising since he had already taken pains to tell us how he had crossed the Acheron, the Styx and the Phlegethon. Nonetheless, the several pertinent details seem to leave no doubt as to the practicability of the crossing. In the first place, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the stream crosses the Wood through an underground channel. This assumption is strongly suggested by the meaning of the verb “spicciare.” In Tuscan, as in most romance tongues, this verb has the common meaning of “to rush to the end of an action.” In Tuscan, however, it had then as it has now, the extended connotation “to spout” or “to issue with force from an orifice or a narrow channel.” Literally it refers to liquids only, but figuratively it may denote a rapid initial movement of anything. In the Divine Comedy there are two such examples besides the present one: the first in the comparison of a diving barrator to a frog plunging into water:

"Io vidi, ed anco il cor me n’accapriccia,
uno aspettar così com’egli incontra
ch’una rana rimane ed altra spiccia."23

and the second in the description of the color of the third step in front of the Gate of Purgatory:

"Lo terzo, che disopra s’ammassiccia,
porfido mi parea si fiammeggiante
come sangue che fuor the vena spiccia."24

The second example is germane to the case in point.

But even if, for the sake of argument, our assumption of an underground conduit be ruled out, are we positively sure that the rill could not be crossed with a single stride? Just
what are we to understand by the double diminutive “picciol fiumicello”? We know, of course, that such terms as rio, rigagno, ruscello, ruscelletto, fiume, fiumicello are quite freely and elastically used in the Divine Comedy. The Acheron, for example, is referred to as rio, fiume, and fiumana, just as the streamlet of Terrestrial Paradise is called rio, fiume and fiumicello. Yet the Acheron is known to be a rather large river, while the rivulet of Purgatory can scarcely be more than three feet wide. This we know from Dante’s own remark that the brook kept him three steps away from Matilda, who was on the opposite bank:

“Tre passi ci facea il fiume lontani.”

In comparison, our “picciol fiumicello” must be much narrower. In addition, to emphasize further its narrowness, Dante refers to it as a “rigagno,” and as a “stretta doccia.”

And the word “doccia,” as we all know, was and is still used to connote a “roof-gutter” or a “shower” (hence comes the phrase bagno a doccia, shower bath). Incidentally, in Sandro Botticelli’s drawing the rill as it flows over the burning sand can scarcely be more than a foot and a half in width, as compared with the human figures which are reprinted in it. It is no doubt much narrower before emerging from the wood into the sand. All this definitely proves that even a man wearing a skirt, like Dante, could easily cross the little rill with a single stride. At any rate, the rill is so narrow as not to impede the poets from utilizing either bank in order to cross the Third Ring. The following lines make this clear:

“Omai è tempo da scostarsi
dal bosco; fa ch’è di retro a me vegne;
li margini fan via, che non son arsi
e sopra loro ogni vapor si spegne.”
May we not, therefore, risk the conjecture that Dante did not feel the need of elucidating what in his mind was self-evident? Let those who would blame him for being too implicit not forget for a single moment that with him minor details are always kept in the background.

And now let us continue our journey. After the poets descended from the right bank of the diminutive rill, Dante walked a little farther on along the inner edge of the Third Ring in order to go and observe the condition of the Violent against Art. Meanwhile, Virgil who, incidentally, always chose to confront great dangers alone, went to confer with Geryon with the likely object of preparing the ground for his apprehensive pupil. When Dante returned from the abode of the Violent against Art, Virgil, who had already mounted on the dreadful monster’s back, was quick to coax him to be strong and fearless and to sit in front of him so as to be protected from the venomous sting of the beast’s scorpioid tail.

At this point ends the first stretch of Dante’s journey through Hell. All directional turns with canto and line references are indicated in Figure 2. Distances, of course, are loosely approximate.

At Virgil’s request, Geryon started spiraling the poets down to the outer edge of the first ditch of Malebolge.

Did Geryon in his journey from the top to the bottom of the Pit circle to the right or to the left? This too has been the subject of much discussion down to our own days. Generally, the advocates of the ethico-Christian idea were dogmatically sure that the circling was to the left; Vellutello and sundry others stood for the right; Dante, on the other hand, seems to show no concern for either the one or the other direction. Perhaps he felt that to the right or to the
Figure 2. Itinerary Through Upper Hell.
left only led to another depth in his journey through human sin:

"Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n."

At any rate, the few relevant and somewhat indirect particulars impress one as being merely casual rather than intentional hints for the solution of a problem. The line:

"perché cogli occhi in giù la testa sporgo"

has no bearing on our problem since the poet did not say in which direction he “stretched his head.” But the lines:

"Io sentia già dalla man destra il gorgo
far sotto noi un orribile stroscio"

are very significant. It is obvious that if Dante heard the roar of the falling water at his right, Geryon was circling to the left, that is, with the poets’ right shoulders next to the near bank of the Pit. The reverse would have put the roar not under him but on the opposite bank, much too far to be heard by the human ear. This will not be considered a wild guess if we recall that the ninth bolgia has a circumference of 22 miles. We should also bear in mind that, for the sake of verisimilitude, the slope of Malebolge should provide a feasible descent for the living poet, for, except when the supernatural intervenes, Dante can not perform miracles; as a man of flesh and bone he can not go beyond what is humanly possible.

The length of the transversal ridges of Malebolge depends on the aggregate widths of all its bolgias. The diameter of Malebolge is, of course, conjectural. Any diameter that does not go beyond sane judgment is good. Now, inasmuch as the circumference of the First Bolgia coincides with the bottom circumference of the Pit, it becomes obvious that the length of the diameter of the Pit depends on the width and the
slope of Malebolge. So that if we should assume Malebolge to be, say ten miles wide, and allow a 15° slope for Dante's living legs, the diameter of the Pit would be approximately twenty-six miles, the minimum distance from Dante's left ear to the roaring water of the Rill. Most commentators assign to the Pit a diameter of thirty-five miles.

Are we quibbling? Of course we are. But we shall not have quibbled in vain if we succeed in persuading a few of the many scientifically inclined critics to leave their slide rules behind them when they enter the Gate of Dante's Hell. *(Lasciate ogni misura voi ch'entrate.)*

Malebolge has topographical features of its own. Although the unique structure is suggestive of a straightforward course, circular movements are not lacking. But whereas in upper Hell the poets circled to the left, in Malebolge they go in the opposite direction, not with their left but with their right shoulders toward the center.

It is also significant that expressed left turns are more numerous, and, therefore, more conspicuous here than in upper Hell. In fact, in upper Hell there are only four directional turns specifically indicated, two to the right and two to the left; in Malebolge there are seven, and only one of them is to the right. It is no wonder then that most commentators, dazzled by so many left turns, have been easily allured to believe that there has been no change of direction. In any case, our diagram (Figure 3) shows quite accurately, we hope, that in Malebolge the poets reversed their journey.

The next problem that has kept commentators busy is the aerial transit from the top of the Well of the Giants to the outer edge of Lake Cocytus.

In view of the fact that the poet assigned to the tenth or last bolgia a diameter of three and a half miles, and inas-
much as he previously described the Well as “un pozzo assai largo a profondo,” it can be fairly conjectured that we have to do with a well approximately two miles in diameter and from two to four or more miles deep. Furthermore, the lines:

“Come noi fummo giù nel pozzo scuro sotti i pie' del gigante, assai più bassi . . .”

Figure 3. Itinerary Through Lower Hell.
make it very clear that the walls of the Well are more or less perpendicular. These conditions exclude all possibilities for a physical descent. There is no doubt, therefore, that the transit from the post of Antaeus to Lake Cocytus must be definitely consigned to the mental and the supernatural.

The critics who sought to prove that the transition was at least in part physical overlooked the fact that in poetry, and much more so in a poetic work of such vast dimensions as the *Divine Comedy*, spatial distances are inevitably mental or loosely approximate. An unknown inch is no more or less insignificant than an unknown mile. The two exactly given circumferences\(^3^7\) of the ninth and the tenth bolgias (twenty-two, and eleven miles, respectively) were no doubt intended by the poet to give the reader some idea of the elastic and progressively shrinking cavity of Hell, not to lure the critic into mathematical calculations for the purpose of dividing the radius of the earth down to the \(3/22\) of a mile. With reference to this subject, Prof. Grandgent very soberly warned:

> "These figures do not afford a clue for any further computation; they give, however, an impression of exactness, and they indicate a near approach to the center of the earth; furthermore, they suggest by contrast the vast dimensions of the upper circles."\(^3^8\)

Unfortunately, it was those two exact details that led some critics deplorably astray, and, consequently, their futile efforts yielded one of the most abundant crops of inconsistencies that have ever come forth from the perennially fruitful garden of critical speculation.

In a way we feel that Dante should have avoided all exact details. Had he done so, the depth of the Well and the area of Lake Cocytus would have been much more elastic, and, consequently, more poetically realistic; more
universal, too, since each reader could recreate his own Cocytus in accordance with his own artistic sensitiveness. As it is, the diameter of Cocytus is mathematically limited to no less than two miles, and since human experience teaches that a well is generally much deeper than it is wide, it follows that a feasible slope from Antaeus to the bottom of the Well would completely bury Lake Cocytus and, logically at least, the cavity of Hell would close up at the feet of the Giants. That is why the descent can not be physical. In any case, we should bear in mind that with Dante transitions are only a means to an end; the end is the ugly human picture of the ugly human sin, and since Dante is the representative of human society, Hell follows him wherever he goes, or, as Marlowe aptly puts it:

"Hell has no limits, nor is circumscrib'd
In one same place; for where we are is Hell,
And where Hell is there must we be . . . ."39

After the descent into Lake Cocytus, the poets were approximately one mile from the center of the earth and the end of their infernal journey; and since there were no topographical obstructions, they walked the whole distance in a straightforward line. Evidence to the contrary is totally lacking, while descriptive details attesting to a direct course are explicit and unequivocal.

No doubt Figure 3 impresses one as representing a symmetrical structure with all horizontal and vertical distances in perfect correlation with each other. But inasmuch as the edifice is so huge as not to be taken in with a single glance, each reader is free, within the general lines set down by the poet, to construct a Malebolge ad libitum. Dante suggested that the edifice be symmetrical.

The itinerary through Purgatory need not detain our attention long; not because it is free from the perplexing
difficulties encountered in Hell, but rather because its physical course was quite accurately traced by our earliest commentators, for, although we have here a repetition of the course followed in upper Hell, the itinerary is by far more expressly indicated. About this there is no doubt, because of the fact that, in questions of direction, Virgil is no longer the expert guide that he was in Hell. To be sure, he is still the same learned pedagogue, but he does not know the way up the Mount. In the kingdom of hope and faith his worldly wisdom is of necessity on the wane. In Hell, explicitly or implicitly, Virgil was free to trace his own itinerary. In Purgatory he had to take his direction from the souls, from the Angels, or from the Sun. As a result, the question of direction came up with almost every turn. However, of the eight directional right turns only two were indicated by Virgil—one taken from the position of the sun, and the other from the habit of turning to the right at the entrance of each new terrace. Furthermore, in Purgatory the itinerary was easier because the road was shorter. While in Hell the journey was completed in one and a half, or possibly two circuits, in Purgatory it was made in only a half circuit. This explains the implicit prerequisite that the poets must face West on the beginning of the journey and East on entering the Terrestrial Paradise. (See Figure 4.)

It goes without saying that the facility of the physical journey did not at all interfere with the preconceived moral idea of Purgatory-right. As we have already stated, the error of the early commentators was one of interpretation rather than of physical inaccuracy. Imbued with the ethico-Christian credence that souls in Purgatory were pilgrims on their way to the throne of God, even the mere thought of Purgatory-left must have been regarded as sacrilegious. Therefore, the line they followed in Purgatory was a wish-
fully antithetical result of the postulated line followed in Hell. For them Hell-left was the strongest argument in sup-
port of Purgatory-right. Once they were sure of a Hell-left procedure, Purgatory-right was taken for granted. Morally at least their hypothesis was convincing: if in Hell, which is the kingdom of vice, the direction was to the left, in Purgatory, the kingdom of virtue and eventual salvation, the direction had to be to the right.

It is quite natural, then, that, with the allegorical sense fixed tenaciously and fondly in their hearts, they went to Purgatory not to investigate the mind of the poet but rather to glean from all contingent evidence only those particulars that could be used in support of their preconceived moral idea. Not for a moment did it occur to them to compare the course pursued in the one and the other kingdom. Had they done so, they could scarcely have failed to observe that upper Hell and Purgatory were identical in direction.

It must be avowed, however, that it was not the earliest commentators that turned the subject of direction into a farrago of empty conjectures, allegorical absurdities, contradictions and guesses. Manetti, Landino, Vellutello, Giambullari, to mention but a few of those worthy pioneers, in their untiring efforts to solve what was for them a new problem, left us such a wealth of useful observation and manifold ideas that if today we can see more distinctly into the subject it is because of the direct and indirect light they have thrown upon it. The words with which Statius addressed Virgil on the slopes of Purgatory could be directed to any or all of those men of ideas:

"Facesti come quei che va di notte,
che porta il lume retro e sè non giova,
ma dopo sè fa le persone dotte." 1

Their light did not fail to guide our steps along the physical path which they had more or less accurately traced. But, influenced by their allegorical devoutness and also by
A Journey Through Sin

Dante's strictly moral ideas, we rarely questioned their ethico-religious interpretations. It is true that we are prone to find faults with them, but it is also true that we can not keep from imitating them. We are still hunting for hidden allegories in an effort to explain the would-be exceptional right turns in upper Hell; we are still reluctant to abandon the pattern Hell-left Purgatory-right; and the belief that the words *destra* and *sinistra* have a moral purport is still lingering in our minds. To be sure, each or all of these subjects have been casually doubted, but doubt without proof only leads to more doubts. Some of us have been inclined to blame Dante for being too implicit. We expected him to throw a lime-light on every minor problem. Yet part of his greatness consists in his ability to keep secondary problems in the background, throwing on them just enough light to guide those who may be particularly interested in this or that minor problem. Thus, his journey through sin is clear enough for those who can visualize the topography of both kingdoms. For them, and only for them, it is indicated with precision and consistency, and without the slightest hint of any moral or allegorical connection.

It has been often suggested that the idea of dextral and sinistral turns in connection with a journey through the abode of the dead came to our poet from Virgil. Dante, of course, knew the whole or most of the *Aeneid* by heart, and no doubt assimilated many of its ideas, as he himself proudly confesses. However, what moral purport can there be in Aeneas' visit to Anchises? Does it really matter that the road divides in two directions ("partes se via findit in ambas") if Aeneas has no choice but to follow the one that leads to Elysium, the abode of his father? It would seem that as far as Aeneas is concerned "dextera aut laeva via" is the right road if it leads him to the place where his father is.
As a poet and philosopher, Dante was quite aware of the fact that the terms "right" and "left" could be used to convey a moral meaning only in the case of a voluntary choice between two possibilities. This ethical dualism was not applicable to a single journey in which both right and left turns were actually essential for the effectuation of his forward progress. Therefore, he was, no doubt, sure that should any of his critics be lured to indulge in allegorical speculations, they would be inevitably frustrated by the very nature of the situation. He most certainly was confident that his clearly traced journey: upper Hell-left, lower Hell-right, and Purgatory-left would not fail to convince the most obdurate allegorist that his journey was intended to be understood as a purely physical one. What, perhaps, did not occur to him was the fact that allegorically inclined critics are seldom concerned with internal evidence, and also that his own fondness for the cryptic and the symbolic provided the greatest incentive for allegorical speculation.

JOSEPH LLOYD BATTISTA

NOTES

1. Inferno XIV, 126.
2. Inferno IX, 132; XVII, 31.
4. Dante con l'esposizione di Cristoforo Landino et Alessandro Vellutello sopra la sua Commedia dell'Inferno, del Purgatorio, e del Paradiso, Venetia, 1596.
5. Galileo Galilei, Opere, Vol. IX.
6. Galileo's terms "su la destra" and "su la sinistra" are sufficiently cleared.
7. See 4, above.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Dr. G. Andrea Scartazzini, Enciclopedia Dantesca, Milano, 1896.
12. Ibid.
13. See 8, above.
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16. *Inferno* XIV, 94-120.
17. *Inferno* XIV, 121-123.
18. *Inferno* XIV, 124-127.
19. *Inferno* X, 133.
21. *Inferno* III, 133-136, IV, 7-9; VIII, 28-30; XII, 91-97.
22. Cf. Fr. dépêcher; Sp. despachar.
23. *Inferno* XXII, 31-33.
25. *Purgatorio* XXVIII, 70.
26. *Inferno* XIV, 121.
27. *Inferno* XIV, 117.
29. *Inferno* XIV, 139-142.
31. *Inferno* XVII, 82-84.
33. *Inferno* XVII, 120.
34. *Inferno* XVII, 118-119.
35. *Inferno* XVIII, 5.
36. *Inferno* XXXII, 16-17.
37. *Inferno* XXIX, 9; XXX, 86.
39. *Dr. Faustus*, Act II, Scene I.
43. *Æneid*, VI, 540 ff.