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When Bloomsbury Press published Seymour Chwast's graphic novel of the *Divine Comedy* in 2010, they seem to have given the artist control over everything but the bar code. His shaky hand is evident in not only the main text and its illustrations but also the front cover, back cover, spine, end papers, copyright pages, title page, and table of contents. Such trust may be surprising, for his wobbly lines are only one of many crude elements in this work. But as with so many other graphic novels the coarseness often masks great sophistication, especially in Chwast's conflation of Dante's text with film noir.¹

This sophistication springs from a long and, as it were, illustrious career in type and graphic design. Born in the Bronx on August 18, 1931, Chwast graduated at the tender young age of 19 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, which was, and is, a leading school for commercial art. Three years later, in 1954, he joined Milton Glaser, Edward Sorel, and Reynold Ruffins in founding the famous Pushpin Studios and began a string of successes that includes such icons as the 1979 packaging for the original McDonald's Happy Meal. He also invented the fonts Chwast Buffalo, Fofucha, Loose Caboose NF, and Weedy Beasties NF and earned the Augustus Saint Gaudens Award from Cooper Union, a gold medal from the American Institute of Fine Arts, an honorary doctorate from the Parsons School of Design, and a place in the Art Directors Hall of Fame.²

Of course, much of his commercial work was dictated by his clients and, as with his Happy Meal design, does not even hint at film noir. But his private work often does. As his wife, the graphic-designer Paula Scher, notes:

¹ For recent and accessible introductions in English to film noir, particularly to the attributes I assign to it in the course of this paper, begin with: Mark T. Conard, ed., *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006); Geoff Mayer and Brian McDonnell, *The Encyclopedia of Film Noir* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007); Michael F. Keaney, *British Film Noir Guide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008); Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*, 2nd ed. repr. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo; London: Perseus Running, 2008); Alain Silver, et al., *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia*, 4th ed. (New York: Overlook Press, 2010); and William Luhr, *Film Noir* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

² For more on Chwast's life, see Seymour Chwast, *Seymour: The Obsessive Images of Seymour Chwast* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2009).

Seymour's unconscious drawing style is definitely rooted in the '30s and early '40s, the years of his childhood. [. . .] Seymour's drawn women wear a lot of hats and floral dresses. Their shoes are usually platformlike, looking as if they came from the '40s. Women's hairdos have permanent waves. Many of the women have hairdos and outfits like Barbara Stanwyck's in *Double Indemnity*. Men wear hats, even though hats went out with the Kennedy administration. [. . .] It's unconscious, nondeliberate; when he is genuinely trying to be serious and accurate, the obsessions of the '30s and '40s seep through. These obsessions are Seymour's default mode.³

Indeed, the very fact that Chwast chose the *Commedia* for his first of what are now three graphic novels suggests the hold that film noir has on him, for he seems to have at least intuited that the *Commedia* particularly welcomes such a perspective.⁴ Though some aspects of the original text are inevitably lost in its refraction through a different format that couches it in a chronologically distant genre from an entirely distinct medium, many others invite this interpretation. Moreover, they and much of the rest of the text profit from it, for, even as the *Commedia* thereby legitimizes an oft-denigrated format and genre, it is enlighteningly reframed by them. That is to say, even as Dante's canonical text lends film noir and graphic novels a respectability they otherwise might not have, they open it to new perspectives, particularly from readers who might otherwise find it too complex or too remote.

Indeed, Chwast blatantly acknowledges at least one side of this reciprocity in the fact that he overtly anticipates and accommodates inexperienced readers. He frequently defines the profession of such well-known historical figures as Plato and Socrates, the role of other famous figures in such major events as the assassination of Caesar, and fairly common concepts, such as usury. His humor sometimes descends to a rather silly level, as in the label "deathguard" for the fellow in *Inferno* 7 who resembles a lifeguard but oversees the wrathful in the Styx. He does not bother to correct such obvious verbal errors as misspelling "pursue" in *Purgatorio* 18, substituting "they" for "we" in *Paradiso* 5, and using the British "s" for "baptised" in *Paradiso* 25. Nor does he fix such obvious pictorial errors as the color changes of Statius' vest in *Purgatorio* 25-27, the portrayal in *Paradiso* 15 of Cacciaguida fighting in World War I (though his great-great-grandson, Dante, seems to predate World War II), and the depiction in *Paradiso* 16 of Florence Cathedral as complete three centuries before its exterior was finished in 1461.

Yet he also articulates many comparatively minor, highly subtle points in Dante's text, as in specifying that the griffin in *Purgatorio* 31 is "an icon of divine power and guardian of the divine." He sometimes assumes his audience already has an extraordinarily thorough knowledge of the *Commedia*, as when he mentions but does not fully explain the "corrupt-church allegory" in

³ Paula Scher, "Seymour: The Man," in Chwast, *Seymour*, 13-14.

⁴ His other two graphic novels depict Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011) and Homer's *Odyssey* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

Purgatorio 32.⁵ He occasionally expands his humor to inside jokes, as in the Yale sweater on one of the astrologers, diviners, or magicians in *Inferno* 20. He slips in many (other) off-hand references to pop culture, as in the resemblance of his sign for hell to the giant letters spelling “Hollywood” on the hills above that city. He sometimes echoes major monuments of early-twentieth-century art, as in the similarity of Beatrice to Man Ray models who also wear black hats rakishly angled above platinum-blond hair, high cheekbones, prominent chins, and heavy mascara. He often invokes inter-war design tropes, as in the portrait roundels above the entrance to the “Limbo Express” in *Inferno* 4. He occasionally parallels Dante miniatures, as in the resemblance of his Limbo to that in an anonymous, fifteenth-century *Commedia* known as *Laurenziana MS Plutei 40.7*.⁶ And, above all, he refracts the *Commedia* through film-noir in a blatant, meaningful manner that goes far beyond a mere predilection.

On the most obvious level, he does so in the appearance and settings of the characters. The Pilgrim appears in a trenchcoat, fedora, and sunglasses, with a pipe jutting out from his trademark scowl. Virgil resembles Charles Laughton with a tuxedo, flat-brimmed bowler, and wire-rim glasses. Matilda would seem to be a flapper, in her headband, heels, and short dress. Beatrice is undoubtedly a high-class dame, in her sunhat, bob, and long dress. And as Dante and his guides pass through night clubs, funeral homes, and vaudeville theaters, they meet many a dapper don, pug-nosed thug, and gangster moll.

But Chwast also blends the *Commedia* and film noir on far more profound levels, as his Pilgrim journeys from ignorance and confusion through fear and suffering to enlightenment and redemption. Indeed, Chwast’s very first narrative scene portrays Dante as a lost and ignorant Sam Spade. Below and to the right of the words, “In the middle of my life I awake to find myself alone in a dark valley,” which is a rough paraphrase of *Inferno* 1.1-2 (“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura”),⁷ the Pilgrim appears amid a literal maze of trees in the center of the page. This forest is far from realistic, as each tree is barely taller than the figure, does not diminish from one to the next, gives no indication of overlapping other trees, casts no shadows, is seen from the side, falls into an artificially regular pattern, and is composed of pen strokes that are uniform in width and—whether representing a twig, leaf, branch, or trunk—only differentiate among their subjects by their proximity to each other. Yet each tree has the proportions, if not the scale, of a tree, and in its departures from the conventions for three-dimensional, post-medieval realism, assumes even more of the menace Dante associates with this “selva selvaggia” (*Inf.* 1.5).

⁵ Chwast’s only expansion on this reference is a giant labeled “THE FRENCH MONARCHY,” a bikini-clad woman labeled “THE CORRUPTED PAPACY,” and, to the left of these figures, a text stating, “THE HARLOT GIRLFRIEND OF A GIANT HAS A ROVING EYE. HE BEATS HER.”

⁶ For a reproduction of the Plutei Limbo, which closely resembles Chwast’s walled terrace, see Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles Singleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts of the “Divine Comedy”*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), vol. 1, pl. 74a.

⁷ For all quotes in Italian from the *Commedia*, see Giorgio Petrocchi’s edition for the Società Dantesca Italiana Alighieri, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Florence: Casa editrice Le lettere, 1994).

The sharp, jagged rows of leaves resemble teeth about to devour the Pilgrim, and the dense but distinct distribution of the trees conflates the forest with a labyrinth seen from overhead. In contrast to the easy orientation afforded by the map on the facing folio, Dante seems lost amid a thick wood with no escape.

Of course, in the lower-right corner of this folio, as in Dante's text, the Pilgrim seems to gain hope and clarity when he sees the "raggi del pianeta che mena dritto altrui per ogne calle" (Inf. 1.17-18). But this respite is dashed on the verso of the folio as the protagonist is confronted by the leopard, lion, and wolf that guard the hill whose "spalle" were already clad in those rays. And though the following scene may renew his hope when Virgil pops up and offers to help him climb the hill by other means, Dante's grin quickly disappears as his guide notes that the Pilgrim's way includes going to hell, purgatory, and heaven, as Virgil ends the first canto on a very film-noir note of dread.

Moreover, Dante's scowl continues immediately below Virgil's pronouncement, as the next scene frames that fear in the sort of cynicism suffusing such works as *The Big Easy* and *Double Indemnity*. Amid perhaps the most overtly film-noir setting in Chwast's book, Dante hammers out his last will and testament on a typewriter between a liquor bottle and a phone. As if the figure's clothes were not enough to date the scene, the typewriter suggests it precedes the 1990s, and the candlestick phone suggests it predates the 1950s. But the narrator's words most concretely suggest we are looking at a film noir, for, in stating that he is preparing his last will and testament, he suggests the sort of fear, stakes, and pessimism that pervade many a Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett script. And in adding "I, Dante, will tell the story of my trip to the after world...but will I come back?" he, like many film-noir protagonists, both acknowledges his supposed ignorance and ramps up the narrative tension. He moves us past the general dread that typically concludes the beginning of a film noir to the explicit introduction of world-weary cynicism and suspense common to the main body of such works.

Indeed, he confirms those qualities in the very next scene. The quote stating that he will tell the story of his trip appears on the near third of his desk, which extends down into an illustration of three heads floating through Virgil's bedroom window. The near head is labeled "Beatrice, Dante's dead lover," and the narrator says at left that "three women had asked Virgil to guide me in hell." But he does not appear to fully accept this motive, much less Virgil's ability to carry out his supposed mission, for he concludes this remark with an ellipsis and the phrase, "I'll have to trust him." Though he had not previously expressed doubt about Virgil, he does not appear confident that this story will have a happy ending.

And, in fact, his cynicism would seem to be justified in the very next canto, for though the devil façade and illuminated sign that frame the gate of hell invoke thematic entrances to 1920s and 30s nightclubs, the viewer may not find anything overtly entertaining about the chamber beyond that portal, about a room stenciled with the words "ANTE-INFERNO AREA" and filled with cowards being tormented by insects. Moreover, though Charon shakes Dante's hand in the next

scene and is far friendlier than his counterpart in Dante's text,⁸ crossing the Acheron is so stressful that the narrator "faints dead away" on the following page. Thus, even as Chwast departs from the tough-guy trope of film noir, he echoes that genre in underscoring pain and trauma from the very start of Dante's journey.

And Chwast goes on to highlight the Pilgrim's suffering, not to mention his persistence, throughout the rest of hell and purgatory. After hearing Francesca's tale in *Inferno* 5, Chwast's Dante becomes confused and faints again. He rushes to get away from the demons in *Inferno* 23. He is shown crawling over "treacherous, rocky territory" in *Inferno* 24. In *Inferno* 33 he cries out "This must stop," after hearing about scandalous Pisa. His climb to the ledge in *Purgatorio* 4 is so difficult he has to rest immediately thereafter. He is so tired by *Purgatorio* 9 that he falls asleep and Lucia has to carry him like a baby to the gate of Purgatory. He must rest again in *Purgatorio* 17-18, which leads to sleep in *Purgatorio* 19. In facing the wall of fire between the lustful terrace and the earthly paradise in *Purgatorio* 27, he notes "I was afraid but I finally crossed through the terrible heat." Immediately after passing through the fire, he claims, "I am tired," which leads to sleep in the next illustration. And finally, in *Purgatorio* 30, he claims to be overcome with emotion and calls for Virgil, shortly before admitting his faults to Beatrice and claiming to be filled with remorse. Again and again, Chwast highlights the narrator's references to his suffering and to the most horrific elements of hell and purgatory. Even if Chwast must depart from minor conventions of film noir and/or amplify otherwise minor points in the *Commedia* to do so, he figuratively, and often literally, foregrounds the arduous nature of the protagonist's journey.

As Chwast's Pilgrim negotiates this torturous trail, he, like many a film-noir detective or journalist, gains not only enlightenment but also redemption, albeit a far purer and more ecstatic sort. The foundation for that accomplishment is laid early in the illustration cycle, for as the Pilgrim chooses to follow Virgil and proceed on his quest despite warnings of the challenges to come, he establishes his bravery, determination, and worthiness for salvation. And though the more overt steps in that purification process are often incidental to Dante's narrative as a whole, Chwast highlights them throughout *Purgatorio*. He devotes a half-page close-up to the placement of the "P"s for "Peccatum" ("sin") on Dante's head in *Purgatorio* 9, a full inset close-up to the removal of one of the "P"s in *Purgatorio* 12, a quarter-page close-up to the removal of another "P" in *Purgatorio* 21, an inset close-up to the absence of all the "P"s in *Purgatorio* 27, an adjacent inset to Dante patting his guide on the shoulder and saying, "Virgil, I want to thank you. All the sin in me has been purged away. I no longer need your guidance," another inset to Matilda bringing the Pilgrim to the Lethe and washing away his sins by having him drink the water in *Purgatorio* 31, and a half page at the end of *Purgatorio* 33 to Dante standing at the summit of Purgatory, raising his arms to the night sky, and declaring, "My final purification is complete. I am perfect, pure and ready for the stars." Though these scenes are in Dante's text and underscore a major narrative

⁸ Compare his welcome "O.K. Come aboard" in Chwast's text, to his remark, "Per altra via, per altri porti /verrai a piaggia, non qui, per passare: / più lieve legno convien che ti porti," in *Inferno* 3.91-93.

thread that might otherwise be missed, all but those from Purgatorio 9 and 31 are not so important as to be included in any *Commedia* miniatures or almost any later Dante illustrations.⁹ Nor, of course, is their form and blatancy anywhere close to that of most works classified as film noir, which, contrary to its title, often casts redemption in subtle shades of gray. But in accord with the heavyhanded nature of many graphic novels, Chwast departs from the nuances of film noir to favor a *Commedia* motif that is a critical bridge to the power and popularity of many movies in that genre, to the possibility that beneath the moral quicksand of our lives lies a chance, even if small and usually missed, to repent for the errors of our ways.

Of course, even on those occasions when redemption is attained in film noir, it usually does not lead to any reward beyond itself. But it does in, for example, *The Big Heat*, and it does in Chwast's *Commedia*. In *Paradiso* 1 the narrator observes that "it seemed [...] I felt God's grace." In *Paradiso* 17 he is told the *Commedia* will be a success. In *Paradiso* 18 he gets to see an even more beautiful Beatrice. In *Paradiso* 25 he is given hope that his poems will be heard, his exile will be ended, and he might receive the poet's crown in Florence. In *Paradiso* 26 he regains his sight and gets to ask Adam four questions. And in *Paradiso* 33 he is allowed direct vision of God and to see a world "bound together in love." Whereas many other pictorial responses to the *Commedia* stop at the end of *Inferno*, and whereas those that go on to *Paradiso* often downplay the Pilgrim's rewards,¹⁰ Chwast underscores that Dante has redeemed himself after a long and difficult journey, after as convoluted and challenging a path as that of many a film-noir protagonist.

In thereby conflating Dante with such jaded and self-serving yet daring and heroic protagonists as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, Chwast sharply departs from Gustave Doré and the many other artists who build on the narrator's professions of humility, who portray the Pilgrim as little more than a timid spectator.¹¹ He invites us to identify the *Commedia* with a genre that features complicated figures who persevere against tremendous odds to discern the truth and/or to right wrongs, though they themselves might never admit to those virtues or goals. And as he thereby demonstrates the enduring relevance of a major medieval monument, he helps to legitimize an oft-denigrated cinematic genre, an even more ridiculed literary format, and a field of design that

⁹ Purgatorio 9 was illuminated in many manuscripts, such as the mid-fourteenth-century Emilian or Paduan example on folio 79r in British Museum MS Egerton 943 and the slightly later Italian example on page 74 in Oxford's Bodleian Library MS Holkham Miscellanae 48 (for reproductions of these miniatures and those mentioned below, see the second volume of *Illuminated Manuscripts*), and in many later *Commedia* cycles, such as those by William Blake and Gustave Doré. Purgatorio 31 was only illuminated by the Egerton artist, his Holkham colleague, and the late-fourteenth-century Veneto artist of Marciana MS it.IX.276. But it has been depicted by Doré, John Flaxman, and many others.

¹⁰ The focus on the *Inferno* begins among *Commedia* miniatures, as only eleven of the thirty-three surviving cycles include the second and third cantiche. For examples of three-cantiche cycles that downplay the Pilgrim's rewards, see the Egerton manuscript, which omits the meeting with Adam in its two depictions of *Paradiso* 26, and British Library MS Yates Thompson 36, whose *Paradiso* was illuminated in the mid-fifteenth-century by Giovanni di Paolo and omits Dante's direct vision of God in canto 33.

¹¹ In addition to Doré's cycle, see, for example, the cycle by Sandow Birk and, perhaps above all, Delacroix's famous painting of Dante cringing from Filippo Argenti as that sinner bites Phlegyas's barque.

is sometimes dismissed as a poor, overly commercial relative of the so-called "fine" arts. Not unlike the film-noir protagonists he celebrates, he helps those in need and redeems the seemingly irredeemable while never admitting to such good deeds.