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Yevgenia Ginzburg’s Personal Inferno

In her memoir *Journey into the Whirlwind*, Yevgenia Ginzburg recounts her eighteen-year ordeal in the Soviet Gulag system. The first part of the novel depicts Ginzburg’s transformation from a well-respected communist and university professor into a political prisoner indicted under Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic, which prosecuted those considered to be disloyal to the Communist Party. In the second part of the memoir, Ginzburg gives an in-depth account of her imprisonment during the great purge of the Party, a time when thousands of people were killed. After initially being imprisoned and released, Ginzburg was falsely accused of harboring Trotskyist sentiments and sentenced again, this time to ten years of hard labor. Throughout *Journey into the Whirlwind*, Ginzburg refers to numerous literary works written by renowned authors, and some of the most frequent allusions are to Dante’s *Inferno.* In this paper, I will analyze various textual similarities between Ginzburg’s novel and Dante’s *Inferno* by comparing Ginzburg’s three initial interrogators to Dante’s three beasts, and Ginzburg’s experiences in prison to Dante’s descriptions of hell in *Inferno*. These parallels, whether intentionally created by the author or not, may offer readers a new interpretation of her novel. In addition, comparing Ginzburg’s experiences to the gruesome images in Dante’s *Inferno* may also help us better understand the thousands of people who shared similar experiences in the years of Stalinist terror.

Dante’s *Inferno* constitutes the first section of his fourteenth-century epic poem, *The

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), hereafter cited by canto and line number(s).
Divine Comedy. Set in the year 1300, the poem begins with the speaker’s journey through a dark wood. Upon arriving at the foot of a mountain and encountering a clear path to continue his journey, three beasts—a leopard, lion, and she-wolf—confront the speaker. Returning to the dark wood to escape the beasts, he is met by the ghost of the ancient poet Virgil who informs him that the only path to paradise is a descent through hell. Thus, the speaker, with Virgil as his guide, enters upon the “cammino alto e silvestro” or “the deep and savage journey” through the underworld (2.142).

Dante’s Inferno serves as an appropriate model for interpreting Ginzburg’s novel on several levels. Firstly, many believe that Dante’s works had a profound impact on Russian writers in the early twentieth century, and so it is possible they may have influenced Ginzburg’s novel as well. John Kopper states that “Dante's importance to early twentieth-century Russian letters goes well beyond the mere frequency of his appearances in texts of the time.”2 Since Ginzburg worked as a teacher and a journalist in the years prior to her arrest, she would have been exposed to the heightened significance of Dante’s texts in the literary culture of this time. A critical review of Journey into the Whirlwind points out that many of Ginzburg’s experiences were cast “through the prism of Russian literature and especially poetry.”3 Secondly, a parallel can be drawn between Inferno and Ginzburg’s eighteen-year prison stay, in that both only represent the initial stages of a larger process; Inferno does not touch on Dante’s speaker’s experience after hell, and Ginzburg’s novel does not incorporate her life after prison. James Baily discusses this aspect of Ginzburg’s novel, noting that “we learn nothing about the

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following fifteen years, her rehabilitation and return, nor about the fate of her husband, who also was arrested.”

Thirdly, Ginzburg compares a stage in her journey to a specific circle of hell in the *Inferno*. In Dante’s epic, hell is divided into nine different circles – or subsections – where souls are given different eternal punishments for their sins. A similar structure can be seen in Ginzburg’s novel, as she comments on one of her stays in prison: “It was the seventh circle of Dante’s hell, where nothing lay ahead but death, and I could not wait to get out of it.” Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ginzburg was referring to the Kolyma prison, which was actually likened to “the Arctic circle of Dante’s Inferno” in a historical analysis from the 1930s.

It is important to analyze the parallel between Ginzburg’s three interrogators and the three beasts that Dante’s speaker confronts before his descent into hell. The first interrogator is a man she identifies as Comrade Beylin. Here I should note that I do not count Beylin’s accomplice as one of the three initial interrogators, since Ginzburg gives the reader very little information about him. His real name is never mentioned (the narrator refers to him by the arbitrary nickname of Malyuta), and the details of his interrogation techniques are not described. Ginzburg indicates his insignificance by mentioning that he reminds her of a “henchman of Ivan the Terrible;” therefore, he cannot be accurately compared with any of the three beasts from Dante’s *Inferno*.

Comrade Beylin, however, does receive a great deal of attention. Ginzburg describes in great detail how he would question her daily about her connection to Professor Elvov, a former

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7 Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 15.
colleague, including inquiring about her decision to not denounce an article written by Elvov that was believed to contain anti-Party sentiments. Recalling the interrogation, Ginzburg describes Beylin’s “sadistic eyes,” yet also claims that he spoke to her politely “in the second person singular, as was proper between Party members.”

According to Ginzburg, Beylin never actually threatened her or accused her of wrong doing during the two-month span of interrogations. She writes that Beylin simply insinuated that her actions defied the Party, and she adds that he only gave her a sentence of “severe reprimand and warning.”

This feigned formality is quite similar to Dante’s description of the first beast that his speaker encounters in *Inferno*.

In the first canto, the speaker is confronted by a leopard. Since each of the three beasts is believed to represent a distinct sub-section of hell, the leopard could symbolize concupiscence.

The first sub-section, which is represented by the lion, is for souls who are punished for crimes of passion and immodest desires. When describing the leopard, Dante explains how the beast simply blocks his speaker’s path, without advancing toward him.

> ...and it did not depart from before my face
> but rather so impeded my way
> that I was at several turns turned to go back. (1.34–36)

These two figures, Beylin and the leopard, are similar in that neither directly advances toward his prey. Instead, they simply rely on intimidation and the impending threat of the beasts to come, in order to frighten their respective prey.

Ginzburg recounts that her second interrogator was Yemelyan Yaroslavsky, who

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9 Ibid., 29.
11 “…e non mi si partia dinanzi al volto,/ anzi ‘mpediva tanto il mio camino/ch’i’ fui per ritornar più volte vòlto.”
participated in a fresh hearing of Ginzburg’s case in Moscow, after her sentence from Beylin had been reduced to a “relaxation of vigilance,” a somewhat lesser charge.\textsuperscript{12} Yaroslavsky was a prominent member of the Communist Party and a journalist. As a result of Yaroslavsky’s interrogation, Ginzburg was accused of “collaboration with the enemy…a specific, punishable, criminal offense.”\textsuperscript{13} This offense often carried a much harsher punishment, as most of those accused were forced into labor camps. Ginzburg’s account of Yaroslavsky is similar to Dante’s description of the second beast, a lion (‘leone’). When the speaker is confronted by the lion, Dante writes:

\ldots But not so that I did not fear
the sight appears like that of a lion.
He appeared to be coming against me
with his head high and with raging hunger,
so that the air appeared to tremble at him. (1.44–48)\textsuperscript{14}

Known as the “conscience of the Party,” Yaroslavsky exuded a pompous attitude when judging Ginzburg.\textsuperscript{15} He was hypocritical in doing so, however, since he had actually published Elvov’s article while Ginzburg was being prosecuted more severely simply because she did not vehemently denounce the article \textit{after} it had been published by Yaroslavsky. As the first person to accuse Ginzburg of collaborating with the enemy, Yaroslavsky boldly attacked her dignity and reputation, much like the lion attempted to attack Dante’s speaker.

Ginzburg’s third interrogator was Captain Vevers of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR. Ginzburg recounts that she initially became acquainted with Vevers during a brief phone call, and she introduces him in her novel with the seemingly

\textsuperscript{12} Ginzburg, \textit{Journey into the Whirlwind}, 29.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{14} “…Ma non si che paura non mi desse/la vista che m’apparve d’un leone./Questi parea che contra me venisse/con la test’ alta e con rabbiosa fame,/ si che parea che l’aere ne tremesse.”
\textsuperscript{15} Ginzburg, \textit{Journey into the Whirlwind}, 32.
peaceful image of “his voice [that] burbled on like a brook in spring.”\textsuperscript{16} Unfortunately, as Ginzburg describes, this pleasant appearance was merely a charade to entice her to meet with him at his office near Black Lake, which is notoriously known as a prison for those falsely accused of political dissention.

Upon arriving at the office, she soon realizes his true demeanor is quite different. Her portrayal of Vever’s is similar to Dante’s descriptions of the third beast that his speaker encounters before entering hell. Dante depicts the beast, a she-wolf, in the following way:

\begin{quote}
And the she-wolf, that with all cravings
that seemed to be laden in her leanness
and has caused many peoples to live in wretchedness
she put on me so much heaviness
with fear that came from the sight of her,
that I lost all hope of reaching the heights…
…so she made me, that restless beast,
who coming against me, little by little,
was driving me back to where the sun is silent. (1.44–51, 58–60)\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Here there exists a parallel between the fearsome gazes of the she-wolf and Vever’s. The fear instilled in the speaker at the sight of the she-wolf is similar to Ginzburg’s own sentiments and her initial impression of Vever’s hateful eyes:

\begin{quote}
[His eyes] were naked. They made not the slightest attempt to conceal their cynicism, cruelty, and anticipation of the pleasure of torturing a victim.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Also, Dante’s statement that his speaker “lost all hope” is also similar to the situation that Ginzburg faces in Vever’s office. Attempting to protect her husband, she gave her maiden name for the official interrogation records. Ginzburg explains that Vever replied sternly: “trying to

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{17} “Eduna lupa, che di tutte brame/sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza,/e molte genti fé già viver grame,/questa mi porse tanto di gravezza/con la paura ch’i uscia di sua vista,/ch’ io perdei la speranza de l’altezza…/mi fece là bestia senza pace,/che, venendomi ‘ncontro, a poco a poco/ mi ripigneva la dove ‘l sol tace.”
\textsuperscript{18} Ginzburg, Journey into the Whirlwind, 48.
protect him? It won’t help,” and claimed that her husband “doesn’t care that much [about the situation]…. He’s disowned you already…. “19 Thus, Vevers attempted to ruin Ginzburg’s hopes of ever returning to her previous life.

One could argue that each of the wardens and interrogators in Ginzburg’s novel are representative of the entire Soviet regime of the time. This becomes evident when considering their roles in society and throughout the Gulag system. Dr. Evans comments that “the Soviet state’s mechanisms of control were pervasive, so that there were no independent organizations, which for some implied that Soviet citizens were completely subjected to direction by the political regime.”20 This type of complete societal control was common throughout the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In Ginzburg’s novel, the wardens and interrogators serve a similar function. Steven Burns notes that “From [the prisoners’] arrival into the Gulag system, [they] were subject to intentional humiliation, the destruction of all private space, and the assertion of total state control over their lives.”21 Thus, with unquestionable power and control over the prisoners’ lives, the wardens and interrogators became a proxy for the entire Soviet regime.

In this case, Vevers – one of Ginzburg’s interrogators – can also be interpreted as a symbol of the entire Soviet regime of that time. This broader interpretation requires a different reading of Dante’s description of the beastly interrogator. For example, the excerpt above regarding the she-wolf, who “has caused many peoples to live in wretchedness,” may pertain to the actions of the Soviet regime during the Great Purge, in which thousands were falsely imprisoned and forced into harsh labor camps. Also, Dante characterizes the relentless she-wolf

19 Ibid., 49–50.
as relying on fear and intimidation to force the speaker onto a different path. This figure, so similar to the wardens and interrogators, could represent the Soviet regime’s attempt to arrest and silence all opposing Party members.

Additionally, Ginzburg subtly refers to a specific circle of *Inferno* to explain her expulsion from the Party and the following uncertainty about her future. Ginzburg writes the following:

> After my expulsion from the Party, eight days went by before my arrest. All those days I sat at home…. I was waiting; so were all my family. What for?  

Later in her novel, Ginzburg describes how she awaited her sentencing from a military tribunal in Moscow. Describing her feeling of uncertainty, Ginzburg writes:

> No one from our cell had been before the military tribunal: only before various summary or civil courts. And no one had yet been presented with an indictment and the clause about the sentence being carried out within twenty-four hours….  

Ginzburg’s uncertainty is even more evident when she recounts her reaction to hearing the verdict:

> The darkness closed in again—for the last time, surely. And then, all of a sudden—what was it? What had he said? Like a blinding zigzag of lightning cutting across my mind. He had said…. Had I heard it right?  

The first circle of *Inferno*, known as limbo, reflects Ginzburg’s uncertainty before her sentencing, since the non-baptized sinners in limbo also await their fate. Describing this, Dante writes:

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22 Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 41.  
23 Ibid., 167–168  
24 Ibid., 173.  
25 “Or vo’ che sappi, innanzi che più andi,/ch’ei non peccaro; e s’elli hanno mercedi/non basta, perché non ebber battesmo,/ch’è porta de la fede che tu credi....”
Now I wish you to know before you walk further
they did not sin; and if they have merits
it is not enough, because they did not receive baptism
which is the gateway to the faith that you believe…. (19.33–36)

When comparing the Soviet regime to a religious authority of Dante’s time, a Party membership card could symbolize a form of baptism into the Party. Stripped of Party membership after her conviction, Ginzburg was left in limbo with an uncertain future awaiting her.

Another similarity between Ginzburg’s novel and Inferno surfaces in her description of a fellow prisoner showing her kindness at Kolyma. Ginzburg notes that this other prisoner gave her a colorful wool jacket, which was then snatched by the team leader, Verka, as a bribe. Distraught by this ordeal, Ginzburg writes how her fellow prisoners attempted to comfort her:

...‘that jacket may save your life…. I’ve heard that this Verka sometimes puts people on light work for as much as two weeks’...[this] prediction came true the very next morning.

This example of bribery is similar to Dante’s eighth circle of Inferno. Within the many bolgie (subcategories) of this circle are the simonists, who profit from buying and selling sacred items. In the voice of a sinner, Dante briefly explains the sin of simony:

...and truly I was a son of the she-bear
so greedy to advance her cubs
that I pocketed wealth up there, and myself down here. (19. 70–72)

Even though simony has religious implications, the jacket that Verka stole from Ginzburg can be viewed as sacred and essential in the context of a Siberian prison. Verka can be considered a type of warden because she controls the prisoners’ work assignments and many aspects of their lives during their time at Kolyma. As with Vvers, her role in the novel can be

26 Ginzburg, Journey into the Whirlwind, 371.
27 “...e veramente fui figliuol de l’orsa,/ cupido sì per avanzar li orsatti/che sù l’avere e qui me misi in borsa.”
compared to the actions of the entire Soviet regime at the time. Thus, it can be interpreted that Verka committed a form of simony by taking Ginzburg’s jacket as a bribe. By extension, this would indicate that the Soviet regime also committed simony, in the form of falsely imprisoning innocent people and effectively “stealing” their lives. Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that Ginzburg met Verka during her eighth prison stay, since it reflects the eighth circle of *Inferno*.

In addition to the examples above, Ginzburg also makes reference to Dante’s description of treachery. After being arrested at Black Lake and refusing to sign any falsified documents, Ginzburg was confronted by two of her former colleagues from the *Red Tartary* newspaper. She recounts that she attempted to embrace the first colleague, Volodya, as he used to be a friend and mentee. She then understood the situation only by observing his negative reaction to her signs of affection. He was one of her accusers and was coerced into signing falsified documents that provided evidence of her supposed crimes. Within minutes, Volodya was ushered out of the office and replaced by Nalya Kozlova. Ginzburg describes her as “…a very old friend of mine” and also states that “as students we had been inseparable.”

Her colleagues’ betrayal was worsened by the fact that Ginzburg played an influential role in helping them receive work at the newspaper:

> [Volodya and I] were old friends. Our fathers had been schoolmates. I had helped him to get his job, and had gladly, almost lovingly, taught him his trade as a journalist… [Nalya] too had been on my staff at the *Red Tartary* and had also got her job through my backing.

These descriptions are similar to Dante’s structure in *Inferno*. In canto XXXIV, Dante describes the lowest circle, which is reserved for the traitors of benefactors. Dante writes that the

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28 Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 93.
29 Ibid., 90–93.
30 “…l’anima…c’ha maggior pena.”
soul who receives “the greatest punishment” was Judas Iscariot, who, according to the New Testament, was one of Christ’s twelve apostles and is most well-known for betraying Jesus (34.61). With this in mind, one can see how Ginzburg weaves a double meaning into her words. Explicitly stating her influence and involvement in getting them jobs at the Red Tartary newspaper, she establishes herself as their mentor or benefactor. Clearly, Ginzburg still feels affection for these former friends, as evidenced through her fond memories. Alternatively, she also harbors negative feelings for them, since their betrayal made her circumstances even worse. Perhaps Ginzburg used her knowledge of Dante’s work and his lowest circle of hell to symbolize her inner conflict regarding her former friends, thus implying that this type of betrayal is unforgiveable.

Ginzburg also alludes to evils in another circle of Inferno to make generalizations about her treatment as a political prisoner. Consider the following passage:

Here are the chiefs of heresies
with their followers
...like with like is buried here...(9.127–128, 130)\footnote{…Qui son li eresiarche/ con lor seguaci.../Simile qui con simile è sepolto...lighierì.}  

In Dante’s time, heresy was a term reserved for anyone who questioned the Catholic Church, its doctrine, or the interpretation of any aspect of the religion. As mentioned above, the Communist Party and the Soviet regime during Ginzburg’s time had unquestionable authority over its people much like a religious entity would. The accusation that Ginzburg collaborated with the enemy implies that she was viewed as a heretic since she questioned the motives of the Party. Another interesting link between Dante’s passage above and Ginzburg’s novel is the line “like with like is buried here.” This echoes throughout Ginzburg’s novel, as she continuously mentions how she
was only imprisoned with other women convicted of the same crime – those who were political prisoners indicted under Article 58.

Thus Ginzburg’s allusions to Dante’s *Inferno* are quite purposeful, and the obstacles that Ginzburg faced in the Soviet Gulag system reflect those of Dante’s speaker during his descent to hell. It is important to note that, despite numerous similarities, these works are still quite different. Dante’s *Inferno* is a fictitious story of one man’s decent through hell, whereas Ginzburg’s work is a personal memoir. Looking past these differences, however, one can examine the parallels between the two works which have been outlined above. It is possible that Ginzburg, a former university professor, used her knowledge of Dante and his work to better communicate her struggles to a larger audience. Her novel serves as a testament for all those who suffered alongside her by giving a voice to the voiceless masses. With *Inferno* as her guide, Ginzburg may have been able to keep her faith in believing that her hell in prison was only a journey—not a destination—and that she may someday reach her own paradise.
Works Cited


