

Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert: ‘Le bout du monde’, ‘Inferno’ and ‘Purgatorio’ in landscape

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There may be times during a visit to a place that we can feel something different; we are not always sure, if some kind of energy or enchantment has triggered inspiration and imagination simultaneously. Nevertheless, what may be so palpable, such as magnificent natural scenery and manmade environment could be also transmuted into something suspended between human fantasy, skilful narrative and legitimate awe of an author or observer? During her stay to this superb village, the author had the opportunity to wonder along its narrow streets and constantly gaze towards the heights of the surrounding hills and mountains; there was some reluctance in her to try to climb towards the high and steep crests of these ancient advances of prehistorically melted rocks which stemmed gorges and currents of the ancient river below. The local belief that a ferocious Giant had ever lived on the top of this wilderness of the powerful landscape could only remind that, perhaps humans and saints had to find a balance by living at the right level and around the hole of some sort of a terrestrial door to the underground Inferno of darkness and freezing waters; the damned humans had to hide from the sun and the life along twisting paths and ‘Purgatory’ terraces. The village’s form blends in nature as a triangle intertwining with the green landscape which surrounds it. However its main routes and paths seen from above appear as if diverging from some sort of a three-directional fault of the terrain. Quite central in this configuration of the built environment we find Gellone Abbey.

In reality Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert grew around Gellone Abbey and near the Pont du Diable (=Devil’s Bridge);¹ the road crossing the village extends towards that bridge and continues over it by offering the pilgrims spectacular views downwards to the gorges of the Hérault river. It is important to note that the abbey was founded by Charlemagne’s cousin Guilhem who made his name during the military campaigns against the Saracens. Later the hero laid down his arms to become a monk. In the 10th century, Guilhem became Saint Guilhem and Gellone a spiritual place of great

¹ Both the abbey of Gellone and the medieval village have been listed as World Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO; Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert was and probably is still a stage of the Santiago De Compostella pilgrimage trail, the famous pilgrimage route to Spain (See also <http://www.destination-languedoc.co.uk/docs/>)

influence and importance. The fame of the saint was spread out by troubadours of the medieval times through their popular music and poetry and it is quite contemporary with Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. The author of this paper felt that, although Saint Guilhem's life was venerated because of his religious Catholic values when he became a monk, it would have been extremely difficult to forget that he lived a life often too close to sins such as war massacres of innocent people and religious bloody conflicts. The metaphor of the heroic deed of his win and the killing of the Giant who was a constant threat over the Gellone holy space and the surrounding village is very similar to what Dante and his friend Virgil, the ancient poet in Limbo between Inferno and Paradise have tried to accomplish. And most importantly this metaphor seems to be powerfully engraved upon the steep drops of the rocks which form a wonderful landscape enclosing the village of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, but in a different way. The rising heights of the gigantic rocky gradients of the hills are rather permeable; they are no more impenetrable edges between natural setting and the rose-pink appearance of the triangular expansion of the village as seen from the peaks. The Y shape, or better, the triangular split of the main routes through the village shows two of its pathlines climbing from the lower ground (the Limbo area, as the author wishes to consider it) towards the surrounding peaks and the ones beyond them by hovering over Le Verdus River gorges. The water is a powerful element in the entire landscape and, according to seasons and weather conditions, it emerges, runs, jumps, hides underground, tumbles out again and deepens under the Devil's Bridge, till it finds a reasonably peaceful exit towards the plane in order to reach the sea ahead.

However the most fascinating part of the landscape is Le Bout du Monde (=the end or edge of the world), the dominant path that crosses the village, from an area that the author felt as the border between Limbo and the ascent towards the redemption of both body and soul. It happens that the path coincides with the famous holy route known as the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, or as Way of Saint James or Road to Santiago. The name 'Santiago' is the Galician evolution of Vulgar Latin 'Sanctu Iacobu'; that is Saint James. The French route of the Camino de Santiago leads to the shrine of the Apostle St. James the Great in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in north-western Spain, where the remains of the saint are buried.

Many authors of literature wrote books and film directors directed films on the theme of the Camino, such as Brazilian author Paulo Coelho who wrote *The Diary of a Magician* or *The Pilgrimage* based upon his own personal experience. The Camino

de Santiago was one of the most important Christian pilgrimages during the Middle Ages and a pilgrimage route on which a plenary indulgence could be earned.² Thus, the route crossing Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert and the mountainous area around it is part of the Camino and, as such, it embraces tradition, rituals and myths of an era during which Guilhem became a saint and, perhaps poems and music were performed many times and for long along that route; these fascinating songs were echoing against the precipices and the high rocky pinnacles of the summits. By singing and venerating saints along the route, the pilgrims were liberated by their sins, as it happened to Dante and Virgil in their way to the highest summit of the Purgatory of the Divine Comedy. Dante starts its ascension towards the Earthy Paradise (top of the mount) to meet Beatrice. However on the top of the terraces we treasure spectacular views towards the valley and we touch some kind of heaven; the paradise is still far away. We have to keep going on the Camino until we reach the finish, the liberation. Is it true though? Can we find an end or the endlessness in front of the ocean? Is it Santiago de Compostela the final destination of the route or something further? Dante determined the end of his route by reaching the summit of one mount only. But, how many mountains should we climb towards a tangible liberation? How many Purgatories do we have to climb during the course of our lives? By entering the area of the Purgatory Dante knows and feels that there is no return back soon; the pilgrim Dante who is guided by Virgil towards the highest terrace knows that he must go to the top to find real love and happiness.

10.4 I heard the gate resound and, hearing, knew
that it had shut, and if I'd turned toward it,
how could my fault have found a fit excuse?

10.7 Our upward pathway ran between cracked rocks;
they seemed to sway in one, then the other part,
just like a wave that flees, then doubles back.³

² The *visitation liminum*, or visit to the tomb of the Apostles was regarded as a good work of great efficacy. Kent, W. H. (1913) in 'Indulgences' entry in the Catholic Encyclopaedia (New York: Robertson Appleton Co) explains that "the doctrine came to include pilgrimage to shrines as a trend that developed from the 8th century A.D. ... the chief purpose was to gain the indulgences granted by the pope and attached especially to the Stations."

³ These are lines from Dante's *Purgatorio Canto 10* available at:
<http://www.worldofdante.org/comedy/dante/purgatory.xml/2.10>

Perhaps these are the same feelings of the people climbing along the precipices and above the village. Reaching Le Bout du Monde is the target. But, is there an end to a spherical world, as Dante also professes? The entire effort is immense though, as it is in the real climbing site swinging above Saint Guilhem-le-Désert village. Dante states as follows:

10.19 I was exhausted; with the two of us
uncertain of our way, we halted on
a plateau lonelier than desert paths.

10.22 The distance from its edge, which rims the void,
in to the base of the steep slope, which climbs
and climbs, would measure three times one man's body;

10.25 and for as far as my sight took its flight,
now to the left, now to the right-hand side,
that terrace seemed to me equally wide.⁴

One thing is certain; the struggle to reach the top of the terraces of the cliffs overhanging Saint Guilhem-le-Désert is a real endeavour. By climbing along the path our state of mind maybe the same as Dante and Virgil's trying to surpass the damned struggling along or lying exhausted upon the terraces of the cliffs; the damned sport towards their redemption by chanting hymns to Mary Virgin or their most popular saints, just exactly how Dante and his friends do and feel by climbing along the Purgatory terraces, from the lowest Terrace 1 of the Proud and through the terraces of the Envious, Wrathful, Slothful, Covetous, Gluttonous to reach Terrace 7 of the Lustful. The names of the damned struggling towards their salvation coincide perfectly with how we feel by ascending from the Limbo horizontalness of the lowest area of the valley; we know that somewhere under our feet are death, solitude and darkness of some kind of Inferno; we do not search for the underground gorges of Acheron as they are depicted, for example, in Gustave Doré's engravings of the gloomy gorges of a river in which Charon comes to ferry souls across the river Acheron to Hell. Perhaps Doré's scenery fits the outskirts of the village and its valley, where the Verdu River meets the Hérault River under the Devils' Bridge. We may also feel closer to the surrealist director Luis Buñuel and its plot of the 1969 film *The*

⁴ These are always lines from Dante's Purgatorio Canto 10 available at:
<http://www.worldofdante.org/comedy/dante/purgatory.xml/2.10>

Milky Way, in which he critiques the Catholic Church. According to Buñuel, the modern pilgrims may encounter various manifestations of Catholic dogma and heresy along the same path of their lives. In fact our ascension and final destination of acquiring the clemency is all in all an ambiguous route to the top, where we may have missed the Paradise forever and, where our Beatrice is no more waiting for us to reach her. We find no Garden of Eden to wonder around, only some kind of silent wilderness. In fact on the top of the ‘Infernet’ of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, we find time without end waiting for us, as an endless play of life and nature; we get no culmination of a deed there. The entire landscape is an allegory, as the Divine Comedy’s cantos (songs) are; Dante’s allegory is as complex as nature manifests itself at all times. The rings of the *Purgatorio* terraces demonstrate the medieval knowledge of a spherical Earth. During his poem, Dante discusses the different stars in the southern hemisphere and the various time zones of the Earth. We become keen observers of a night full of stars by looking from the lowest part of the valley (and the central area of the village) towards the peaks stemmed by disintegrated castles or cliffs heavily devoured by the wind and the torrential rain of the most wild tempests that may occur during all seasons. Nevertheless we have got time to think how small we are, if we compare ourselves to the marvels of nature surrounding us. We may feel like Dante’s arrogants pushed to the ground by exhaustion, but still willing to recover:

10.127 Why does your mind presume to flight when you
are still like the imperfect grub, the worm
before it has attained its final form?

...

10.133 oppressiveness, unreal, gives rise to real
distress in him who watches it): such was
the state of those I saw when I looked hard.

10.136 They were indeed bent down – some less, some more –
according to the weights their backs now bore;
and even he whose aspect showed most patience,

10.139 it tears, appeared to say: “I can no more.”⁵

⁵ Always lines from Dante’s *Purgatorio* Canto 10 available at:
<http://www.worldofdante.org/comedy/dante/purgatory.xml/2.10>

The author should like to conclude by referring to Gustave Doré's illustrations which "have become so intimately connected that even today, nearly 150 years after their initial publication, the artist's rendering of the poet's text still determines our vision of the *Commedia*."⁶ She would like to add that these engravings still define and describe skilfully old landscapes, which have survived in remote and adventurous territories and, they are still accessible to entertain new pilgrims of the natural and unspoilt environment around Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, one of the most beautiful Heritage sites in Europe.



III. 1: Dante and Virgil approaching the entrance to Hell [Similarity is extraordinary with the *Infernet* landscape, near Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert]

Creator: Doré, Gustave; Date: 1890; Medium: engraving

Source: Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* from the Original by Dante Alighieri and Illustrated with the Designs of Gustave Doré (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890).

At:

http://www.worldofdante.org/pop_up_query.php?dbid=I097&show=more

⁶ See Gustave Doré at: http://www.worldofdante.org/gallery_dore.html