

Regaining independence and heroism in canto 17



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While Dante is supported, both physically and mentally, by his guide Virgil throughout Canto 17, he demonstrates his increasing independence and understanding via his analysis of the events he faces. Dante is required to call on the spiritual and mental understanding he gains in this canto to overcome the challenges that hamper him in later cantos. In fact, even translations of the *Inferno* that differ in significant ways are in concordance on these aspects of Dante's evolution as a protagonist.

In preparation for the journey to the eighth circle, Dante and his reliable guide, Virgil, survey "the beast with the pointed tail, that passes through mountains and pierces walls and armor" that will bring them into the lower realms of Hell (*Inf.* 17. 1-2). Dante takes a moment to examine the mythological monster whose "face was that of a just man... and the rest was that of a serpent" (*Inf.* 17. 10-11). Later, Virgil reveals his name to be Geryon. Before Virgil commands the beast to act as their vessel, he instructs Dante to "carry away full experiences of this subcircle" by seeing the last of the sinners in the seventh circle. (*Inf.* 17. 37-38). The shades whom Virgil refers to are usurers who are condemned to stare at the "bag of special color, with a special emblem" that hangs from their necks. After briefly speaking with them, Dante returns to Virgil, and together they mount Geryon starting their descent into the eighth circle. On the flight down, Dante observes "the great evils that come closer on every side" (*Inf.* 17. 125-126). Once they dismount, Geryon briskly disappears.

While Dante's interactions with Geryon are not independent from Virgil, his analysis is thus showing his progression towards independent thought. Dante uses Geryon to personify the traits of fraud since "fraud makes all physical

barriers and defenses (mountains, walls, and armor) useless” (Martinez and Durling 268). He makes note of the physical appearance that contributes to Geryon’s “filthy image of fraud” by comparing the beast to German skiffs “positioned to wage war” and with additional details describing his tail as a “poisoned fork that armed its tip like a scorpion’s” (Inf. 17. 7, 20-22, 26-27). Both of these similes highlight the juxtaposition between Dante’s use of “kind” describing Geryon’s upper half and the brutality of what follows beneath the rest of the “wicked beast’s” torso (Inf. 17. 23). From this interaction, Dante bolsters his ability to discern interior deceit from the superficial exterior that often glosses over fraudulent acts and sinners. Later, Dante relies on his ability to see through fraud’s facade while exposing Ulysses in Canto 26.

When Dante approaches the usurers, he walks “all alone” (Inf. 17. 44). Virgil encourages Dante’s exploration through self-learning which illustrates Dante’s acquired autonomy. Although Dante’s time spent with the sinners is concise, his descriptions are not. As he describes, the usurers continue to uselessly hope that their money and family stature will grant them immortality through the legacy they left on Earth (Inf. 17. 55-56). However, as Dante’s analysis implies, ignorance besieges these shades for true immortality is granted through the divine power not through the power of one’s wallet.

Although his independence is growing, Dante still depends on Virgil in daunting situations. Turning back towards his guide, Dante is told to “be strong and bold” as they descend into the eighth circle (Inf. 17. 80-81). Dante later adapts this phrase. Fighting off the exhaustion he faces in Canto <https://assignbuster.com/regaining-independence-and-heroism-in-canto-17/>

24, Dante claims, “ I am strong and bold” emphasizing his growth as an individual and the necessity to continue pushing forward despite adversity (Inf. 24. 59-60). While Dante is unable to verbally communicate his fears within Canto 17, Virgil understands Dante’s unspoken emotions and “ clasps and braces [Dante] with his arms” (Inf. 17. 95-96). During departure, Virgil directs the beast to be cautious and “ consider the new weight [he] carries” referencing that, unlike the shades who reside in hell, Dante is living and has a physical mass (Inf. 17. 98-99). While this quality adds another physical layer of separation between him and those who surround him, it metaphorically highlights Dante’s ability, with Virgil’s guidance, to move and shape the environment around him molding the path that leads towards salvation.

Before safely landing, Dante depicts his fear using two allusions to Phaethon and Icarus.

The theme of overreaching is found within both of these allusions. In the first one, Phaethon solicits his father, Helios, to permit him to steer the chariot of the sun “ as proof of his divine origin” (Martinez and Durling 273).

Consequently, Phaethon loses the reins after the horses are frightened by the constellation Scorpion, similar in nature to the beast Geryon on which Dante rides, and streaks the sky with fire. In the latter allusion, Icarus flies too close to the sun melting the wax that bonds his wings together thus plummeting to his death. Both of these stories portray men who thought their capabilities were greater than what could be supported by their skill. Unlike the wretched individuals in these allusion, Dante knows his limits are bound by the will of God, and thus he will successfully finish his journey.

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Looking at another translation of this passage by the poet Ciardi shows that there are slight nuances in translated word choice that steer the passage.

The Durling translation uses the word “believes” compared to the Ciardi translation which uses “think”. The act of believing implies a more spiritual understanding rather than simply thinking which can be interpreted in a secular fashion. Dante believing there “was no greater fear” ties into his belief that God will carry him through. Likewise, Durling’s use of “abandoned” creates the image of Phaethon actively leaving his position because he did not have the willpower and capability to overcome fear. Dante, on the other hand, has the mindset and resources, albeit he is scared, to complete the divine task set before him. Ciardi’s use of “loose” is more passive and does not as strongly critique Phaethon’s loss of control.

One other word choice to note is Ciardi’s use of “the great scar of the Milky Way” compared to Durling’s use of “the sky was scorched”. The former illustrates the vastness of the aftermath which the latter does not achieve. The result of Phaethon’s mistakes stretches deep, injuring the cosmos; however, Dante’s journey will achieve the opposite affect by illuminating the world with the divine power. In terms of writing styles, the Durling translation focuses on intention and personal action while the Ciardi translation highlights the overall consequences. Both translations, however, create juxtaposition between the failed heroes mentioned, and the successful protagonist Dante is and will become.

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Translated by Robert Durling, Notes by Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez, Oxford University Press, 1996.

Ciardi, John. “ Full text of ‘ The inferno’”. Archive. org, https://archive.org/stream/inferno00dant_2/inferno00dant_2_djvu.txt, Accessed 22 September 2017.