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Volume 1 : Inferno Cantos I - XI

Canto I

Halfway through his life, DANTE THE PILGRIM wakes to find himself lost in the dark wood. Terrified at being alone in so dismal a valley, he wanders until he comes to a hill bathed in sunlight, and his fear begins to leave him. But when he starts to climb the hill his path is blocked by three fierce beasts: first a LEOPARD, then a LION, and finally a SHE-WOLF. They fill him with fear and drive him back down to the sunless wood. At that moment the figure of a man appears before him; it is the shade of VIRGIL, and the Pilgrim begs for help. Virgil tells him that he can not overcome the beasts which obstruct his path; they must remain until a GREYHOUND comes who will drive them back to Hell. Rather by another path will the Pilgrim reach the sunlight, and Virgil promises to guide him on that path through Hell and Purgatory, after which another spirit, more fit than Virgil, will lead him to Paradise. The Pilgrim begs Virgil to lead on, and the Guide starts ahead. The Pilgrim follows.

[View a Picture of Dante Lost in the Dark Wood](#)

[View a Picture of The Lion Confronting Dante](#)

Notes on Canto I

Early critics of Dante thought that the three beasts that block the Pilgrims path as symbolising three specific sins: lust, pride and avarice, but it may be that they represent the three major divisions of Hell. The spotted leopard represents Fraud and reigns over the Eighth and Ninth Circles, where the Fraudulent are punished. The Lion symbolises all forms of Violence, which

are punished in the Seventh Circle. The she-wolf represents the different types of Concupiscence or Incontinence, which are punished in Circles Two to Five. In any case the beasts must represent the three major categories of human sin, and they threaten Dante the Pilgrim, the poets symbol of mankind.

It is impossible to understand all of the allegory in the First Canto without having read the entire Comedy because Canto I is, in a sense, a miniature of the whole, and the themes that Dante introduces here will be the major themes of the entire work. Thus this canto is perhaps the most important of the entire work.

This Canto explains that Dante must choose another road because, in order to arrive at the Divine Light, it is necessary first to recognise the true nature of sin, renounce it, and do penance for it. Virgil in his role of Reason or Human Wisdom, is of course the means through which man may come to an understanding of the nature of sin. With Virgil-Reason as his guide, Dante the Pilgrim will come to see the penance imposed on the repentant sinners on the Mount of Purgatory.

The moral landscape of Canto I is tripartite, reflecting the structure of The Divine Comedy itself. The dark wood suggests the state of sin in which Dante the Pilgrim finds himself, and therefore is analogous to Hell, through which Dante will soon be travelling. The barren slope that Dante attempts to limb suggests the middle ground between evil and good, which men must pass through before they reach the sunlight of love and blessedness at the mountains peak. It is therefore analogous to Purgatory, the subject of the

second part of the Comedy. The blissful mountain bathed in the rays of the sun is the state of blessedness, toward which man constantly strives, described in the third canticle, the Paradise.

Canto II

But the Pilgrim begins to waver; he expresses to Virgil his misgivings about his ability to undertake the journey proposed by Virgil. His predecessors have been AENEAS and SAINT PAUL, and he feels unworthy to take his place in their company. But Virgil rebukes his cowardice, and relates the chain of events that led him to come to Dante. The VIRGIN MARY took pity on the Pilgrim in his despair and instructed SAINT LUCIA to aid him. The Saint turned to BEATRICE because of Dantes great love for her, and Beatrice in turn went down into Hell, into Limbo, and asked Virgil to guide her fiend until that time when she herself would become his guide. The Pilgrim takes heart at Virgils explanation and agrees to follow him.

Notes on Canto II

The second major movement of Canto II includes Virgils explanation of his coming to the Pilgrim, and the subsequent restoration of the latters courage. According to Virgil, the Virgin Mary, who traditionally signifies mercy and compassion in Christian thought, took pity on the Pilgrim in his predicament and set in motion the operation of Divine Grace. Saint Lucia, whose name means light, suggests the Illuminating Grace sent for by the Blessed Virgin; without Divine Grace the Pilgrim would be lost. Beatrice, whose name signifies blessedness or salvation, appears to Virgil in order to reveal to him the will of God, who is the ultimate bestower of Divine Grace. The three

heavenly ladies balance the three beats of Canto I; they represent mans salvation from sin through Grace, as the beasts represent mans sins. The Pilgrims journey then, actually starts in Paradise when the Blessed Virgin Mary takes pity on him. Thus the action of The Divine Comedy is in one sense a circle that begins in Heaven, as related here, and will ultimately end in Heaven with the Pilgrims vision of God in the closing canto.

Canto III

As the two poets enter the vestibule that leads to Hell itself, Dante sees the inscription above the gate:

I AM THE WAY INTO THE DOLEFUL CITY,

I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL GRIEF,

I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN RACE.

JUSTICE IT WAS THAT MOVED MY GREAT CREATOR;

DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE CREATED ME,

AND HIGHEST WISDOM JOINED WITH PRIMAL LOVE.

BEFORE ME NOTHING BUT ETERNAL THINGS

WERE MADE, AND I SHALL LAST ETERNALLY.

ABANDON EVERY HOPE, ALL YOU WHO ENTER.

Dante hears the screams of anguish from the damned souls. Rejected by God and not accepted by the powers of Hell, the first group of souls are

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nowhere, because of their cowardly refusal to make a choice in life. Their punishment is to follow a banner at a furious pace forever, and to be tormented by flies and hornets. The Pilgrim recognises several of these shades but mentions none by name. Next they come to the River Acheron, where they are greeted by the infernal boatman, CHARON. Among those doomed souls who are to be ferried across the river, Charon sees the living man and challenges him, but Virgil lets it be known that his companion must pass. Then across the landscape rushes a howling wind, which blasts the Pilgrim out of his senses, and he falls to the ground.

View a Picture of Charon Ferrying the Damned Souls Across the Acheron

Notes on Canto III

The words on the gate on Hell refer to Divine Omnipotence, Highest Wisdom and Primal Love. These three attributes represent, respectively the triune God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus the gate of Hell was created by the Trinity in an act of Justice.

The first tormented souls whom the Pilgrim meets are not in Hell itself but in the Vestibule leading to it. In a sense they are the most loathsome sinners of all because in life they performed neither meritorious nor reprehensible acts. Among them are the angels who refused to take sides when Lucifer revolted. Appropriately, these souls are all nameless (also note that Dante names none of the souls), for their lack of any kind of action has left them unworthy of mention. Heaven has damned them but Hell will not accept them.

In the Inferno divine retribution assumes the form of contrapasso, i. e. the just punishment of sin, effected by a process either resembling or contrasting with the sin itself. In this canto the contrapasso opposes the sin of neutrality, or inactivity: the souls who in their early lives had no banner, no leader to follow, now run forever after one.

Though we assume that the damned in the Inferno are naked (except for the Hypocrites), only occasionally is this pointed out. Canto III is one such case. It is perhaps important to note that as part of the punishment that the souls of all the damned are eager for their punishment to begin (they want to cross the river, they are eager). Those who were willing to sin on earth are in Hell damned with a willingness to go to their retribution.

Canto IV

Waking from his swoon, the Pilgrim is led by Virgil to the First Circle of Hell, known as Limbo, where the sad shades of the virtuous non-Christian shades dwell. The souls here, including Virgil, suffer no physical torment, but they must live, in desire, without hope of seeing God. Virgil tells about Christ's descent into Hell and His salvation of several Old Testament figures. The poets see a light glowing in the darkness, and as they proceed towards it, they are met by the four greatest (other than Virgil) pagan poets: HOMER, HORACE, OVID and LUCAN, who take the Pilgrim into their group. As they come closer to the light, the Pilgrim perceives a splendid castle, where the greatest non-Christian thinkers dwell together with other famous historical figures. Once within the castle, the Pilgrim sees amongst others, ELECTRA, AENEAS, CAESAR, SALADIN, ARISTOTLE, PLATO, ORPHEUS, CICERO,

AVICENNA and AVERROES. But soon they must leave; and the poets move from the radiance of the castle toward the fearful encompassing darkness.

[View a Picture of Dante and Virgil Meeting the Poets](#)

Notes on Canto IV

According to Christian doctrine no one outside the Church (i. e. without baptism the first Sacrament and thus the gateway to the faith) can be saved. The souls suspended in Limbo, the first circle of Hell, were on earth virtuous individuals who had no knowledge of Christ and His teachings (through no fault of their own since they preceded Him) or who, after His coming died unbaptized. Here physical torment is absent; these shades suffer only the mental anguish for now cognizant of the Christian God, they have to live in desire without any hope of beholding Him.

Dantes inability to read Greek denied him access to Homers works, with which he was acquainted only incidentally through Latin commentaries and redactions. Because his name was inseparably linked with the Trojan War, Homer is portrayed, in this canto as a sword-bearing poet, one who sang of arms and martial heroes. Therefore Canto IV gives direct evidence to the problems Dante faced with respect to studying certain poets and philosophers. Inability to access their works leads to

a sometimes, restricted view of some of the artists and a tendency to characterize them to a certain image. This is again demonstrated by Dantes description of Horace as a satirist. Here it is Dantes unfamiliarity with his

work Odes that leaves Horaces description without any mention of his role as a moralist.

Canto V

From Limbo Virgil leads his ward down to the threshold of the Second Circle of Hell, where for the first time he will see the damned in Hell being punished for their sins. There, barring their way, is the hideous figure of MINOS, the bestial judge of Dantes underworld; but after strong words from Virgil, the poets are allowed to pass into the dark space of this circle, where can be heard the wailing voices of the LUSTFUL. Their punishment consists in being forever whirled about in a dark, stormy wind. After seeing a thousand or more famous lovers including SEMIRAMIS, DIDO, HELEN, ACHILLES and PARIS the Pilgrim asks to speak to two figures he sees together. They are FRANCESCA DA RIMINI and her lover PAOLO, and the scene in which they appear is probably the most famous episode of the Inferno. At the end of the scene, the Pilgrim, who has been overcome by pity for the lovers, faints to the ground.

[View a Picture of Francesca and Paolo](#)

Notes on Canto V

Canto V is perhaps the most famous canto in Inferno. The meeting with Francesca da Rimini being particularly captivating. The full allegory of this encounter is not discussed here, instead I recommend that you visit the page devoted to them within this website.

The fifth canto can be divided into two equal parts with a transitional tercet. The first concerns Minos and his activities, the band of souls being punished in the wind for their lust, and certain shades of royal figures seen in a formation that resembles that of flying cranes. The Pilgrim has learned (evidently from Virgil) the function of Minos, and he will learn from him the type of sin being punished, the form of the punishment, and the names of many of those who are here. Chiefly, Virgil is trying to teach the Pilgrim three lessons in the first part of this canto, and each is concerned with the nature of lust - a heinous sin even if it is the least of those punished in Hell. The first lesson should come from the sight of Minos exercising his function: the horror of this sight should shock the Pilgrim into an awareness of the true nature of all sin. The second lesson should come from the royal figures guilty of lust. Semiramis, who legalized lust because of her own incestuous activity (and to whom Virgil devotes three tercets, more lines than anyone else in this group receives), should be a particularly significant lesson to the Pilgrim should come to despise the lustful because they blaspheme Divine Justice, which has placed them here, and thereby show themselves to be totally unrepentant.

But the Pilgrim learns nothing from Virgil's tutelage,, as we see in the transitional tercet. Instead, pity for these sinners seizes his senses and he is dazed. This tercet reveals the state of the Pilgrim's mind before meeting with Francesca da Rimini. Pity is precisely that side of the Pilgrim's character toward which Francesca will direct her carefully phrased speech. The Pilgrim has not learned his lesson, and in the direct encounter with one of the lustful (Francesca), he will fail his first test.

The contrapasso or punishment suggests that lust (the infernal storm) is pursued without the light of reason. Indeed all of the punishments issued in the Circles of Hell before the Gates of Dis are all issued without reason.

Canto VI

On recovering consciousness the Pilgrim finds himself with Virgil in the Third Circle, where the GLUTTONS are punished. These shades are mired in filthy muck and are eternally battered by cold and dirty hail, rain and snow. Soon the travellers come upon CERBERUS, the three headed doglike beast who guards the Gluttons, but Virgil pacifies him with fistfuls of slime and the two poets pass on. One of the shades recognises Dante the Pilgrim and hails him. It is CIACCO, a Florentine who before they leave makes a prophecy concerning the future of Florence. As the poets move away, the Pilgrim questions Virgil about the Last Judgement and other matters until the two arrive at the next circle.

Notes on Canto VI

The shades in this circle are the gluttons, and their punishment fits their sin. Gluttony, like all the sins of Incontinence, subjects reason to desire; in this case desire, without reason; they are sunk in slime, the image of their excess. The warm comfort their gluttony brought them in life here has become cold, dirty rain and hail.

In classical mythology Cerberus is a fierce three headed dog that guards the entrance to the Underworld, permitting admittance to all and escape to none. He is the prototype of the gluttons, with his three howling, voracious

throats that gulp down huge handfuls of muck. He has become Appetite and as such flays and mangles the spirits who reduced their lives to a satisfaction of appetite. With his three heads, he appears to be a pre-figuration of Lucifer and thus another infernal distortion of the Trinity.

The shades in Hell bear only the appearance of their corporeal forms, although they can be ripped and torn and otherwise suffer physical torture - just as here they are able to bear the Pilgrims weight. Yet themselves evidently are airy shapes without weight which will, after the Day of Judgement =, be possessed of their actual bodies once more.

The Pilgrim seems to have learned very little from his experiences in the previous canto. He feels pity again at the sight of Ciaccio and the circumstances of his punishment. Ciaccos prophecy reveals that the shades in Hell are able to see the future; they also know the past, but they know nothing of the present. This ability if the shades is brought up and explained again in Canto X.

Canto VII

At the boundary of the Fourth Circle the two travellers confront PLUTUS, the god of wealth, who collapses into emptiness at a word from Virgil.

Descending farther, the Pilgrim sees two groups of angry, shouting souls who clash huge rolling weights against each other with their chests. They are the PRODIGAL and the MISERLY. Their earthly concern with material goods prompts the Pilgrim to question Virgil about Fortune and her distribution of the worldly goods of men. After Virgils explanation they descend to the banks of the swamp like river Styx, which serves as the Fifth Circle. Mired in

the bog are the WRATHFUL, who constantly tear and mangle each other. Beneath the slime of the Styx, Virgil explains are the SLOTHFUL; the bubbles on the muddy surface indicate their presence beneath. The poets walk around the swampy area and soon come to the foot of a high tower.

View a Picture of the Wrathful

Notes on Canto VII

Virgil refers to the avaricious Plutus as a cursed wolf. This image recalls the She-Wolf of Canto I and lends more credence to the idea that the She-Wolf reigns over the circles of Incontinence.

The Miserly and the Prodigal, linked together as those who misused their wealth, suffer a joint punishment. Their material wealth has become a heavy weight that each group must shove against each other, since their attitudes toward wealth on earth were opposed to each other. Each of the two groups completes a semicircle as they roll their weights at each other; therefore together they complete an entire circle (but whether there are many small circles or one huge one around the whole ledge is not clear). The image of a broken circle is surely related to the concept of Fortune mentioned by Virgil. Just as the avaricious and the Prodigal believed they could outwit the turn of Fortunes wheel. by hoarding material goods or by wasting them on earth, so here the short lived mockery / of all the wealth that is in Fortunes keep is apparent, since part of the punishment is to complete the turn of the wheel (circle) of Fortune, against which they had rebelled during their short space of life on earth. Because their total concern with wealth left them

undistinguished in life they are unrecognizable here, and the Pilgrim can not pick out any one sinner in the teeming mass.

In answer to the Pilgrims questions about the distribution of wealth on earth, Virgils digresses to answer the Dante. Fortune is a major theme of medieval and Renaissance writers such as Boethius, Petrarch , Boccaccio, Chaucer and Machiavelli. Usually it was visualized as a female figure with a wheel, the revolutions of which symbolized the rise and fall of fortune in a mans life, but Dante deviates somewhat from the standard concept of Fortune by assigning to her the role of an angel. In Dantes world she is a minister of God who carries out the divine purpose among men; i. e. Dante has Christianized a pagan goddess.

The river Styx is the second of the rivers of Hell; Dante, following the Aeneid, refers to it here as a marsh or quagmire. Since we know from Canto XIV that all the river in Hell are joined, the spring mentioned in this canto must be the point where the Acheron issues from an underground source.

Category: Philosophy