

Canto XXXIV

Circle Nine: Cocytus¹ Compound Fraud

Round Four: Judecca

The Treacherous to Their Masters

The Center

Satan

“On march the banners of the King,” Virgil begins as the Poets face the last depth. He is quoting a medieval hymn, and to it he adds the distortion and perversion of all that lies about him. “On march the banners of the King—of Hell.”² And there before them, in an infernal parody of Godhead, they see Satan in the distance, his great wings beating like a windmill. It is their beating that is the source of the icy wind of Cocytus, the exhalation of all evil.

All about him in the ice are strewn the sinners of the last round, JUDECCA, named for Judas Iscariot.³ These are TREACHEROUS TO THEIR MASTERS. They lie completely sealed in the ice, twisted and distorted into every conceivable posture. It is impossible to speak to them, and the Poets move on to observe Satan.

He is fixed into the ice at the center to which flow all the rivers of guilt; and as he beats his great wings as if to escape, their icy wind only freezes him more surely into the polluted ice. In a grotesque parody of the Trinity, he has three faces, each a different color, and in each mouth he clamps a sinner whom he rips eternally with his teeth. JUDAS ISCARIOT is in the central mouth: BRUTUS and CASSIUS⁴ in the mouths on either side.

1. **Cocytus** (kō sī' tās): This Greek word means “wailing.”

2. **On march the banners of the King—of Hell:** The hymn was written in the sixth century by Venantius Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers. The original celebrates the Holy Cross, and is part of the service for Good Friday to be sung at the moment of uncovering the cross.

3. **Judas Iscariot** (is ker' ē ōt): The disciple who betrayed Jesus; see the Bible, Matthew 26:14, 48.

4. **BRUTUS and CASSIUS:** They took part in a plot against Julius Caesar.

Having seen all, the Poets now climb through the center, grappling hand over hand down the hairy flank of Satan himself—a last supremely symbolic action—and at last, when they have passed the center of all gravity, they emerge from Hell. A long climb from the earth's center to the Mount of Purgatory awaits them, and they push on without rest, ascending along the sides of the river Lethe, till they emerge once more to see the stars of Heaven, just before dawn on Easter Sunday.

“On march the banners of the King of Hell,” my Master said. “Toward us. Look straight ahead:

can you make him out at the core of the frozen shell?”

Like a whirling windmill seen afar at twilight,
5 or when a mist has risen from the ground—
just such an engine rose upon my sight

stirring up such a wild and bitter wind
I cowered for shelter at my Master's back,
there being no other windbreak I could find.

10 I stood now where the souls of the last class
(with fear my verses tell it) were covered wholly;
they shone below the ice like straws in glass.

Some lie stretched out; others are fixed in place
upright, some on their heads, some on their
soles;

15 another, like a bow, bends foot to face.

When we had gone so far across the ice
that it pleased my Guide to show me the foul
creature⁵
which once had worn the grace of Paradise,

he made me stop, and, stepping aside, he said:
20 “Now see the face of Dis!⁶ This is the place
where you must arm your soul against all
dread.”

Do not ask, Reader, how my blood ran cold
and my voice choked up with fear. I cannot
write it:
this is a terror that cannot be told.

25 I did not die, and yet I lost life’s breath:
imagine for yourself what I became,
deprived at once of both my life and death.

The Emperor of the Universe of Pain
juttet his upper chest above the ice;
30 and I am closer in size to the great mountain

the Titans⁷ make around the central pit,
than they to his arms. Now, starting from this
part,
imagine the whole that corresponds to it!

If he was once as beautiful as now
35 he is hideous, and still turned on his Maker,
well may he be the source of every woe!

With what a sense of awe I saw his head
towering above me! for it had three faces:⁸
one was in front, and it was fiery red;

40 the other two, as weirdly wonderful,
merged with it from the middle of each shoulder
to the point where all converged at the top of
the skull;

5. **the foul creature:** Satan.

6. **Dis** (dis): In greek mythology, the god of the lower world or the lower world itself. Here it stands for Satan.

7. **Titans:** Giant deities who were overthrown by Zeus and the Olympian gods of Greece.

8. **three faces:** Numerous interpretations of these three faces exist. What is essential to all explanation is that they be seen as perversions of the qualities of the Trinity.

the right was something between white and bile;
the left was about the color that one finds
45 on those who live along the banks of the Nile.

Under each head two wings rose terribly,
their span proportioned to so gross a bird:
I never saw such sails upon the sea.

They were not feathers—their texture and their
form
50 were like a bat’s wings—and he beat them so
that three winds blew from him in one great
storm:

it is these winds that freeze all Cocytus.
He wept from his six eyes, and down three chins
the tears ran mixed with bloody froth and pus.⁹

55 In every mouth he worked a broken sinner
between his rake-like teeth. Thus he kept three
in eternal pain at his eternal dinner.

For the one in front the biting seemed to play
no part at all compared to the ripping: at times
60 the whole skin of his back was flayed away.

“That soul that suffers most,” explained my
Guide,
“is Judas Iscariot, he who kicks his legs
on the fiery chin and has his head inside.

Of the other two, who have their heads thrust
forward,
65 the one who dangles down from the black face
is Brutus: note how he writhes without a word.

And there, with the huge and sinewy arms,¹⁰ is the
soul
of Cassius,—But the night is coming on¹¹
and we must go, for we have seen the whole.”

9. **bloody froth and pus:** the gore of the sinners he chews, which is mixed with his saliva.

10. **huge and sinewy arms:** The Cassius who betrayed Caesar was more generally described in terms of Shakespeare’s “lean and hungry look.” Another Cassius is described by Cicero (*Catiline* III) as huge and sinewy. Dante probably confused the two.

11. **the night is coming on:** It is now Saturday evening.



JUDECCA—LUCIFER
Gustave Doré

70 Then, as he bade, I clasped his neck, and he,
watching for a moment when the wings
were opened wide, reached over dexterously¹²

and seized the shaggy coat of the king demon;
then grappling matted hair and frozen crusts
75 from one tuft to another, clambered down.

When we had reached the joint where the great
thigh
merges into the swelling of the haunch,
my Guide and Master, straining terribly,

turned his head to where his feet had been
80 and began to grip the hair as if he were climbing,¹³
so that I thought we moved toward Hell again.

12. **dexterously:** Skilfully.

13. **as if he were climbing:** They have passed the center of gravity and so must turn around and start climbing.

“Hold fast!” my Guide said, and his breath came
shrill¹⁴
with labor and exhaustion. “There is no way
but by such stairs to rise above such evil.”

85 At last he climbed out through an opening
in the central rock, and he seated me on the rim;
then joined me with a nimble backward spring.

I looked up, thinking to see Lucifer
as I had left him, and I saw instead
90 his legs projecting high into the air.

Now let all those whose dull minds are still vexed
by failure to understand what point it was
I had passed through, judge if I was perplexed.

14. **his breath came shrill:** In Canto XXIII, 85, the fact that Dante breathes indicates to the Hypocrites that he is alive. Virgil's breathing is certainly a contradiction.

“Get up. Up on your feet,” my Master said.
95 “The sun already mounts to middle tierce,¹⁵
and a long road and hard climbing lie ahead.”

It was no hall of state we had found there,
but a natural animal pit hollowed from rock
with a broken floor and a close and sunless air.

100 “Before I tear myself from the Abyss,”
I said when I had risen, “O my Master,
explain to me my error in all this:

where is the ice? and Lucifer—how has he
been turned from top to bottom: and how can
the sun

105 have gone from night to day so suddenly?”

And he to me: “You imagine you are still
on the other side of the center where I grasped
the shaggy flank of the Great Worm of Evil

which bores through the world—you *were* while I
climbed down,

110 but I turned myself about, you passed
the point to which all gravities are drawn.

You are under the other hemisphere where you
stand;
the sky above us is the half opposed
to that which canopies the great dry land.

115 Under the midpoint of that other sky
the Man¹⁶ who was born sinless and who lived
beyond all blemish, came to suffer and die.

You have your feet upon a little sphere
which forms the other face of the Judecca.

120 There it is evening when it is morning here.

15. middle tierce: According to the church’s division of the day for prayer, tierce is the period from about six to nine A.M. Middle tierce, therefore, is seven-thirty. In going through the center point, they have gone from night to day. They have moved ahead twelve hours.

16. the Man: Jesus, who suffered and died in Jerusalem, which was thought to be the middle of the earth.

And this gross Fiend and Image of all Evil
who made a stairway for us with his hide
is pinched and prisoned in the ice-pack still.

125 On this side he plunged down from heaven’s height,
and the land that spread here once hid in the sea
and fled North to our hemisphere for fright,¹⁷

And it may be that moved by that same fear,
the one peak¹⁸ that still rises on this side
fled upward leaving this great cavern¹⁹ here.”

130 Down there, beginning at the further bound
of Beelzebub’s²⁰ dim tomb, there is a space
not known by sight, but only by sound

of a little stream²¹ descending through the hollow
it has eroded from the massive stone
135 in its endlessly entwining lazy flow.”

My Guide and I crossed over and began
to mount that little known and lightless road
to ascend into the shining world again.

140 He first, I second, without thought of rest
we climbed the dark until we reached the point
where a round opening brought in sight the blest

and beauteous shining of the Heavenly cars.
And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.²²

17. fled North . . . for fright: Dante believed that the Northern hemisphere was mostly land and the Southern hemisphere water. Here he explains the reason for this state of affairs.

18. the one peak: The Mount of Purgatory.

19. this great cavern: The natural animal pit of line 98. It is also “Beelzebub’s dim tomb,” line 131.

20. Beelzebub’s (bē el’ zə bubz): Beelzebub, which in Hebrew means “god of flies,” was another name for Satan.

21. a little stream: Lethe (lē’ thē). In classical mythology, the river of forgetfulness, from which souls drank before being born. In Dante’s symbolism it flows down from Purgatory, where it has washed away the memory of sin from the souls who are undergoing purification. That memory it delivers to Hell, which draws all sin to itself.

22. Stars: As part of his total symbolism, Dante ends each of the three divisions of the *Divine Comedy* with this word. Every conclusion of the upward soul is toward the stars, God’s shining symbols of hope and virtue. It is just before dawn of Easter Sunday that the Poets emerge—a further symbolism.

Reader's Response *If you were Dante, what thoughts would you have upon viewing Satan?*

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Interpreting

1. Why are the figures in Satan's mouth considered traitors?
2. Why does Dante choose to represent the most terrible part of Hell as a frozen lake?
3. Why does Virgil have to carry Dante out of Hell by climbing over Satan?
4. Dante himself called punishment "the sword of heaven." (a) First explain the meaning of this statement. (b) Then tell how it applies to Canto XXXIV.
5. What does Dante learn from this experience?

Applying

6. What elements in Dante's depiction of the pit of Hell are designed to strike terror in the hearts of readers?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Personification

Satan is the quintessential representation of evil. In the Bible he is represented as a slithering serpent, hissing his treachery to Eve. In Dante's description of Satan, he is the "Emperor of the Universe of Pain." However, he is rendered motionless in the ice. His kingdom and therefore his power is thus limited.

1. Which details make Satan particularly repulsive?
2. In what way does Dante's description of Satan indicate that evil is not necessarily frightening for the Godly human being?

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Avoiding "Translationese"

The translator is confronted with many problems when he or she begins to transfer a literary work from one language to another. One of these problems is how to avoid "translationese"; or how to make a translation sound natural and appeal to a particular audience, while at the same time being faithful to the meaning of the original language.

This problem is heightened when the text is in verse, as it is in the *Divine Comedy*. The translator must decide whether to use prose or poetry. If the translator uses verse, then will he or she use a poetic form that is familiar to the intended audience? If there is a gap between what the audience expects and what the translator offers, it is usually because the style of the translation is not appropriate for its public.

1. Imagine that you are John Ciardi preparing your translation of the *Inferno*. Why did you decide to translate it using verse instead of prose?
2. Imagine that you are translating the work. What decisions would you make that are different from Ciardi's?

THINKING AND WRITING

Preparing Translations

Reread these lines from the third canto:

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW.

SACRED JUSTICE MOVED MY ARCHITECT.
I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE,
PRIMORDIAL LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLECT.

ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND.
ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.

Paraphrase Ciardi's translation of Dante. The simplest tool at your disposal is a dictionary of synonyms. For example, *woe* could be substituted by *sorrow*, *pain*, or *tragedy*. *Forsaken* could be replaced by the words *abandoned*, *forgotten*, or *forlorn*. Try to find equivalent words for every important noun, verb, or adjective in this passage. Pick out the most striking or appropriate synonyms and then put them together to create your own version of the inscription. As you revise your work, see if a different ordering of the material might be more effective or poetic. Do you think your version conveys Dante's meaning well? Is it easy to read and understand?

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

from the Inferno, Canto XXXIV

Commentary

Personification. **Personification** is the portrayal of a concept by granting it a human identity. The Greeks and Romans personified phenomena by creating gods that evoked aspects of nature. Poseidon personified the sea and Apollo the sun.

Dante uses both historical and mythological figures to represent the various sins. He goes to great lengths to fashion them an appropriate punishment. In fact, it is the punishment itself that makes the reader aware of the sins that these people have committed. A good example would be Paolo and Francesca. As Dante discovers, they are the personification of lust. They are swept around this circle of hell just as they were swept away by their passions in life. This idea of appropriate punishment is linked to personification. Together, sin, its personification, and punishment create an allegorical system.

Of course, Satan is the ultimate personification of evil. In him, evil is depicted as a hideous three-faced monster. He is frozen into the very bottom of Hell, isolated as far as possible from God and humanity, a suitable punishment for the cold-hearted betrayal of the ultimate good.

Writing

Films often personify evil. They may represent evil as a demonic car or as a plant. Create your own personification of evil.

Commentary

This is the end of an odyssey into Hell. But for Dante, this is merely the first of three stages of his pilgrimage toward salvation. In the cantos you have read, you have seen how Dante creates a transition from one circle of hell to another. Dante succeeds by making constant use of bridges, river crossings, and other images of travel. When he is confronted with an obstacle, Dante conveniently faints, allowing Virgil or his own narrative to carry him from one circle to another.

At the end of the *Inferno*, Dante must prepare for the continuation of his voyage in yet another realm. Satan is used as a bridge over which Virgil and Dante climb into the next world. Virgil must carry the weakened Dante over the obstacle, as he did many times before in the *Inferno*. What is new here is the contrast that Dante uses to lead his reader to a new world of hope and salvation. He contrasts the dark world of Hell with the dazzling light of Purgatory. And so he moves from the "lightless" to the "shining" world. This image summarizes Dante's journey.