

Notes on Dante's Fourfold Analysis

Lower Hell

Canto XXVI Circle 8, Bolgia 8

Evil Counselors Ulysses and Diomedes

Spiritual: Ciardi says in his introduction to Canto XXVI that Dante is highly critical of the Evil Counselors, whom he sees as “all men of gift who abused their genius, perverting it to wiles and stratagems. Seeing them in Hell [Dante] know his must be another road: his way shall not be by deception” (Ciardi 220). Their punishment is spiritual in its symbolism. “As they stole from God in their lives and worked by hidden ways, so are they stolen from sight and hidden in the great flames which are their own guilty consciences...as they sinned by glibness of tongue, so are the flames made into a fiery travesty of tongues” (Ciardi 220). See text, line 19-24.

Canto XXVII Circle 8, Bolgia 8

Evil Counselors Count Guido

Literal/Historical: Lines 64-108. He gave Pope Boniface VIII advice about how to trap his enemies, such as the Collona, who were lured by promises with loopholes out of their secure castle at Penestrino, which was then destroyed.

Political: Guido da Montefeltro, hearing Dante speak Italian (Lombard), asks about Romagna. In lines 35-54, Dante answers his question about war saying, “none flared openly when I left just now. Ravenna's fortunes stand as they have stood these many years,” while explaining the political issues as forces including Malatesta (in Verrucchio), Guido Vecchio da Polenta (Ravenna), Maginardo de' Pagani (ruler of Faenza) and Sinibaldo degli Ordelaffi (in Forli).

Moral/Psychological: “If I believed that my reply were made to one who could ever climb to the world again, this flame would shake no more. But since no shade ever returned—if what I am told is true—/ from this blind world into the living light, without fear of dishonor I answer you.” As he tells his story, he reveals that he resisted Pope Boniface VIII's request for advice in advancing his corrupt war on other Christians, until the Pope offered him absolution...but he never repented. So, when he died, Guido went to hell. He was a logician, and the Black Angel's comment in lines 111-117 makes sense—so Count Guido da Montefeltro went to hell, and he is still just as conniving as he tells his “confession” to Dante, only because, once again erroneously, he believes Dante cannot return to the earth to tell anyone else. This shows his **spiritual blindness**; he is clever, but unable to illuminate his sophistry (arguing the letter of the law with false intent, trying to subvert its spirit) with mere reason.

Canto XXVIII Circle 8, Bolgia 9

Sowers of Religious Discord Mahomet, Ali (his son-in-law), Fra Dolcino

Literal/Historical seems dominant in that Mahomet is literally cut in half vertically, in a disgracefully grotesque symbolic retribution. Dante sees Mahomet as responsible for the schism between Christianity and Islam. His own misunderstanding of Islam shows all too clearly here. Dante includes Ali, who is seen as less responsible. It is interesting that Mahomet sends a warning to Fra Dolcino. (Friar who started a community of goods and women, starved out and then burned at the stake as a heretic).

Sowers of Political Discord Pier da Medicina, Curio, Mosca dei Lamberti

Pier da Medicina warns Guido and Angiolello that they will be “thrown from their ships into the sea/and drown in the raging tides near La Cattolica/ to satisfy a tyrant’s treachery” (lines 79-81). He and the other two seem to want to be remembered.

Sower of Discord among Kinsmen Bertrand de Born

Literal/Historical: Counsellor Young King Henry to overthrow his father, Henry II, so his head is severed from his body, in what even he sees as just retribution, saying “and since I parted those who should be one/in duty and in love, I bear my brain/ divided from its source within this trunk/ and walk here where my evil turns to pain/ an eye for an eye for all eternity: thus is the law of Hell observed in me” (138-143).

Canto XXIX Circle 8, Bolgia 10

The Falsifiers: Class one, Alchemists, Falsifiers of Things

Griffolino D’Arrezzo, Capocchio

Canto XXX: Circle 8, Bolgia 10

Class Two, Evil Impersonators: Falsifiers of Persons

Gianni Schicchi, Myrrha

Literal: Schicchi is an incubus, a maddened rabid mangler of other damned souls such as Capocchio, whose neck he “sank his tusks so savagely into” (l. 28-30). Myrrha, who “loved her father with more than rightful love./ She falsified another’s form and came/disguised to sin with him...” also runs with Schicchi, who “lay under disguise in Buoso Donati’s death bed (impersonating the dead man) and dictated/a spurious testament to the notaries...” a will that favored Donati’s son Simone, but which also included some bequests for Schicchi, including a famous mare (l.43-45).

Class Three, Counterfeiters: Falsifiers of Money

Master Adam of Brescia, who thirsts eternally, stamped “florins with three carats of alloy” under the orders of the Counts Guidi of Romena, creating a currency crisis in Northern Italy. (l. 89-90) The Florentines burned him at the stake in 1281.

Class Four, False Witnesses: Falsifiers of Words

Potiphar’s Wife “charged young Joseph falsely” (Genesis 34:6-23), and Sinon the Greek who stayed with the Trojan Horse to lie to the Trojans that it was a sacrifice that they should bring within the walls of the city.

Moral/Psychological: Master Adam Potiphar’s wife and Sinon fall into “petty wrangling and upbraiding” which Virgil’s rebukes to Dante for watching, saying that “The wish to hear such baseness is degrading.”

Canto XXXI: The Central Pit of Malebolge

The Giants: Nimrod, Ephialtes and Briareus, Tityos and Typhon, and Antaeus (son of the earth, he grows stronger each time he touches it. He did not join in the revolt against the gods, so he is unchained.)

Giants are sons of earth, embodiments of elemental forces unbalanced by love, desire without restraint, and without acknowledgement of moral and theological law.

the giants, saying “for where the instrument of intelligence/ is added to brute power and evil will,/ mankind is powerless in its own defense (lines 54-57)

Literal /Historical-Mythical: Nimrod (First King of Babylon who built the Tower of Babel) “through whose evil mankind no longer speaks a common tongue” (77-78). He is punished by his own tongue being unable to speak sensibly and by the confusion of his own understanding. “Augustine had shown Nimrod as the giant who instigated the building of the tower of Babel, [and] Dante accepts this....[In his Latin work, *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante] “argues that language was given to man alone, because only to him—not to angels or animals—it was necessary.”(Pesaresi 409).

Moral/Psychological: The Giants preview Freud’s theory of the id, the uncontrolled, wild and crazy desire within. What the giants want is to be free. They are the guardians of Cocytus, the depth below them. It is interesting that Dante is having trouble seeing them clearly. Pesaresi says “The visual delusions of Dante the pilgrim, who, at the embankment past the tenth bolgia, mistakes the giants for towers add a sinister but not fearsome ambivalence to the whole episode. The delusory image of the towers lingers as a [motif] throughout the canto...The pilgrim’s grasp of reality is shaken....Misconception and misrepresentation seem to be the fate of one who is about to confront the utmost horror just before he escapes from it....The monsters he encounters *are*, in a certain sense, towers. They are as lifeless and harmless as immobile shadows....Dante demythologizes the giants to tame them. Huge, humanlike beings, they are devoid of all the fabulous attributes of mythical tradition. Dante is thus preparing a background for Lucifer, the rebel par excellence, who defied not the pagan deities but the true God and nevertheless appears more grotesque and undignified than the giants themselves, outstripped as he is even of the grim majesty of a tower seen in murky air”(Pesaresi 407).

Canto XXXII: Circle 9 Cocytus Compound Fraud

Round One: Caina The Treacherous to Kin

Alessandro and Napoleone degli Alberti, Camicion de’ Pazzi

Literal: The setting is a huge frozen lake, Cocytus, the fourth and last great water of Hell. This water is made of human tears and compassion, frozen. The ice is divided into four concentric rings of the damned within the ice; their treacheries are a denial of human love and human warmth, even more profound in those who are at the center, those who denied God’s love. Those in Caina were “treacherous against blood ties, against those to whom they were bound by special ties” (Ciardi 266). “Cocytus, Hell’s ninth and final circle, contains the constitutive principle of unredeemed human society: violent, self-destructive betrayal of family, community, guests, and benefactors” (Ahern 413).

Historical:“Alessandro and Napoleone degli Alberti murdered each other in a dispute over their patrimony. Here, paralyzed from the neck down in ice, they struggle in a travesty of a lovers’ embrace. Freezing tear shut their lips together in eternal silence...The most common form of conflict in mythology is struggle between brothers usually ending in fratricide. Their near identity jeopardizes family –based social order...In the struggle over their inheritance, the moral distinctions between brothers vanish. Each is aggressor and victim as they merge into a monstrous, bipartite unity” (Ahern 417). Dante says their eyelids were shut “tighter than any clamp grips wood to

wood./ and mad with pain, they fell to butting heads/ like billy-goats in a sudden savage mood.” (lines 40-51).

(Moral/Psychological) In lines 9-12, Dante calls on the muses, “those Ladies of the Heavenly Spring who helped Amphion wall Thebes” by charming blocks of stone out of Mount Cithareon, to “assist my verse,/ that the word may be the mirror of the thing. In Italian, the words of this canto are crude, hoarse and harsh-sounding. Ahern says that “the human mouth, whether Amphion’s, the narrator’s, the sinners’ or the reader’s, is the true locus of this cantos. Hell itself is a mouth, “this savage maw” (XXIV, 123), a place where it is hard to speak. The mouth reverts to cannibalism, the condition from which Amphion’s potent civilizing song saved society.” The character named “mouth” or Bocca in Antenora and the cannibal Ugolino both echo this reference to the mouth.” (Ahern 416). In the end of the canto, Bocca refers to Ugolino, where “one head made a helmet for the other./ As a famished man chews crusts—so the once sinner/sank his teeth into the other’s nape/ at the base of the skull, gnawing his loathsome dinner” (lines 126-129), a grotesque reference to the mouth by the man whose name means mouth. (Ciardi doesn’t think that Ugolino was a cannibal, but many critics do. In any case, Ugolino eventually starved to death, as had his sons and grandsons). “Speech, the activity of the mouth that creates community, yields to cannibalism, the activity of the mouth that destroys community....At the end of Hell Satan uses his three mouths not for speech but to devour three traitors” (Ahern 420).

Back to the allusion to Amphion. “By extension, then, the narrator is the anti-Amphion. Amphion built Thebes, a “splendid absolute beginning of cultural order” (Ahern 416). But the narrator, “that the word may be the mirror of the thing” does not use Amphion’s sweet song. Rather, he uses “a more violent language, a harsher and hoarser language” (Ahern). As Dante responds with more violent language to the violence of Cocytus, so he “responds with violence to the violence of the damned. His own behavior, both as pilgrim and as narrator, imitates the violent behavior he condemns.

Political Camicion de’ Pazzi informs on all of them, comparing the Alberti brothers to “a squab more fit for the aspic” (l. 60) “suggesting that they are potential victims, not aggressors, something to be eaten instead of ferocious eaters. He names Mordred, slain by his uncle (or incestuous father...) King Arthur. The spear and sunlight penetrate Mordred’s body at the same time. The human body is an emblem of the body politic.” (Ahern 418). Consider: Ciardi tells us in the notes to Canto XXXII that the two Alberti brothers were constantly feuding, and that Alessandro was a Guelph and Napoleone was a Ghibelline (Ciardi 272).

It is almost impossible for Dante to divorce himself from the values and codes of the family-based, vendetta-torn world of 14th century urban Italy (Herlihy; Martines, Brucker 62-74, 97-130) (qtd. in Ahern). The longstanding feud of his own clan, the Alighieri, with the Sacchetti was not settled until two decades after his death. Some of the traitors we” see in Caina are brothers or close relatives, “and the pilgrim will reveal himself as their “brother” in violence (Ahern 417). Dante is affected by the violence around him, grabbing Bocca’s hair, kicking him in the face

As Camicion informs on the traitors against their own families and cities, he is concerned with status. “The traitors are rivals in everything, even betrayal. This speech is part of the radical reevaluation of contemporary politics that began when the pilgrim learned

from Ciaccio that the leaders he most admired were among the blackest souls in Hell” (418). The implication here is that Dante reconsidered his violent and political passions

Round Two: Antenora The Treacherous to Country

Bocca degli Abbati

Literal/Historical (Mythical) The circle of traitor to community or country is named for Antenor, who betrayed Troy to the Greeks. (Ahern 420). **Political:** “Cocytus, a frozen river of human tears and compassion, is a mirror of contemporary Italy. Many Italian cities figure in these cantos: Monterelegioni, Faenza, Bologna, Rome, Siena Genoa, Pisa and Florence” (Ahern 417).

Canto XXXIII: Circle 9 Cocytus Compound Fraud

Round Two: Antenora The Treacherous to Country

Ugolino is especially horrifying because he narrates his own tale. For Dante, this is especially horrid because Ugolino has been reduced to a beast. There are many references to animals in these cantos, which suggests further the degradation of man to beast. These final conversations with the souls of the damned are followed by an invective against municipalities (**Political**) This is not satiric or sarcastic, as it was earlier. It is an indictment of the cities that used such a barbarous punishment in the Tower of Hunger.

Round Three: Ptolomea The Treacherous to Guests and Hosts

Literal: Although Dante uses the Ptolemaic system for “his representation of the heavens, he locates his Hell and Purgatory in the universe and in time according to a forceful combination of physical science and religious history. In this construction, God and history determine the extreme moment of sin and redemption. [Dante] conceived the idea that Hell formed following the fall of Lucifer, when the infernal chasm opened right below the point where Christ was crucified on Golgotha. On the same axis, at the opposite pole, the Mount of Purgatory arose, organized from the gigantic mass of earth displaced by Lucifer’s body, with the Earthly Paradise of Adam and Eve at its summit” (Remo Ceserani 432). He accounts for the separation of land and sea, gives a “natural” cause for the emergence of land in the southern hemisphere as well as a theological one. (433).

Still, Dante’s description of Satan seems an anticlimax. One critic suggests that this is deliberate. According to Massimo Mandolini Pesaresi, in Canto XXXI, the description of the Giants prepares the reader for Ptolomea and the description of Satan. The Giants, “frightening and comic, huge and stupid, deafening and speechless...still preserve a [sort of] undiminished... grandeur. They are impotent and brutish creatures; their arcane, towering shadows in the misty plain haunt [the reader’s] memory.” When Dante first saw the Giants he thought they were towers. There is dim twilight and silence; Dante is confused; the whole scene is ambiguous, fantastic and melancholy. The Giants’ ambivalence mirror the ambivalence of evil as depicted in the last cantos.

Pesaresi, writes “Evil, if we are to overcome it, must be deprived of its allure and appear devoid of any seductive or majestic power: Lucifer must therefore become a ludicrous monster, which seems to come out of a child’s nightmare of hairy and horned beasts. And yet such evil can damn our souls for ever. Dante’s insight into the nature of sin (which we call weakness or error, or confusion) bears on this fundamental duplicity” (Pesaresi 407).

Some critics suggest that Dante's Satan is a parody of god, a "king of Hell [that is] an infernal parody of the king of Heaven" (Ceserani 434). One has the "estrangement" or "perspective of incongruity" as the confused Dante tries literally to figure out which way is up. "Lucifer has the same physical and moral characteristics as the giants—arrogance, violence, deformity—qualities that make him seem inhuman. Peter Dronke has pointed out that Lucifer is immersed more deeply in ice than the giants are in their pit, that he is larger than they are, and that his supreme rebellion against God overgoes the rebellion of the pagan giants against the divine kingdom of Jupiter. His end is the same as theirs, however. All receive the punishment of perpetual immobility. Immense silence surrounds Lucifer, fixed in ice. The absence of sound seems to extend to everything, even to the wind, to the dripping tears of Lucifer, to his jaws forever grinding the three traitors, and to the reactions of Dante, so that we find all the more striking...the opening verses sung by Virgil...If God is the World, Lucifer is nonspeech, the non-Word. ...The immutability of Lucifer, that is, his obstinacy in evil and error, finds its poetic expression in ice and infinite silence" (Ceserani 436). "That Lucifer is half within the ice and half without suggests a symbolic personification of passion that dulls the intellect; his bat wings represent brute force devoid of intelligence while his tears mixed with slaver express the impotent anger of the defeated prince. The three faces of different colors are thought to have meanings as well. The ruddy face embodies hatred or anger, the pallid one impotence, and the black one ignorance" (Ceserani 437). The triple aspects of Lucifer suggest an inversion of the holy trinity, as to the three divisions of the *Inferno*, as well as the three canticles (*Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso*) of the *Commedia*. This last canto can also be divided into three parts: "the first part is dominated by the monstrous figure of Lucifer", the second part sees "Lucifer as the gravitational center of the world, a great power, the incarnation of ineradicable evil"; and his frozen shadow lingers menacingly in the mind of the two poets" in the third part, "as they struggle upward toward the stars" (Ceserani 438).