

Inferno: Thieves

Canto XXIV

Literal/Historical: “Theft, in contrast to violent robbery, is based on deceptive action that intentionally misleads the victim; in that sense, it is the essence of fraud, which is why the souls of this section (and in no other in the ten *bolge* of the eighth circle) recall Geryon, the monster of fraud. Geryon has a human face with the body of a serpent; the souls in this *bolgia* alternate between the bodies of men and the bodies of serpents. Geryon is the static symbol of deception; the souls and serpents are its dynamic representation (Ferrante 317).

Moral/Psychological: “Deception involves the alternation between the posture that inspires confidence and the act that harms, between the surface appearance and the hidden purpose. By presenting the two in continual flux, Dante reveals the reality of fraud, and in this sense goes beyond the metamorphoses of his sources that, once accomplished, remain fixed in the new condition. His thieves can never attain a state of rest, of permanent identity, either as individuals or as **political** entities. Their cities, Pistoia and Florence, thieves on a greater scale, also undergo continual flux, destruction and renewal to no purpose. Of course, change, flux, is natural, and even in nature it can be either violent, as in the storms of the simile that ends the canto, or peaceful, as in the change of seasons that opens it. **(Spiritual)** But nature’s change is always moving toward a stable goal, following the providential plan to the end of time, when eternal life with conquer death and change in nature. The single but permanent rebirth in human existence, the resurrection of the body, which conquers time and death, is implied by the description of the phoenix, periodically reborn out of its own remains, a traditional symbol of the resurrection” (Ferrante 317).

“Fame is another means of overcoming time and death, not so absolute as resurrection but effective in human terms....Dante contracts the recurring and futile change of the souls and their cities both with the permanence of eternal life and with the enduring nature of literary fame. Virgil encourages Dante with the reminder that fame can only be won by continual striving, which in this canto is translated into the difficult climb up the moat, a foreshadowing of later and long climbs, in Purgatory and in life (XXIV:55). The climb is not direct or easy—in Hell it is possible only because it is ultimately leading downward—but Dante must descend though Hell in order to reach full knowledge of evil before he can begin to climb the mountain of Purgatory or rise through heaven, the ascent that will win him fame through poetry....As the poet’s labor wins true fame and conquers death, so the thief’s brings shame and robs him of eternal life; both make others’ possessions their own, but the poet gives them new life and enhances their value for others” (Ferrante 317-318).

More Political: “The image of a man covered by hostile serpents recalls Laocoon as Virgil describes him in the *Aeneid*. He has warned the Trojans against the wooden horse (the originator of which will appear in the next *bolgia* as a counselor of fraud) and the deceptions of the Greeks, even bearing gifts, but is interrupted by the appearance of a particularly deceptive Greek, Sinon, who comes on the scene with his hands bound behind him like the thieves in Canto XXIV. Sinon tells his tale of Greek treachery (the entire episode of the *Aeneid* is filled with words for deception, as Canto XXIV is),

presenting himself as the innocent victim, swearing falsely by the divine powers who know truth, but the Trojans finally believe him because Laocoon and his sons are attacked and killed by a pair of serpents, which is taken as a corroborating omen. Troy, the future Rome, is destroyed by the stratagem of the arch-counselor of fraud, Ulysses, with the help of the innocent-appearing liar, Sinon, and the evil agency of the serpents, the same combination of human and serpent features that operates to deceive in the symbolic monster of fraud, Geryon, and in the thieves of this section” (Ferrante 323-324).

Alighieri, Dante. *The Inferno*. Trans. John Ciardi. New York: Mentor/Penguin, 1982.

Ciardi, John, ed. and trans. *The Inferno*. By Dante Alighieri. New York: Mentor/Penguin, 1982.

Ferrante, Joan M. “Canto XXIV: Thieves and Metamorphoses.” *Lectura Dantis: Inferno, A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*. Ed. Allen Mandelbaum and others. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1998. (316).