

rich and worldly church, has shown him the reason for this prohibition. (Cf. *Inf.* xix. 88-117; and also *De Mon.* III. xiii, last paragraph.)

l. 133-40: *who's this sample ... still displays*: since Marco has not mentioned Gerard's family name, Dante asks for more precision. Marco thinks Dante must be joking: everybody in Tuscany surely knows "the Good Gerard" without further definition; but if not, the family name has been made notorious by Gerard's daughter Gaia, a lady, apparently of more beauty than virtue, who still bears that name, having married another member of the da Cammino family.

l. 143: *the angel's near*: the brightness of the approaching Angel indicates that they are nearing the end of the smoke-cloud, from which Marco must not emerge until his purgation is complete.

Canto XVII



THE STORY. *ON* issuing from the Smoke-cloud, Dante sees in a vision examples of the sin of Wrath. The Angel of the Cornice meets the Poets, erases the third P from Dante's forehead, and, having pronounced the Benediction, directs them to the next stairway. Night falls as they reach the top step, and, since the Law of the Mountain prevents them from ascending further, Virgil beguiles the time by explaining the arrangement of the Cornices and the nature of the sins purged on each of them.

Remember, Reader, if you've ever been ¹
Caught in the mountains when a mist came on
Through which you peered as moles peer through the skin,

How, when the thick damp vapours have begun ⁴
To lift, there steals upon you, faintly winking
Through thin-drawn veils, the pale disc of the sun;

And little trouble then you'll have in thinking ⁷
Just how things looked to me when first I spied
The sun again, which now was near to sinking.

Thus with my leader, stride for trusty stride, ¹⁰
Forth from such clouds I came to the bright ray,
Though from the shore below all light had died.

O fantasy, that reav'st us off away ¹³
So from ourselves that we remain distraught,
Deaf though a thousand trumpets round us bray,

What moves thee when the senses show thee naught? 16
Light moves thee, formed in Heaven, by will maybe
Of Him who sends it down, or else self-wrought

The impress of her impious cruelty 19
Who turned into the bird that most doth dote
On song, was shown me in a fantasy,

Which seized my mind and caged it so remote 22
Within itself that outside things passed by,
And it received them not and took no note.

And then a man hanged on a gallows high 25
Came to me in this visionary mood,
And even in death his look was fierce and high;

There great Ahasuerus, there the good 28
Esther his queen, there he that was in word
And deed most true, just Mordecai stood.

And when the image of its own accord 31
Burst as a bubble formed within a stream
Bursts on the water's surface, afterward

A girl rose wailing up into my dream 34
Who cried: "Why didst thou let wrath lay thee low,
Most royal lady? Better didst thou deem

To slay thyself than lose Lavinia-lo! 37
Now hast thou lost me; I am she, who cries,
Mother, for thee and for none else cries so."

As, when new light smites sudden on closed eyes, 40
Sleep breaks and flutters broken a brief spell
Before it wholly drops away and dies,

So my imaginations broke and fell 43
Soon as a brilliance smote mine eyes, which shined
Beyond all wont of ours and nonpareil

Where had I got to? I looked round to find; 46
But then a voice which said: "Here is the place
Where one ascends," drove all else from my mind

And filled me with a mighty eagerness 49
To see the speaker, such as knows no rest
Till it beholds its object face to face;

But as sight shrinks from the sun's fiery vest 52
That shrouds his form in its excessive bright,
So here my powers shrank fainting and oppressed.

"This is a spirit of God that toward the height 55
Directs us on our way, and this he does
Unasked, and he goes veiled in his own light.

As a man treats himself, so he treats us; 58
Who waits the asking when he sees the need,
In his mean heart goes half-way to refuse.

Let's move our feet to follow this good lead, 61
And ere night falls climb briskly as we can,
Else, till the sun return, we'll make no speed."

Thus far my leader; wherefore, as one man, ⁶⁴
We hastened toward the stair; and when my tread
Touched the first step where the ascent began

I felt as 'twere a wing-beat, felt my head ⁶⁷
Fanned, and "Beati", then, "*pacifici*,
Who know not evil wrath," I heard it said.

Soon, overhead, went slanting up so high ⁷⁰
Those last bright beams whereon night follows fast
That on all sides the stars peeped from the sky.

"Alack, my strength! O why hast thou thus passed ⁷³
Away from me?" so ran my inward speech —
It seemed that gyves about my legs were cast.

We'd come now to the stairway's topmost reach, ⁷⁶
And there we were, powerless to lift a limb,
Stuck like a vessel grounding on a beach.

I bent my ear to the new circuit's rim ⁷⁹
To see if any sound would issue thence;
Then, turning to my master, said to him:

"My gracious father, tell me what offence ⁸²
Is purged here on this cornice where we bide;
Let feet be stayed, but not thy eloquence."

"Love of the Good," said he, "that once let slide ⁸⁵
Its proper duties, is restored up there;
There once again the slackened oar is plied.

But now, to make this matter fully clear, ⁸⁸
Give me thy full attention; thus we'll get
Some useful fruit of our forced tarrying here."

So he began: "Never, my son, was yet ⁹¹
Creator, no, nor creature, without love
Natural or rational — and thou knowest it.

The natural cannot make an erring move; ⁹⁴
The other may, either by faulty aim
Or else by too much zeal or lack thereof

When to the great prime goods it makes full claim, ⁹⁷
Or to the lesser goods in measure due,
No sin can come of its delight in them;

But if it swerve to evil, or pursue ¹⁰⁰
Good ends too hot of foot or slack of speed,
Then would the Workman's work His work undo.

Bethink thee then how love must be the seed ¹⁰³
In you, not only of each virtuous action,
But also of each punishable deed.

Now, to the object of its predilection ¹⁰⁶
Love cannot but wish well; this means, of course,
That from self-hatred no one needs protection;

And self-sufficient being, in divorce ¹⁰⁹
From primal Being, is not thinkable:
Hence, no effect can hate its own First Source;

Restat (if I decide and judge with skill) 112
That love of hurt means love of neighbours' hurt,
Which love springs in your clay from three roots still.

Some hope their neighbour's ruin may divert 115
His glory to themselves, and this sole hope
Prompts them to drag his greatness in the dirt;

Some, in their fear to lose fame, favour, scope, 118
And honour, should another rise to power,
Wishing the worst, sit glumly there and mope;

And some there are whose wrongs have turned them sour, 121
So that they thirst for vengeance, and this passion
Fits them to plot some mischief any hour.

This threefold love below us finds purgation; 124
Next, I would have thee know that other kind,
Which seeks the good, though in disordered fashion,

Everyone vaguely pictures in his mind 127
A good the heart may rest on, and is driven
By his desire to seek it and to find.

If to the vision and the quest you've given 130
But lukewarm love, and then repent of this,
Upon this cornice you're chastised and shriven.

There is another good which brings not bliss: 133
Bliss it is not, nor that essential Good
The fruit and root of all the good there is;

Love which sets too much store on that is rued 136
Above us on the mountain's triple shelf,
Being triple too — I'll not say how; I would

Thou shouldst work out the answer for thyself." 139

Notes.

l. 3: *as moles peer through the skin*: the extreme smallness of the mole's eyes gave rise to a belief that it had none, or could not see (cf. Shakespeare: "the blind mole", *Tempest*: iv. i, *Pericles*: i. i). Dante, however, knows that it has eyes, and can see, though (as he supposes) dimly, through a protective membrane. Pliny held that a mole died at once if exposed to the full light of day, and this view was common in the Middle Ages.

l. 9: *the sun ... which now was near to sinking*: it is close on 6 p.m. 11 — 19-39: *the impress*, etc.: The three visions which follow are the Bridle of Wrath: one is taken from classical myth, one from the O.T., and one from the *Aeneid*. They correspond, though not very exactly, nor in the same order, to the examples of Meekness.

l. 19: *her impious cruelty*: "She" is Procne, for whose story see Canto ix. 13, note. (Wrath against kindred and friends.)

ll. 25-30: *a man hanged*, etc.: Because Mordecai refused to do reverence to him, Haman in his rage ordered all the Jews in Persia to be destroyed. Esther intervened with King Ahasuerus, and Haman was hanged. The story is told in the *Book of Esther*. (Wrath against God's Chosen.)

l. 34-9: *a girl rose wailing*, etc.: Lavinia, daughter of King Latinus, was betrothed to Turnus. Her mother Amata, thinking (mistakenly) that Turnus had been killed in battle, hanged herself for rage and despair; *and for none else*: i.e. not for Turnus, who was then still alive, though he was later killed by Aeneas. (*Aen.* xii. 595-607.) (Wrath provoked by foes.)

l. 47: *a voice*: this is the voice of the Angel of Meekness. He is, in Charles

Williams's phrase, "unseen and unbesought", as is fitting to his nature.

ll. 67-8: *I felt as 'twere a wing-beat, felt my head fanned*: the Angel's wing erases the third P from Dante's forehead.

l. 68: *beati pacifici*: "blessed are the peacemakers": this is the Benediction of the Third Cornice (*Matt* v. 9).

l. 69: *evil wrath*: Dante here distinguishes the sin of Wrath from righteous anger.

l. 73: *alack, my strength!*: the sun has set, and the poets feel the effect of the Law of the Mountains, which inhibits all ascent after nightfall (see vii. 44-60, and Images).

ll. 85-7: *love of the Good*: Virgil explains that they are now approaching the Cornice of Sloth, where Love Defective is purged (see Introduction,). The *Good* is the true Good (which is, ultimately, God), love of which can never be excessive (see below, l. 97), but may err by defect.

l. 91-139: *so he began*, etc.: This is Virgil's exposition of the arrangement of Purgatory, forming the prologue to his Second Discourse on Love, which follows in the next canto. The gist of his exposition is set out in the Introduction, p-7 q.v.

l. 93: *natural or rational*: the *natural* love is the unselfconscious instinct, which in itself is wholly free from blame; the *rational* is that which has the conscious assent of the will, and may err by "faulty aim" (love perverted), "too much zeal" (love excessive) or "lack thereof" (love defective).

l. 97: *the great prime goods*: i.e. God, and the virtues which spring from the love of God. To these love must "make full claim" (i.e. desire them in the highest degree), since love for those objects can err only by defect.

l. 98: *to the lesser goods in measure due*: the "lesser goods" are all those legitimate objects of love which are not God. If any one of them is preferred before God, then the love errs by excess; further, a right order must be observed among them; e.g. to put love of money before love of one's

neighbour would also be an error by excess. But provided that "due measure" is kept there is no sin in loving pleasant things. Throughout this passage Dante explicitly and emphatically repudiates the Gnostic heresy that natural desires and their objects are, or can be, evil in themselves.

l. 103-51 *how love must be the seed*, etc.: Virgil sums up his argument so far: love is the root of every action, whether good or bad.

ll. 106-23: *now to the object*, etc.: Virgil now proceeds to show (a) what is the object of Love perverted, (b) which are its three main kinds, and (c) where they are purged.

(a) (ll. 106-13):

(1) He dismisses *self*: everybody naturally loves himself, and therefore cannot really wish to harm himself.

(2) He dismisses *God*: since every creature is wholly dependent on God, no one can really hate the source of his own existence.

(Any appearance of hatred against God or the self is one of the delusions of Hell. "It is the rational choice of which [Virgil] is speaking, and in Hell the rational choice no longer exists; there are 'the people who have lost the good of intellect'" — Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, .)

(3) There remains (*restat*) only the love of harm to one's neighbour. This is the object of Love Perverted, and the only means by which "the work can seek to work against the Workman" — i.e. by "the harming of an image or images given to one for due love" (Charles Williams, *op. cit.*).

(b) (ll. 114-23) the three kinds are:

(1) *Pride*: the intolerance of any rivalry.

(2) *Envy*: the fear of loss through competition.

(3) *Wrath*: the love of revenge for injury.

(c) (l. 124) those sins in that order are purged on the Cornices of Lower Purgatory.

l. 125-39: Virgil now comes to the objects and purgations of legitimate love

which errs by (a) defect, (b) excess.

(a) (ll. 127-32): *Defect*: There is a true and satisfying Good (which “the heart may rest on”), of which everybody has at least some kind of nostalgic glimmering. This is the love of God; failure to pursue it with one’s whole will is called Sloth (*Accidia*), and is purged on the fourth Cornice (Mid-Purgatory).

(b) (ll. 133-9): *Excess*: There is a love which though good as far as it goes, cannot of itself bring one to Heaven (it “is not bliss”) because it is not the love of God (the essential Good and source of all contingent goods). This love is threefold, and purged on the three Cornices of Upper Purgatory.

For all this arrangement see diagram, , and table, p-3.

Canto XVIII



THE STORY. *IN answer to a question from Dante, Virgil proceeds to his Second Discourse on Love and on Free Will. By the time he has finished, the gibbous Moon is high in the sky and putting out the stars. Dante is just dozing off when he is roused by the noisy approach of the spirits of the Slothful, who run continually around the Cornice crying aloud the examples of Zeal and Sloth which form the Whip and Bridle for their meditation. The spirit of the Abbot of San Zeno, as he rushes by, calls out directions for the Poets’ journey and tells them about his convent. Presently, Dante falls asleep.*

Thus the great teacher closed his argument, 1
And earnestly perused my face, to see
Whether I now appeared to be content:

While I, though a new thirst tormented me, 4
Kept outward silence, and within me said:
“My endless questions worry him, maybe.”

But he, true father that he was, had read 7
My timid, unvoiced wish, and now by speech
Nerved me to speech; and so I went ahead:

“Master,” said I, “thy light so well doth reach 10
And quicken my dim vision, that it sees
Clearly whate’er thy words describe or teach;

Wherefore, my kindest, dearest Father, please 13
Define me love, to which thou dost reduce