

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

All virtuous actions and their contraries.”

And he: “Fix then on me the luminous ¹⁶
Eyes of the intellect, and plain I’ll prove
How, when the blind would guide, their way they lose.

The soul, which is created apt for love, ¹⁹
The moment pleasure wakes it into act,
To any pleasant thing is swift to move.

Your apprehension draws from some real fact ²²
An inward image, which it shows to you,
And by that image doth the soul attract:

And if the soul, attracted, yearns thereto, ²⁵
That yearning’s love; ’tis nature doth secure
Her bond in you, which pleasure knits anew.

And as fire mounts, urged upward by the pure ²⁸
Impulsion of its form, which must aspire
Toward its own matter, where ‘twill best endure,

So the enamoured soul falls to desire — ³¹
A motion spiritual — nor rest can find
Till its loved object it enjoy entire.

Now canst thou see how wholly those are blind ³⁴
To truth, who think all love is laudable
Just in itself, no matter of what kind,

Since (they would argue) its material ³⁷
Seems always good; yet, though the wax be good,

The imprint is not always good as well.”

“That’s love,” said I, “and well I’ve understood, ⁴⁰
Thanks to thy words and my attendant wit;
But now I teem with fresh incertitude.

If from without love beckons us to it, ⁴³
And with no choice the soul’s foot followeth,
Go right, go wrong, we merit not a whit.”

“So much as reason here distinguisheth ⁴⁶
I can unfold,” said he; “thereafter, sound
Beatrice’s mind alone, for that needs faith.

To each substantial form that doth compound ⁴⁹
With matter, though distinct from it, there cleaves
Specific virtue, integral, inbound,

Which, save in operation, none perceives; ⁵²
It’s known by its effects, as, in the plant,
Life manifests itself by the green leaves.

So how his intellect’s made cognizant ⁵⁵
Of the prime concepts, or what guides his aim
Toward the first appetibles, man’s ignorant;

Such things are instincts in you, much the same ⁵⁸
As is in bees the honey-making bent;
This prime volition earns nor praise nor blame.

Now, to keep all volitions else well blent ⁶¹
With this, you have a counsellor-power innate

Set there to guard the threshold of assent:

That is the principle to which relate 64
All your deserts, according as its fan
Is strict to purge right loves from reprobate.

They who by reasoning probed creation's plan 67
Root-deep, perceived this inborn liberty
And bequeathed ethics to the race of man,

Grant, then, all loves that wake in you to be 70
Born of necessity, you still possess
Within yourselves the power of mastery;

And this same noble faculty it is 73
Beatrice calls Free Will; if she thereon
Should speak with thee, look thou remember this."

Retarded near to midnight now, the moon, 76
Shaped like a mazer fiery-new and bright,
Was making the stars appear but dimly strewn,

As counter-heaven she ran by the road whose light 79
Flares red at night when the sun, beheld from
Rome, 'Twixt Corsica and Sardinia sinks from sight.

That shade who gives to Pietola, his home, 82
More fame than even Mantua city knows,
Disburdened of my problems, now sat dumb;

So I, who'd reaped succinct and luminous 85
Replies to all my questions, could relax

In rambling thoughts, half dropped into a doze,

When, all at once, and close behind our backs 88
Startling me up, a throng came roundabout,
Wheeling towards us in their circling tracks.

As on their banks by night a rush and rout 91
Of old Ismenus and Asopus spied, When
Thebans to their aid called Bacchus out,

So round that circle sweeping, stride on stride, 94
I saw them come whom love, devoutly vowed,
And glad good will, like horsemen, spur and ride.

Soon they were on us, for the whole great crowd 97
Were running at top speed; and there were twain
Who went before and, weeping, cried aloud:

"Mary ran to the hills in haste!" and then: 100
"Caesar, to subjugate Ilerda, thrust
Hard at Marseilles and raced on into Spain!"

"Quick, quick! let not the precious time be lost 103
For lack of love!" the others cried, pursuing;
"In good work strive, till grace revive from dust!"

"O people, now with eager haste renewing 106
The time, belike, that slipped in dalliance by,
Or sloth, through lukewarm fervour for well-doing,

This living man — indeed I speak no lie — 109
Would fain ascend when day brings back the sun;

So tell us, please, where there's an opening nigh."

Such were my leader's words. Then answered one 112
Among those spirits, hallooming; "Come this way —
Thou'lt find the pass if thou behind us run.

Zeal to be moving goads us so, that stay 115
We cannot; if our duty seem at first
Too like discourtesy, forgive us, pray.

San Zeno's abbot in Verona erst 118
Was I, 'neath good King Barbarossa brave,
Who in Milan's still talked about and cursed.

A man there is with one foot in the grave, 121
Shall for that convent soon have tears to shed,
Ruining his influence and the powers it gave,

Because he's set his own son — bastard-bred, 124
Deficient of his body, worse in wit —
To rule there in its rightful pastor's stead."

If more he spake, or ceased there, never a whit 127
Know I — he'd fled so far beyond us both;
Thus much I heard, and gladly noted it.

Then he who in my need was never loth 130
To aid me, said: "Turn hither, see where come
Two others, pulling on the curb of sloth."

These, running last, cried out: "The folk for whom 133
The Red Sea opened died ere Jordan river

Beheld their heirs pass over and win home";

And then again: "The folk whose faint endeavour 136
Failed good Anchises' son, and did not last,
Sank to a slothful life, disfamed for ever."

Then, when these shades so far from us had passed 139
That nothing could be seen of them, there rose
New fancies in my mind, whence thick and fast

Sprang others, countless, various; and from those 142
To these I drifted, down so long a stream
Of rambling thought, my lids began to close,

And meditation melted into dream. 145

The Images.

The Penance of Sloth: Ceaseless Activity: The sin which in English is commonly called *Sloth*, and in Latin *accidia* (or more correctly *acedia*), is insidious, and assumes such Protean shapes that it is rather difficult to define. It is not merely idleness of mind and laziness of body: it is that whole poisoning of the will which, beginning with indifference and an attitude of "I couldn't care less", extends to the deliberate refusal of joy and culminates in morbid introspection and despair. One form of it which appeals very strongly to some modern minds is that acquiescence in evil and error which readily disguises itself as "Tolerance"; another is that refusal to be moved by the contemplation of the good and beautiful which is known as "Disillusionment", and sometimes as "knowledge of the world"; yet another is that withdrawal into an "ivory tower" of Isolation which is the peculiar temptation of the artist and the contemplative, and is popularly called "Escapism".

The penance assigned to it takes the form of the practice of the opposite virtue: an active Zeal. Note that on this Cornice alone no verbal Prayer is provided for the penitents: for them, “to labour is to pray”.

Notes.

ll. 4-15: *while I*, etc.: A comparison of the tone of these lines with the corresponding passage in *Inf.* xi. 67-79 shows how subtly Dante conveys the development of the intimacy and affection between himself and Virgil during the course of their journey. Dante is no *longer* importunate, and Virgil no longer sharp with him.

l. 18: *when the blind would guide*: an allusion to *Matt* xv. 14.

l. 19-75: *the soul, which is created apt for love*, etc.: This opens Virgil’s second great Discourse on Love: the first (xv. 49-81) turned on the operation of love; this, on its origin and nature.

l. 20: *pleasure*: the origin of love is our instinctive attraction to what pleases us; an attraction in itself natural (ll.26-7) and blameless (ll. 58-61, *subt.*).

ll. 22-6: *your apprehension*, etc.: an exterior object is presented (by means of the senses) to the apprehensive faculty, which forms it into a comprehensible impression or image, to which the mind, or soul, directs its attention; *some real fact*: the image must be of something really existing outside the self; i.e. love must be directed to a *real other*. (The implications of this will be taken up in the next canto.)

l. 26-7: *nature doth secure her bond in you*: the natural tie of affection which knits all creation is reinforced by pleasure in an attractive object.

l. 28-30: *as fire mounts*, etc.: Medieval philosophers for the most part followed Aristotle in supposing that fire mounted, earthy bodies sank, etc., because each element tended towards its “natural place”, where it was most at home (i.e. in the case of fire towards the “sphere of fire”) (ix. 30, note). The theory (since proved correct) that these movements were due to a

difference in weight was put forward in the eleventh century, but was unfortunately rejected by Avicenna, whose authority influenced all subsequent scientific speculation until the seventeenth century; *its form: the form* is that essential principle of structure which, when united to the component matter, makes a thing what it is (v. *subt.* l. 49, note).

l. 32: *a motion spiritual*: “motion”, in the Aristotelian vocabulary, signifies any kind of change, or action. At this point the conscious will comes into play, reaching out toward the beloved object and desiring complete union with it; this is a spiritual action (not a local movement).

ll. 35-9: *that all love is laudable*, etc.: It is interesting to see that this prevalent sentimental heresy was not unknown even in Dante’s day. “People argue that because love is, generally (i.e. as regards its *matter*), directed to the good, therefore each and every love must itself be *good*; *hut that is not true*, for it is the *form* which specifically determines what kind of love it is; just as if a seal is clumsily impressed the print is a bad print however good the wax may be.”

ll. 43-9: *If from without*, etc.: Dante here voices a fresh perplexity, which brings up the problem of determinism versus free will in a new form. Granted that (as Marco Lombardo showed in Canto xvi) our actions are not determined by the material “course of the heavens”, are they not determined from within by the fact that we are inevitably bound to pursue that which we happen to fall in love with? Are we not, that *is*, the helpless victims of our own temperamental urges? Virgil proceeds to deal with the problem of free will in love, so far as reason can; beyond that point it becomes a matter of faith (i.e. depends upon the Christian revelation) and must be left to Beatrice.

l. 49: *substantial form*: in scholastic terminology, a *substance* is an *individual existing being*. Most of the beings we meet with are *material substances*, consisting *of matter* and form; the form being the organization of the substance, and the matter being that which is organized. At the lowest end

of the scale of creation we have *inanimate* substances, in which the form is merely the shape or arrangement of the matter. Thus, a glass button is a lump of matter (glass) formed into a certain (button-) shape. Such “individuality” as it has is purely numerical and derives from its matter: out of a card of similar buttons, it is the particular quantum of glass used in its manufacture which gives Button A its “thisness” and distinguishes it from Button B. On the other hand, the form gives the matter its “thusness”, in virtue of which it is one *kind* of thing and not another — a button, and not, for example, a wineglass or a test-tube.

At the highest end of the scale there are the *spiritual* or *immaterial* substances, such as angels. These are *pure forms*, subsisting as individual beings in their own right, and not needing matter either for their self-expression, or for communication among themselves.

Between these two extremes we have an ascending order of *animate* substances, extending from the lowest forms of plant-life to man. In these, it is the *soul* which is the form of the matter and makes the being the kind of being it is. Thus a cat, for example, is not merely a lump of cat-matter organized into a cat-shape: such a being exists, but it is a dead cat. The living cat has an “animal” or “sensitive” soul (*anima sensitiva*) which, animating and *informing* the cat-matter-shape, confers being upon it — makes it, that is, *substantially* the cat we know, which eats and runs and purrs and catches mice and has kittens; and this is its *substantial form*. When the animal soul is withdrawn at death, all that is left is the material shape; and this, in the absence of the substantial form, quickly loses both its cathood and its individual identity, corrupting away into mere disorganized matter.

The substantial form of a *man* is the *rational soul*. This so far partakes of the nature of the lower forms that it needs a body by means of which it may express and communicate itself and develop into a complete personality. But it also partakes of the nature of spiritual forms in that it is self-subsistent,

containing within itself its own principle of individuation; so that after the death of the body it survives and retains unimpaired the fullness of the personality it has built up.

Note, once and for all, that in the technical vocabulary of the schools, “substance” and “substantial” are *never* used, as they are today, to mean “matter” and “material” (or “solid” or “thick” or “firm” or “considerable” — a “substantial oak table”; a “substantial fortune”). We remain nearer to the scholastic use when we say: “Give me the *substance* of that document” — meaning by that, neither the material ink and paper, nor yet the “accidental” form of the words, but the underlying (*substantial*) sense which makes the document what it essentially *is* — a greeting, a transfer of property, a proposal of marriage, a dog-licence, or what-not.

l. 49-50: *that doth compound with matter, though distinct from it*: the rational soul, although, as we have seen, essentially distinct from the material body, is in life inextricably welded with it: i.e. man is not (as Plato thought) a soul *imprisoned* in a body, like brandy in a bottle. The body-soul is a compound, in which the matter nourishes the soul and the soul “informs” the matter — rather as, in a poem, the sound expresses the sense and the sense “informs” the sound, though the two are distinguishable for the purpose of analysis.

l. 51: *specific virtue*: a “specific virtue” is a power belonging to all the members of a *species* and to them only. In the human species, this characteristic power is the *discursive intellect* (sometimes called the “possible” or “potential” intellect) which builds up knowledge by arguing from the known to the unknown. (Animals know by instinct, appetite, or acquired habit; angels, by intuition; only man *argues*.)

ll. 52-4: *save in operation*, etc.: We cannot directly observe this power, any more than we can *see* life; but, just as, if the leaves of a plant are green,

we know that life is in it, so we infer the presence of the discursive intellect from the fact that we observe the process of argument going on.

ll. 55-7: *the prime concepts ... the first appetibles*: Observation of the process cannot tell us how the intellect gets the original data from which to start its argument. We can only say that certain things seem to be self-evidently true, and these we call the “first cognitions” or “prime concepts”. Other things appear to be obviously desirable, and these we call the “prime appetibles” or “first objects of desire”; and from these implanted or instinctive perceptions the process of reasoning starts. If we whittle the content of these perceptions down to the minimum, we may say that, in the natural order, the first intelligible is *being* (we are aware that we exist), and the first appetible is our own *good* (we are aware of preference). Taken absolutely, God is both the First Intelligible and the Prime Appetible (since He *is* all the *Being* there is and all the *Good* there is); but Virgil is here speaking of the natural order.

l. 60: *prime volition*: this ground of inquiry and desire is neutral and innocent, and the volition which it involves is simply the mainspring of action, in itself neither laudable nor blameworthy.

l. 61-2: *all volitions else*, etc.: these are the exertions of the conscious will, which it is our business to keep as innocent as our instincts.

l. 62-3: *a counsellor-power ... the threshold of assent*: it will be seen that this famous image of the Censor and the Threshold is not the invention of the nineteenth-century psychologists. Dante is not, of course, concerned here with those “volitions” so shocking to the self that harbours them that the Censor will not even allow them to pass the “threshold of consciousness”. The whole allegory of the *Inferno* may, if one likes, be regarded as an exploration “into the hidden things” (*Inf.* viii. 12) beneath that threshold and the dragging into consciousness of the unfathomable mystery of iniquity. But here we have to do with desires which, impelled by the “prime volition”,

arise in the consciousness and present themselves at the “threshold of assent”. We can either (1) wholeheartedly accept them; (2) wholeheartedly repudiate them; or (3), in the useful modern phrase, sublimate them — (the *Commedia* itself is, from one point of view, the story of the successful sublimation of a natural desire). The Censor is Free Will (see below, l. 74).

l. 64-6: *that is the principle*, etc.: Merit or blame depends upon the discrimination of the will in distinguishing good from evil desires and giving or withholding assent accordingly (this answers Dante’s question in ll. 43-5).

l. 67-9: *they who by reasoning*, etc.: the philosophers who first perceived the freedom of the will found in it their justification for drawing up a code of *ethics*, which in a determinist world would be quite meaningless.

l. 70-2: *grant then*, etc.: “although the first motions of love are prompted by an inner necessity, you have a corresponding inner power of control.” (Cf. Marco’s words in xvi. 73-81, which give to free will the power of control over *exterior* necessity.)

l. 74: *Free Will*: the Latin is *liberum arbitrium* (lit. “free choice” or “free judgement”). Actually, two freedoms are involved: (1) right choice; (2) power to implement the choice. When the judgement is enslaved one cannot discriminate; when the will is enslaved one may “know and approve the better, but follow the worse.” To this gulf between will and power, Virgil’s philosophy can find no bridge; it is for Beatrice to show how, through the Incarnation, human nature is taken up by Grace into the Divine Nature (“where will and power are one”), so that the will can freely perform what the judgement freely chooses.

ll. 76-7: *retarded near to midnight now, the moon, shaped like a mazer*: the moon, which was full on Maundy Thursday when Dante’s journey began (v. *Inf.* xx. 127) is now gibbous, or bowl-shaped, and rising some four hours later. She would actually have risen about 10 or 10.30 p.m., a little south of

east, so that she is now (“near to midnight”) already high enough in the sky to quench the starlight and just coming into view from behind the mountain.

l. 79-81: *as counter-heaven she ran*, etc.: the moon in her proper monthly motion from W. to E. (*against* the daily motion of the heavens) is backing through the constellations, and has reached that part of the Zodiac in which the Sun is when people in Rome see him setting between Corsica and Sardinia. This by modern calculations would bring the Moon into *Libra* (the Scales); but we know that she cannot be there, because on the previous night she rose in *Scorpio* (the Scorpion) — cf. ix. 4-6. Dante must therefore be mistaken about the latitude of Sardinia — which is quite likely, since medieval geography was very inaccurate. The Moon would actually be in the last degrees of *Scorpio* or the first of *Sagittarius* (the Archer).

l. 82: *Pietola* (anciently called Andes): a small village near Mantua, the traditional birthplace of Virgil.

l. 89: *a throng*: these are the spirits of the Slothful.

l. 92: *Ismenus and Asopus*: rivers of Boeotia, along whose banks the Thebans ran at night with lighted torches calling Bacchus, the patron of the city, to send rain for the vines.

ll. 100-3: *Mary ... Caesar*: these are the examples of Zeal, or Energy, which form the Whip of Sloth. The first (from the life of the Blessed Virgin) is taken from *Luke* i. 39: the second (from Classical History) is related in Lucan’s *Pharsalia* (Bks. iii and iv). Caesar, on his way to encounter Pompey in Spain, laid vigorous siege to Marseilles, and then, leaving part of his army to complete the operation, hastened on to defeat the enemy at Ilerda (now Lerida) in Catalonia.

l. 118: *San Zeno’s abbot in Verona*: perhaps Gherardo II, who died in 1187. Nothing is now known of him or his sins of sloth.

l. 119: *Barbarossa*: Frederick Barbarossa, emperor 1152-90; he destroyed Milan in 1162.

ll. 121-6: *a man there is*, etc.: Alberto della Scala (*d.* 1301), lord of Verona, father of Dante’s friends Bartolommeo and Can Grande (for whom see Glossary) and of the deformed and depraved bastard Giuseppe who by his appointment held the Abbacy of San Zeno from 1291 to 1314.

l. 129: *and gladly noted it*: In view of the benefits Dante had received from the della Scala family, Dante’s severe treatment of Alberto may appear unbecoming; but the legitimate sons may well have resented the family scandal, so that he could represent himself as being “glad”, on their account as well as his own, to know that this shocking piece of nepotism would be repented (whether in life or in Purgatory).

ll. 132-8: *the curb of sloth*: The examples which form the Bridle of Sloth are taken, the first from the Israelites who, after the crossing of the Red Sea, “murmured”, and, refusing to follow Moses over Jordan to the Promised Land, perished in the desert (*Ex.* xiv. 10-20; *Num.* xiv. 1-39; *Deut.* i. 26-36); the second from the *Aeneid* (v. 604 *sqq.*), where Aeneas (“Anchises’ son”) left behind in Sicily those of his companions who, having “no desire of high renown”, were unwilling to follow him to Latium.