

Canto III



THE STORY. *THE Poets climb the lower slopes of the Mountain, where Dante's solitary shadow, cast by the rising sun, poignantly brings home to him the fact that Virgil is only a shade. At the foot of a steep cliff they encounter the souls of the Excommunicate, detained upon this First Terrace of Ante-Purgatory, and converse with Manfred, who explains to them the law of the Terrace.*

Though in their hurried flight the shadows thus 1
Were running scattered o'er the champaign wide
Towards the Mount where Justice searches us,

I still clung closely to my faithful guide; 4
How had I sped without his comradeship?
Who would have brought me up the mountain-side?

He looked as though remorse had stung him deep: 7
O noble conscience, clear and undefaced,
How keen thy self-reproach for one small slip!

Now when his feet had put away the haste 10
Which robs all actions of their dignity,
My mind, till then in one strait groove compressed,

Expanded, letting eager thought range free, 13
And I looked up to that great mountain, soaring
Highest to Heaven from the encircling sea.

Fire-red behind our backs the sun was pouring 16
Light on the slope before us, broken where
I blocked the rays, my shadowy outline scoring

Black on the ground — I whipped about in fear, 19
Abandoned, as I thought, beholding how
I, and I only, made a darkness there.

My Comfort turned and faced me: "Why wilt thou 22
Always mistrust? Believ'st thou not I come
Still at thy side and lead thee even now?"

'Tis vesper-tide already where the tomb 25
Yet holds the body in which I once cast shade;
Naples received it from Brundisium.

Though shadowless I go, be not dismayed, 28
Nor marvel more than at the heavens, which fleet
Their radiance through from sphere to sphere unstayed.

Bodies like mine, to bear pain, cold and heat, 31
That power ordains, whose will forever spreads
A veil between its working and our wit.

Madness! that reason lodged in human heads 34
Should hope to traverse backward and unweave
The infinite path Three-personed Substance treads.

Content you with the *quia*, sons of Eve: 37
For had you power to see the whole truth plain
No need had been for Mary to conceive;

And you have seen such great souls thirst in vain 40
As else had stilled that thirst in quietness
Which now is given them for eternal pain;

I speak of Plato, Aristotle — yes, 43
And many others.” Here he bent his head
And moved on, silent, with a troubled face.

Meanwhile, we’d reached the mountain’s foot — and dead 46
Upright it rose, a cliff so steep and sheer,
’Twould make the nimblest legs seem dull as lead.

The craggiest way, the most remote and drear 49
Between Turbia and Lerici, you’d call,
Compared with that, a broad and easy stair.

My master stopped: “Now, who can tell at all 52
Which side,’ said he, “these ridges slope, to give
A chance for wingless men to climb the wall?”

And as with downcast eyes contemplative 55
He stood and searched his mind which way to go,
While I gazed up and round about the cliff,

I saw a troop of spirits moving slow, 58
So slow towards us on the left of me,
’Twas hard to tell if they came on or no.

“Master,” said I, “lift up thine eyes and see; 61
Here come some people we can call upon,
If thine own wisdom cannot counsel thee.”

He looked, and said with frank delight: “Come on; 64
They’re slow — we’ll go to meet this loitering band;
And be thou steadfast still in hope, dear son.”

When still they were as far — after we’d spanned, 67
That is, what here we’d call a thousand paces —
As a stone’s cast from a good slinger’s hand,

They all shrank up to the rough rock that raises 70
Its towering height there, and stood huddling, checked
Like one who walks perplexed, and stops and gazes.

“O souls peace-parted, souls already elect,” 73
Virgil began, “by that same peace I pray
Which, as I think, you eagerly expect,

Tell us, where slopes the cliff, to make a way 76
That man may climb? For they who know its worth
Fret most when time is wasted in delay.”

Then, just as from the fold the sheep come forth, 79
By one, by two, by three, and others go
Timidly bunched behind them, nose to earth,

And what the first one does, the others do, 82
Bumping against her if she stops, and wait
Silly and meek, though why they do not know,

So of that flock most blest, most fortunate, 85
I saw the leaders move as to come on,
With modest looks and tripping step sedate;

But when they saw the radiance of the sun 88
Broken upon the hillside as I came,
And on my right saw the long shadow run

To touch the rock, they halted, drawing them 91
Somewhat aback; and following these, the rest
Not knowing why or wherefore, did the same,

“Before you ask me, let it stand confessed, 94
This thing you see, that cleaves the falling light,
Is a man’s body, plain and manifest.

Be not afraid, for not without the might, 97
Believe you well, of grace from heaven shed
Does he come here and seek to scale this height,”

Thus far my lord: the kindly people said: 100
“Turn round then, go before us — that way, see!”
And with their hands backhanded waved ahead.

And one began: “Whoever thou may’st be, 103
Look backward as thou goest; consider, do,
If, yonder, thou didst e’er set eyes on me.”

I turned to him and took a careful view; 106
Buxom he was, and blond, and debonair,
Only he had one eyebrow cloven through.

When I had modestly confessed, I ne’er 109
Had seen his face: “Nay, look!” quoth he, and on
His upper breast showed me a fearful scar:

Then, smiling, said: “Manfred am I, grandson 112
To Empress Constance: wherefore, grant me this:
On thy return, pray go, and tell my own

Fair daughter, mother of the majesties 115
Of Sicily and Aragon, the truth,
Should any man report my tale amiss.

When I had suffered two strokes, mortal both, 118
I sighed my soul out weeping unto Him
Whose whole delight is always to have ruth.

My sins were horrible in the extreme, 121
Yet such the infinite mercy’s wide embrace,
Its arms go out to all who turn to them.

And ere Cosenza’s bishop ran to chase 124
Me out, by Clement’s orders, had he once
Well read the word of God, and marked that place,

Still would the kind earth keep my body’s bones 127
At Benevento by the bridgehead, trenched
And guarded by the heavy cairn of stones.

Now they tie tumbled by the wind and drenched 130
With rain, beyond the realm, by Verde river,
Where he translated them with tapers quenched.

Their curse cannot so damn a man for ever 133
That the eternal love may not return
While one green hope puts forth the feeblest sliver.

True, he who dies in contumacy and scorn ¹³⁶
Of Holy Church, though dying he repent,
Must stay outside this barrier here, and mourn

Thirty long years for every year he spent ¹³⁹
In his presumption, save good prayers should gain
Remission of his term of banishment.

See if thou canst not make me happy, then; ¹⁴²
Tell my kind Constance thou hast seen me; touch
Upon this ban of exile — make all plain;

You people there can help us here so much.” ¹⁴⁵

The Images.

The Excommunicate: Those who have incurred excommunication, and have thus been cut off from the sacraments, guidance, and fellowship of the Church, are condemned to wander “as sheep that have no shepherd” thirty times as long as their contumacy lasted upon earth. Although they repented in their last hour (otherwise they would never have reached Purgatory) they left themselves no time for formal reconciliation, and no opportunity to make satisfaction; satisfaction must therefore be made here, and their punishment (like all other *penal* inflictions in the *Comedy*) is simply the sin itself: the old self-banishment and the old delay. But, unlike the impenitent in Hell, they endure their suffering in hope and patience.

No prayer is allotted to the Excommunicate — doubtless because of their severance from the Church.

Notes.

l. 9: *reproach for one small slip:* Cf. and contrast the passage in *Inf.* xxx. 142-4, where Virgil has rebuked Dante for a similar dawdling to listen. “The difference between [Virgil] and Dante is that the Florentine is delayed by the

obscurity of Hell, the Roman only by the song of love in the island of purgatory: yet for that his self-reproach is as deep as Dante’s had been, and Dante says, as Virgil had said, ‘How little the fault!’ But Virgil had said it aloud, and Dante does not; there are degrees in such things: it is not for Dante — Christian and capable of beatitude though he may be — to console Virgil. This certainly is one of the preludes to the inothering, to observe everywhere a proper courtesy. The great may have their faults: but our business is to remember their greatness and not cheapen it” — Charles Williams: *The Figure of Beatrice*.

l. 18: *my shadowy outline:* the sun is now risen, and casts a defined shadow. Note the artistic skill which reserves this beautiful effect for the present passage, instead of squandering it on Dante’s encounter with the shades in the previous canto.

l. 25: *vesper-tide:* It is 3 p.m. in Italy (where Virgil’s body is buried): and therefore 6 p.m. in Jerusalem and 6 a.m. in Purgatory.

l. 27: *Naples received it from Brundisium:* Virgil died (19 B.C.) at Brundisium (Brindisi), in Apulia on the Adriatic coast, and his body was transferred by the orders of Augustus to Naples. His supposed tomb is still to be seen, on the road to Pozzuoli.

l. 29-30: *the heavens ... unstayed:* the rays of the sun pass unobstructed through the aery body of Virgil as those of the outermost planets pass through the series of transparent spheres on which the inner planets are carried (see *Dante’s Universe, Inf.*).

l. 31: *bodies like mine:* for the full explanation of the aery body, see below, Canto xxv. 88 *sqq.*

l. 37: *content you with the quia:* Aristotle, and, following him, the Schoolmen, distinguish between two kinds of demonstration: (1) the knowledge *that* a thing is, obtained by arguing *a posteriori*, from effect to cause: this is the demonstration *quia*; (2) the knowledge *why* a thing is as it

is, obtained by arguing *a priori*, from cause to effect: this *is* the demonstration *propter quid*. In this life, finite minds cannot (ll. 32-6) know God as He is (in His quiddity), but only by His effects; and must therefore be content to know only the *quia* of His mysterious Providence.

l. 39: *no need had been for Mary to conceive*: Had it been possible for mankind to know all things *propter quid*, there would have been no need for the revelation in human terms by the Incarnation. And had Adam and Eve been contented with the *quia*, man would not have fallen, nor needed to be redeemed by Christ's death (cf. xxix. 23-30 and note).

l. 42: *which now is given them for eternal pain*: the pagan philosophers in Limbo eternally retain the desire of knowing God, without hope of fulfilment (*Inf.* iv. 41-2).

l. 50: *between Turbia and Lerici*: a village and town at the W. and E. extremities of the Genoese riviera, a district studded with steep and, in Dante's time, almost unscalable acclivities.

l. 61: "*Master*", *said I*, etc.: Note that here, in Purgatory, Dante is emboldened to offer Virgil suggestions about procedure, which are amiably received.

l. 65: *this loitering band*: these are the Excommunicate.

l. 68: *what here we'd call a thousand paces*: Dante means us to understand that distances in Purgatory are not commensurable with ours, but that if one thinks of about half a mile one will get the right impression.

l. 70: *they all shrank*, etc.: Having no leader, the souls are timid and uncertain: they are not merely perplexed, but terrified by Dante's shadow (ll. 88-92), and seem to find a living man as alarming as a ghost is to living men.

l. 112: *Manfred* (1231-66): natural son of the Emperor Frederick II, and grandson of the Emperor Henry VI and his wife Constance, was a pillar of the Ghibelline cause. At his father's death in 1250, he was ruler of Apulia and Sicily, and much beloved by his subjects. He was driven out by his

legitimate brother, Conrad IV; but on the latter's death he in turn expelled his nephew Conradin IV; and in 1258 was crowned at Palermo. Pope Clement IV, however, excommunicated him as a Ghibelline and heretic, setting up in his place Charles of Anjou (*q.v.* Glossary), who in 1265 entered Italy with a large army, and in 1266 overthrew and killed Manfred at Benevento. After three days' search, Manfred's body was found by a camp-follower and brought to Charles, who granted him honourable burial, though not in consecrated ground, because he was excommunicate. He was, therefore, buried at the foot of the bridge at Benevento, under a cairn to which each soldier contributed a stone. But later, the Bishop of Cosenza, by command of the Pope, had the body taken up and deposited on the banks of the Verde (now the Garigliano) beyond the confines of the kingdom of Naples and the Church States.

Villani describes Manfred as "comely of his body and as dissolute as his father, and more so. He was a musician and singer, and delighted in the company of jesters, courtiers, and courtesans, and always dressed in green; he was very liberal and courteous and debonair (*di buon aire*), so that he was greatly loved and gracious; but all his life he was an Epicurean, caring neither for God nor His saints, but only for bodily pleasure. He was an enemy of the Church and the clergy". (*Chron.* vi. 46.)

ll. 115-16: *the majesties of Sicily and Aragon*: Manfred's daughter Constance married Peter III of Aragon, and had three sons who succeeded one another as kings of Aragon and Sicily (*v. subt.* vii. 115-20).

l. 121: *my sins were horrible*: Manfred was further accused (rightly or wrongly) of having murdered his father, his brother Conrad, and two of his nephews, and of attempting to murder his nephew Conradin. These charges are chronicled by Brunetto Latini in his *Livre dou Trésor*, which Dante had certainly read (*Inf.* xv. 30 and note).