

CANTO XIV

THEY COME to the edge of the Wood of the Suicides, where they see before them a stretch of burning sand upon which flames rain eternally and through which a stream of boiling blood is carried in a raised channel formed of rock. There, many groups of tortured souls are on the burning sand; Virgil explains that those lying supine on the ground are the BLASPHEMERS, those crouching are the USURERS, and those wandering aimlessly, never stopping, are the SODOMITES. Representative of the blasphemers is CAPANEUS, who died cursing his god. The Pilgrim questions his guide about the source of the river of boiling blood; Virgil's reply contains the most elaborate symbol in the Inferno, that of the OLD MAN OF CRETE, whose tears are the source of all the rivers in Hell.

- The love we both shared for our native city
 moved me to gather up the scattered leaves
 and give them back to the voice that now had faded. 3
- We reached the confines of the woods that separate
 the second from the third round. There I saw
 God's justice in its dreadful operation. 6
- Now to picture clearly these unheard-of things:
 we arrived to face an open stretch of flatland
 whose soil refused the roots of any plant; 9
- the grieving forest made a wreath around it,
 as the sad river of blood enclosed the woods.
 We stopped right here, right at the border line. 12
- This wasteland was a dry expanse of sand,
 thick, burning sand, no different from the kind
 that Cato's feet packed down in other times. 15

- O just revenge of God! how awesomely
you should be feared by everyone who reads
these truths that were revealed to my own eyes! 18
- Many separate herds of naked souls I saw,
all weeping desperately; it seemed each group
had been assigned a different penalty: 21
- some souls were stretched out flat upon their backs,
others were crouching there all tightly hunched,
some wandered, never stopping, round and round. 24
- Far more there were of those who roamed the sand
and fewer were the souls stretched out to suffer,
but their tongues were looser, for the pain was greater. 27
- And over all that sandland, a fall of slowly
raining broad flakes of fire showered steadily
(a mountain snowstorm on a windless day), 30
- like those that Alexander saw descending
on his troops while crossing India's torrid lands:
flames falling, floating solid to the ground, 33
- and he with all his men began to tread
the sand so that the burning flames might be
extinguished one by one before they joined. 36
- Here too a never-ending blaze descended,
kindling the sand like tinder under flint-sparks,
and in this way the torment there was doubled. 39
- Without a moment's rest the rhythmic dance
of wretched hands went on, this side, that side,
brushing away the freshly fallen flames. 42
- And I: "My master, you who overcome
all opposition (except for those tough demons
who came to meet us at the gate of Dis), 45
- who is that mighty one that seems unbothered
by burning, stretched sullen and disdainful there,
looking as if the rainfall could not tame him?" 48

And that very one, who was quick to notice me
inquiring of my guide about him, answered:

"What I was once, alive, I still am, dead!" 51

Let Jupiter wear out his smith, from whom

he seized in anger that sharp thunderbolt
he hurled, to strike me down, my final day; 54

let him wear out those others, one by one,

who work the soot-black forge of Mongibello
(as he shouts, 'Help me, good Vulcan, I need your help,' 57

the way he cried that time at Phlegra's battle),

and with all his force let him hurl his bolts at me,
no joy of satisfaction would I give him!" 60

My guide spoke back at him with cutting force,

(I never heard his voice so strong before):
"O Capaneus, since your blustering pride 63

will not be stilled, you are made to suffer more:

no torment other than your rage itself
could punish your gnawing pride more perfectly." 66

And then he turned a calmer face to me,

saying, "That was a king, one of the seven
besieging Thebes; he scorned, and would seem still 69

to go on scorning God and treat him lightly,

but, as I said to him, he decks his chest
with ornaments of lavish words that prick him. 72

Now follow me and also pay attention

not to put your feet upon the burning sand,
but to keep them well within the wooded line." 75

Without exchanging words we reached a place

where a narrow stream came gushing from the woods
(its reddish water still runs fear through me!); 78

like the one that issues from the Bulicame,

whose waters are shared by prostitutes downstream,
it wore its way across the desert sand. 81

This river's bed and banks were made of stone,
so were the tops on both its sides; and then
I understood this was our way across. 84

"Among the other marvels I have shown you,
from the time we made our entrance through the gate
whose threshold welcomes every evil soul, 87

your eyes have not discovered anything
as remarkable as this stream you see here
extinguishing the flames above its path." 90

These were my master's words, and I at once
implored him to provide me with the food
for which he had given me the appetite. 93

"In the middle of the sea there lies a wasteland,"
he immediately began, "that is known as Crete,
under whose king the world knew innocence. 96

There is a mountain there that was called Ida;
then happy in its verdure and its streams,
now deserted like an old, discarded thing; 99

Rhea chose it once as a safe cradle
for her son, and, to conceal his presence better,
she had her servants scream loud when he cried. 102

In the mountain's core an ancient man stands tall;
he has his shoulders turned toward Damietta
and faces Rome as though it were his mirror. 105

His head is fashioned of the finest gold;
pure silver are his arms and hands and chest;
from there to where his legs spread, he is brass; 108

the rest of him is all of chosen iron,
except his right foot which is terra cotta;
he puts more weight on this foot than the other. 111

Every part of him, except the gold, is broken
by a fissure dripping tears down to his feet,
where they collect to erode the cavern's rock; 114

- from stone to stone they drain down here, becoming
 rivers: the Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon,
 then overflow down through this tight canal 117
- until they fall to where all falling ends:
 they form Cocytus. What that pool is like
 I need not tell you. You will see, yourself." 120
- And I to him: "If this small stream beside us
 has its source, as you have told me, in our world,
 why have we seen it only on this ledge?" 123
- And he to me: "You known this place is round,
 and though your journey has been long, circling
 toward the bottom, turning only to the left, 126
- you still have not completed a full circle;
 so you should never look surprised, as now,
 if you see something you have not seen before." 129
- And I again: "Where, Master, shall we find
 Lethe and Phlegethon? You omit the first
 and say the other forms from the rain of tears." 132
- "I am very happy when you question me,"
 he said, "but that the blood-red water boiled
 should answer certainly one of your questions. 135
- And Lethe you shall see, but beyond this valley,
 at a place where souls collect to wash themselves
 when penitence has freed them of their guilt. 138
- Now it is time to leave this edge of woods,"
 he added. "Be sure you follow close behind me:
 the margins are our road, they do not burn, 141
- and all the flames above them are extinguished."

NOTES

3. *the voice that now had faded*: that of the anonymous Florentine suicide.

10. *the grieving forest*: the Wood of the grieving Suicides.

15. *that Cato's feet packed down in other times*: Cato of Utica (born 95 B.C.), a friend of Cicero, sided with Pompey in the Roman civil war. After Pompey was defeated at Pharsalia, Cato joined Metellus Scipio in Africa; and when it became apparent that he was about to be captured by Caesar, he killed himself (46 B.C.). The year before his death he led a march across the desert of Libya (recorded by Lucan in the *Pharsalia*)—hence the comparison between the arid plain of the Seventh Circle and the hot desert crossed by Cato.

22–24. *some . . . , others . . . , some . . .*: The shades in this third round of the Seventh Circle are divided into three groups: the Blasphemers lie supine on the ground (22), the Usurers are “crouching” (23), and the Sodomites wander, “never stopping” (24). The sand they lie on perhaps suggests the sterility of their acts, just as the black leaves and lack of fruit on the trees in the Wood of the Suicides depicted their perversion of fruitful living.

33–36. *flames falling, floating solid to the ground*: Dante's source was probably Albertus Magnus's *De meteoris*. Albertus refers to an apocryphal letter from Alexander to Aristotle concerning the former's adventures in India. There, Alexander was said to have first encountered a heavy snowfall and later a rain of fire. According to the letter, Alexander had his soldiers trample the snow, but Albertus (and Dante after him) confuses the snow with the fire and has Alexander's legions trampling the flames.

41. *of wretched hands went on, this side, that side*: Note the expression “this side, that side,” whose rhythm (in the original: *or quindi, or quinci*) imitates the ceaseless movements of the sinners' hands attempting to brush off the falling flames from their bodies. We will find this same effect also in line 55 (“one by one”: *a muta a muta*), line 57 (“Help me . . . I need your help”: *aiuta, aiuta*), and even in the next canto, line 84 (“hour after hour”: *ad ora ad ora*). In fact, this leitmotiv first appears before the sinners come in view, at the moment when the travelers reach the edge of the burning sand: “We stopped right here, right at the border line”: *a randa, a randa* (12).

44–45. *those tough demons*: The rebel angels of Canto IX who

barred the travelers' entrance to the city of Dis. Note that the Pilgrim, in praising his guide, naively reminds him of his recent difficulty.

51-60. *What I was once, alive, I still am, dead!*: The representative of the Blasphemers is Capaneus, who, as Virgil will explain, was one of the seven kings who assaulted Thebes. Statius describes how Capaneus, when scaling the walls of Thebes, blasphemed against Jove, who then struck him with a thunderbolt (54). Capaneus died with blasphemy on his lips and now, even in Hell, he is able to defy Jove's thunderbolts (59-60). At Phlegra Jove defeated the Titans who attempted to storm Olympus. Vulcan and the Cyclopes, of course, were the manufacturers of the thunderbolts. *Mongibello* (56), the Sicilian name for Mt. Aetna, was supposed to be Vulcan's furnace.

68-69. *one of the seven / besieging Thebes*: Thebes, the capital of Boeotia, was the scene of a great struggle for sovereignty between Eteocles and Polynices, the sons of Oedipus. Adrastus, King of Argos, on Polynices' behalf led an expedition of seven kings (including Capaneus) against Thebes and Eteocles. See the above note, 51-60.

79-80. *like the one that issues from the Bulicame*: Near Viterbo there was a hot spring called the Bulicame, whose sulphurous waters transformed the area into a watering place. Among the inhabitants were many prostitutes, who were required to live in a separate quarter. A special stream channeled the hot spring water through their section, since they were denied use of the public baths. Here Dante compares the stream which flows from the river in Canto XII to the hot, steamy flow channeled for the prostitutes from the Bulicame—whose mineral-rich waters undoubtedly had a reddish cast.

86-87. *from the time we made our entrance through the gate*: The principal gate of Hell. Compare Canto III, 1-11, and Canto VIII, 125-26.

94-119. *In the middle of the sea there lies a wasteland*: The island of Crete is given as the source of Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon, the joined rivers of Hell whose course eventually leads

to the "pool," Cocytus (119), at the bottom of Hell. Crete was probably chosen by Dante because, according to Virgil, it was the birthplace of Trojan—therefore Roman—civilization, the Trojan Aeneas being the founder of Rome (cf. I, 73–75, and II, 13–24). Crete was also at the center of the known world, the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. According to mythology, Mt. Ida on Crete was the place chosen by Rhea to protect her infant son, Jupiter, from his father, Saturn, who usually devoured his sons when they were born. Rhea, to keep him from finding Jupiter, "had her servants scream loud when he cried" (102) to drown out the infant's screams.

Within Mt. Ida Dante places the statue of the "Old Man of Crete" (certainly one of the most elaborate symbols in the *Inferno*), with his back to Damietta and gazing toward Rome (104–105). Damietta, an important Egyptian seaport, represents the East, the pagan world; Rome, of course, the modern, Christian world. The figure of the Old Man is drawn from the book of Daniel (II, 32–35), but the symbolism is different, and more nearly (though not absolutely) reflects a poetic symbol utilized by Ovid (*Metamorphoses* I). The head of gold represents the Golden Age of man (that is, in Christian terms, before the Fall). The arms and breast of silver, the trunk of brass, and the legs of iron represent the three declining ages of man. The clay foot (the one made of *terra cotta*) may symbolize the Church, weakened and corrupted by temporal concerns and political power struggles. Through the fissure that cracks every part of the figure but the golden head flow the Old Man's tears, the sins and sorrows of man through all ages except the Golden Age of Innocence. The tears bore their way down through the mountain, and eventually their course forms the rivers of Hell, which are joined, evidently, by tributary streams (as we see here), since they are all circular. The Old Man, imprisoned in the darkness of Mt. Ida, certainly symbolizes from the neck down the fallen state of man due to the original sin in the Garden of Eden. Mt. Ida was once like Eden, "then happy in its verdure and its streams" (98), but now, devastated like man after the Fall, it is a "wasteland"

(94). The fissure, through which flow the tears of sorrow caused by the Fall, represents an imperfection symbolic of original sin.

126. *turning only to the left*: as was pointed out in the note to Canto IX, 132, there are two exceptions to the usual procedure of circling to the left.

134-35. *that the blood-red water boiled*: To the Pilgrim's naive question (130-31) Virgil replies that he should have been able to recognize Phlegethon by its extreme heat. This property of the river is mentioned in the *Aeneid* (VI, 550-51):

Encircled with a rushing flood of torrential flames Tartarean
Phlegethon . . .

136-38. *And Lethe you shall see, but beyond this valley*: Dante places Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness, in the Earthly Paradise atop the mountain of Purgatory.

141. *the margins are our road, they do not burn*: The "margins" are the miraculously protected paths which run alongside the stream. See lines 82-84.