

Circle One: Limbo—The Virtuous Pagans

Dante wakes to find himself across Acheron. The Poets are now on the brink of Hell itself, which Dante conceives as a great funnel-shaped cave lying below the northern hemisphere with its bottom point at the earth's center. Around this great circular depression runs a series of ledges, each of which Dante calls a *Circle*. Each circle is assigned to the punishment of one category of sin.

As soon as Dante's strength returns, the Poets begin to cross the *First Circle*. Here they find the *Virtuous Pagans*. They were born without the light of Christ's revelation, and, therefore, they cannot come into the light of God, but they are not tormented. Their only pain is that they have no hope.

Ahead of them Dante sights a great dome of light, and a voice trumpets through the darkness welcoming Virgil back, for this is his eternal place in Hell. Immediately the great Poets of all time appear—*Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan*. They greet Virgil, and they make Dante a sixth in their company.

With them Dante enters the Citadel of Human Reason and sees before his eyes the Master Souls of Pagan Antiquity gathered on a green, and illuminated by the radiance of Human Reason. This is the highest state man can achieve without God, and the glory of it dazzles Dante, but he knows also that it is nothing compared to the glory of God.

A monstrous clap of thunder broke apart
the swoon that stuffed my head; like one awakened
by violent hands, I leaped up with a start. 3

And having risen; rested and renewed,
I studied out the landmarks of the gloom
to find my bearings there as best I could. 6

And I found I stood on the very brink of the valley
called the Dolorous Abyss, the desolate chasm
where rolls the thunder of Hell's eternal cry, 9

so depthless—deep and nebulous and dim
that stare as I might into its frightful pit
it gave me back no feature and no bottom. 12

Death-pale, the Poet spoke: "Now let us go
into the blind world waiting here below us.
I will lead the way and you will follow." 15

And I, sick with alarm at his new pallor,
cried out, "How can I go this way when you
who are my strength in doubt turn pale with terror?" 18

And he: "The pain of these below us here,
drains the color from my face for pity,
and leaves this pallor you mistake for fear. 21

Now let us go, for a long road awaits us."
So he entered and so he led me in
to the first circle and ledge of the abyss. 24

No tortured wailing rose to greet us here
but sounds of sighing rose from every side,
sending a tremor through the timeless air, 27

a grief breathed out of untormented sadness,
the passive state of those who dwelled apart,
men, women, children—a dim and endless congress. 30

And the Master said to me: "You do not question
what souls these are that suffer here before you?
I wish you to know before you travel on 33

that these were sinless. And still their merits fail,
 for they lacked Baptism's grace, which is the door
 of the true faith *you* were born to. Their birth fell 36

before the age of the Christian mysteries,
 and so they did not worship God's Trinity
 in fullest duty. I am one of these. 39

For such defects are we lost, though spared the fire
 and suffering Hell in one affliction only:
 that without hope we live on in desire." 42

I thought how many worthy souls there were
 suspended in that Limbo, and a weight
 closed on my heart for what the noblest suffer. 45

"Instruct me, Master and most noble Sir,"
 I prayed him then, "better to understand
 the perfect creed that conquers every error: 48

has any, by his own or another's merit,
 gone ever from this place to blessedness?"
 He sensed my inner question and answered it: 51

"I was still new to this estate of tears
 when a Mighty One descended here among us,
 crowned with the sign of His victorious years. 54

He took from us the shade of our first parent,
 of Abel, his pure son, of ancient Noah,
 of Moses, the bringer of law, the obedient. 57

Father Abraham, David the King,
 Israel with his father and his children,
 Rachel, the holy vessel of His blessing, 60

and many more He chose for elevation
 among the elect. And before these, you must know,
 no human soul had ever won salvation." 63

We had not paused as he spoke, but held our road
 and passed meanwhile beyond a press of souls
 crowded about like trees in a thick wood. 66

And we had not traveled far from where I woke
 when I made out a radiance before us
 that struck away a hemisphere of dark. 69

We were still some distance back in the long night,
 yet near enough that I half-saw, half-sensed,
 what quality of souls lived in that light. 72

"O ornament of wisdom and of art,
 what souls are these whose merit lights their way
 even in Hell. What joy sets them apart?" 75

And he to me: "The signature of honor
 they left on earth is recognized in Heaven
 and wins them ease in Hell out of God's favor." 78

And as he spoke a voice rang on the air:
 "Honor the Prince of Poets; the soul and glory
 that went from us returns. He is here! He is here!" 81

The cry ceased and the echo passed from hearing;
 I saw four mighty presences come toward us
 with neither joy nor sorrow in their bearing. 84

"Note well," my Master said as they came on,
 "that soul that leads the rest with sword in hand
 as if he were their captain and champion. 87

It is Homer, singing master of the earth.
 Next after him is Horace, the satirist,
 Ovid is third, and Lucan is the fourth. 90

Since all of these have part in the high name
 the voice proclaimed, calling me Prince of Poets,
 the honor that they do me honors them." 93

So I saw gathered at the edge of light
 the masters of that highest school whose song
 outsoars all others like an eagle's flight. 96

And after they had talked together a while,
 they turned and welcomed me most graciously,
 at which I saw my approving Master smile. 99

And they honored me far beyond courtesy,
 for they included me in their own number,
 making me sixth in that high company. 102

So we moved toward the light, and as we passed
 we spoke of things as well omitted here
 as it was sweet to touch on there. At last 105

we reached the base of a great Citadel
 circled by seven towering battlements
 and by a sweet brook flowing round them all. 108

This we passed over as if it were firm ground.
 Through seven gates I entered with those sages
 and came to a green meadow blooming round. 111

There with a solemn and majestic poise
 stood many people gathered in the light,
 speaking infrequently and with muted voice. 114

Past that enameled green we six withdrew
 into a luminous and open height
 from which each soul among them stood in view. 117

And there directly before me on the green
 the master souls of time were shown to me.
 I glory in the glory I have seen! 120

Electra stood in a great company
 among whom I saw Hector and Aeneas
 and Caesar in armor with his falcon's eye. 123

I saw Camilla, and the Queen Amazon
 across the field. I saw the Latian King
 seated there with his daughter by his throne. 126

And the good Brutus who overthrew the Tarquin:
 Lucrezia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia;
 and, by himself apart, the Saladin. 129

And raising my eyes a little I saw on high
 Aristotle, the master of those who know,
 ringed by the great souls of philosophy. 132

All wait upon him for their honor and his.
 I saw Socrates and Plato at his side
 before all others there. Democritus 135

who ascribes the world to chance, Diogenes,
 and with him there Thales, Anaxagoras,
 Zeno, Heraclitus, Empedocles. 138

And I saw the wise collector and analyst—
 Dioscorides I mean. I saw Orpheus there,
 Tully, Linus, Seneca the moralist, 141

- Ecclid the geometer, and Ptolemy,
Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna,
and Averrhoës of the Great Commentary. 144
- I cannot count so much nobility;
my longer theme pursues me so that often
the word falls short of the reality. 147
- The company of six is reduced by four.
My Master leads me by another road
away from that serenity to the roar 150
- and trembling air of Hell. I pass from light
into the kingdom of eternal night.

NOTES

13 ff. *death-pale*: Virgil is most likely affected here by the return to his own place in Hell. "The pain of these below," then (line 19), would be the pain of his own group in Limbo (the Virtuous Pagans) rather than the total of Hell's suffering.

31 ff. *You do not question*: A master touch of characterization. Virgil's *amour propre* is a bit piqued at Dante's lack of curiosity about the position in Hell of Virgil's own kind. And it may possibly be, by allegorical extension, that Human Reason must urge the soul to question the place of reason. The allegorical point is conjectural, but such conjecture is certainly one of the effects inherent in the use of allegory; when well used, the central symbols of the allegory continue indefinitely to suggest new interpretations and shades of meaning.

53. *a Mighty One*: Christ. His name is never directly uttered in Hell.

53. *descended here*: The legend of the Harrowing of Hell is Apocryphal. It is based on I *Peter* iii, 19: "He went and preached unto the spirits in prison." The legend is that Christ in the glory of His resurrection descended into Limbo and took with Him to Heaven the

first human souls to be saved. The event would, accordingly, have occurred in 33 or 34 A.D. Virgil died in 19 B.C.

102. *making me sixth in that high company*: Merit and self-awareness of merit may well be a higher thing than modesty. An additional point Dante may well have had in mind, however, is the fact that he saw himself as one pledged to continue in his own times the classic tradition represented by these poets.

103–105. These lines amount to a stylistic note. It is good style (*'l tacere è bello* where *bello* equals "good style") to omit this discussion, since it would digress from the subject and, moreover, his point is already made. Every great narrator tends to tell his story from climax to climax. There are times on the other hand when Dante delights in digression. (See General Note to Canto XX.)

106. A GREAT CITADEL. The most likely allegory is that the Citadel represents philosophy (that is, human reason without the light of God) surrounded by seven walls which represent the seven liberal arts, or the seven sciences, or the seven virtues. Note that Human Reason makes a light of its own, but that it is a light in darkness and forever separated from the glory of God's light. The *sweet brook flowing* round them all has been interpreted in many ways. Clearly fundamental, however, is the fact that it divides those in the Citadel (those who wish to know) from those in the outer darkness.

109. *as if it were firm ground*: Since Dante still has his body, and since all others in Hell are incorporeal shades, there is a recurring narrative problem in the *Inferno* (and through the rest of the *Commedia*): how does flesh act in contact with spirit? In the *Purgatorio* Dante attempts to embrace the spirit of Casella and his arms pass through him as if he were empty air. In the Third Circle, below (Canto VI, 34–36), Dante steps on some of the spirits lying in the slush and his foot passes right through them. (The original lines offer several possible readings of which I have preferred this one.) And at other times Virgil, also a spirit, picks Dante up and carries him bodily.

It is clear, too, that Dante means the spirits of Hell to be weightless. When Virgil steps into Phlegyas' bark (Canto VIII) it does not settle into the water, but it does when Dante's living body steps aboard.

There is no narrative reason why Dante should not sink into the waters of this stream and Dante follows no fixed rule in dealing with such phenomena, often suiting the physical action to the allegorical need. Here, the moat probably symbolizes some requirement (The Will to Know) which he and the other poets meet without difficulty.

THE INHABITANTS OF THE CITADEL. They fall into three main groups:

1. *The heroes and heroines*: All of these it must be noted were associated with the Trojans and their Roman descendants. (See note on AENEAS AND THE FOUNDING OF ROME, Canto II.) The Electra Dante mentions here is not the sister of Orestes (see Euripides' *Electra*) but the daughter of Atlas and the mother of Dardanus, the founder of Troy.

2. *The philosophers*: Most of this group is made up of philosophers whose teachings were, at least in part, acceptable to church scholarship. Democritus, however, "who ascribed the world to chance," would clearly be an exception. The group is best interpreted, therefore, as representing the highest achievements of Human Reason unaided by Divine Love. *Plato and Aristotle*: Through a considerable part of the Middle Ages Plato was held to be the fountainhead of all scholarship, but in Dante's time practically all learning was based on Aristotelian theory as interpreted through the many commentaries. *Linus*: the Italian is "Lino" and for it some commentators read "Livio" (Livy).

3. *The naturalists*: They are less well known today. In Dante's time their place in scholarship more or less corresponded to the role of the theoretician and historian of science in our universities. *Avicenna* (his major work was in the eleventh century) and *Averrhoës* (twelfth century) were Arabian philosophers and physicians especially famous in Dante's time for their commentaries on Aristotle. *Great Commentary*: has the force of a title, i.e., The Great Commentary as distinguished from many lesser commentaries.

The Saladin: This is the famous Saladin who was defeated by Richard the Lion-Heart, and whose great qualities as a ruler became a legend in medieval Europe.

Circle Two—The Carnal

The Poets leave Limbo and enter the *Second Circle*. Here begin the torments of Hell proper, and here, blocking the way, sits *Minos*, the dread and semi-bestial judge of the damned who assigns to each soul its eternal torment. He orders the Poets back; but Virgil silences him as he earlier silenced Charon, and the Poets move on.

They find themselves on a dark ledge swept by a great whirlwind, which spins within it the souls of the *Carnal*, those who betrayed reason to their appetites. Their sin was to abandon themselves to the tempest of their passions: so they are swept forever in the tempest of Hell, forever denied the light of reason and of God. Virgil identifies many among them. *Semiramis* is there, and *Dido*, *Cleopatra*, *Helen*, *Achilles*, *Paris*, and *Tristan*. Dante sees *Paolo* and *Francesca* swept together, and in the name of love he calls to them to tell their sad story. They pause from their eternal flight to come to him, and Francesca tells their history while Paolo weeps at her side. Dante is so stricken by compassion at their tragic tale that he swoons once again.

So we went down to the second ledge alone;
a smaller circle of so much greater pain
the voice of the damned rose in a bestial moan. 3

There Minos sits, grinning, grotesque, and hale.
He examines each lost soul as it arrives
and delivers his verdict with his coiling tail. 6

That is to say, when the ill-fated soul
appears before him it confesses all,
and that grim sorter of the dark and foul 9