Inferno: Questions for Analysis

Cantos XII – XVII

Canto XII, Violence against Others

- Notice the vivid description which emphasizes the blasted, vertical nature of the landscape.
- Notice the familiar structure: the Minotaur threatens/Virgil protects. A new wrinkle to Dante's relationship with Virgil emerges more evidently: Virgil appears almost omniscient in his ability to read Dante's thoughts. What's the significance of this ability, do you think? It crescendos in Canto XVII, when Dante is paralyzed by fear of Geryon, choking on his words, dumbed by fear, yet Virgil knows what he wants to say and responds protectively.
- Notice Dante's address to the reader. Compare it to his addresses in other rare places (VII and VIII, for instance). Does his speech here represent any kind of thematic development, do you think?
- Another new wrinkle: the Centaurs are demons who participate in the punishment of the sinners, who are immersed in a river of boiling blood, a pretty obvious contrapasso. What's the significance of this progression?

Canto VIII, the Suicides

- Virgil continues to be inside Dante's mind. When he observes Dante's “mistake” concerning the wailing voices, and his bewilderment, instead of explaining he instructs Dante to break the branch from the tree, knowing the result. Why doesn't he simply explain that the trees are the souls of the suicides, as he explains the contrapasso of other areas?
- Dante is frozen with dread when he hears the trees speak. Why this reaction?
• The suicides sin because they succumb to despair, the sin Dante was in danger of succumbing to in the dark wood of Canto I. Dante is overwhelmed with pity for Pier della Vigne, a counselor to Frederick II, just as he was overwhelmed with Francesca’s story in Canto V. Is this a regression from what we had been observing as his progress in his battle against pity?

• Francesca and Pier are similar in their misuse of language. Their rhetoric hides their own responsibility for their sin. What other connections can you make between the imagery of this Canto and earlier Cantos, especially Canto I?

• Notice that the Harpies, who represent the demons in this area, do not threaten Virgil and Dante. Why not?

• The spenders appearance at the end of the Canto might be confusing to some: these are people who, like the suicides, willfully cast away their possession, purposely destroyed their earthly possessions, which was considered violence against oneself.

• The anonymous suicide who speaks at the end of the Canto gives a bit of the history of Florence and demonstrates his wrongheadedness in attributing Florence’s continued fortunes to Mars, a false god. Yet, the more poignant point he brings out: while Florence has been rebuilt many times, survived many wars and disasters, he took his own life.

**Canto XIV, Violence against God**

• Blasphemy is pretty easily understood, but nevertheless, the point is hammered home three times; once by Dante, then Capaneus, then Virgil.

• The contrapasso is particularly devious, as the sinners are punished within sight of mercy, the protection that Dante and Virgil enjoy.

• Notice the great relationship between Dante and Virgil. This signals Dante’s progress. He takes no pity on the sinners here.

• When the leave the blasphemers, who are writhing on the burning sand within eyesight of protection, they come to a “amazing stream.” Virgil says nothing he’s seen so far has been worth more note than this little stream, which fills Dante with curiosity, and he emphasizes his hunger for knowledge, a good sign that he will learn much.

• The Old man of Crete, a mountain in Crete, is a powerful image of decay; how does this image relate to the present story?

**Canto XV, Brunetto Latini and the Sodomites**

• Another brutal test for Dante, as he’s surprised to see his former master here. Battle against pity once again.

• This is Ring 3, Violence against Nature and Art. Debate rages about the meaning of this Canto. Although “sodomy” is basically “homosexuality,” the sinners featured here didn’t all have a reputation for homosexuality. Rather than admit that Dante was “outing” some of these famous men, some critics insist that “sodomy” really refers to a class of sins associated with the city, Sodom, and they
define “sodomy” as “sacrilege.” Read closely, do a little research, and decide for yourself!

- Notice how Dante seems to be very sure of himself in this Canto. He proves he’s lost his disorientation and knows the true purpose of his journey. The fearful, ignorant man who quarreled with Virgil (Reason), pitied Francesca, Farinata, and the Suicides seems to be receding. He’s taking a long view of things and not concerning himself with earthly bad “fortune.” You really see this when he replies in lines 78-93. Dante humors Latini, but makes it clear that he’s learned not to see eternity in his work, but in spiritual transcendence. When Latini “wins the race” at the end of the Canto, he has won a pyrric victory, and it’s sad.

- Brunetto’s character closely parallels Dante’s (as many of the main characters who are pitied do). If we understand Brunetto’s sin not as simple “homosexuality” but as “sacrilege, we can see that Dante is observing how he went astray by being too worldly. The fame he seeks (his notion of “eternity”) has to do with earthly fame for his book rather than spiritual transcendence. It’s a short view, as opposed to Dante’s growing long view. Brunetto’s eternity therefore is hell. He sins in an intellectual, scholarly way, putting man’s knowledge ahead of spiritual revelation. Brunetto’s work, The Treasure, is very parallel to the Comedy. Studying how they are similar and different reveals much about Dante’s purpose.

XVI and XVII, Geryon: Dante’s Claim to “Truthfulness”

XVI

- The weirdly linked wrestlers at the beginning of Canto XVI once again tests Dante’s pity, as he admits he’d like to “join them,” but knows he’d be badly burned if he did.

- Distances are a little surreal, as the waterfall that opened the Canto seemed far off and by its middle, with only a little travel, seemed so close as to be deafening. Significance?

- When the travelers turn towards the right, that is one of the rare times when they don’t turn left. This links the Canto with their right turn at the Gate of Dis.

- When Dante observes Virgil’s action at the cliff’s edge (he throws Dante’s belt into the abyss), he puts it together that “some strangeness surely will answer from the deep”—but notice he isn’t afraid or doubtful. Progression?

- Then, Dante acknowledges that Virgil is able to “not only observe the action, but see the thought as well!” Is Virgil a mindreader? Is this some kind of progression we’re observing between the two?

- Study the section where we see Geryon coming up from the abyss. Here’s a really significant theme that’s explored as Dante prepares to introduce Geryon: the relative “truthfulness” of the Comedy as a work of “true fiction” and not “fraud” (lies, deception, etc.). Dante emphasizes that the image of Geryon is almost too incredible to describe, because it will seem like a lie. But he asserts that it is true. What he really means is that this vision of Geryon is authentic “revelation,” an his poem is an authentic testament; allegorical truths come wrapped in seemingly false imagery. Revelation (think of the word “vision” to
get rid of the religious connotation—an author’s “vision of truth”) is communicated by poetic imagery which may not be literally true but is allegorically true. If we don’t make this distinction, if Dante doesn’t make this distinction, he might be accused of the very fraud he’s going to describe in the next circle, the sin that Geryon represents. But here Dante asserts that poetic truth is as valid as literal truth, and that the Comedy is true, despite its obvious imaginary substance.

XVII

- Geryon’s flight down into Malebolge is a major division in the text, a graphic marker that signals the division between Circles seven and eight, violence and fraud. Geryon is especially vivid and memorable in this Canto, because this is a major division in the text.
- In what ways does the action and imagery of this canto link to the Canto VIII, when the travelers stood before the gates of Dis? What are the significant similarities and differences that might reveal progression and development of character and theme?
- Virgil leaves Dante to parley with Geryon, sending him off to encounter the usurers alone. What’s the significance of this separation, in your opinion?
- We are midway through the book; there’s a real convergence of themes, motifs, and developments in this Canto. See if you can recognize them. Notice Dante’s power as a poet capable of revealing this “truth” powerfully, articulately. He can acknowledge the poem’s fictiveness (it has the face of a lie) while boldly declaring its underlying truth. This is quite a different poet from the one we originally encountered in the dark wood—the poet who fumbled for words and couldn’t describe anything. Dante is beginning to surpass Virgil is both his grasp of the truth and in his poetic power. There are still setbacks ahead, but it’s a hopeful midway point. Just as Christianity has surpassed the pagan Gods of the Roman Empire, the brilliant student will surpass even his brilliant teacher.
- Until now the demons in the seventh circle have posed no real threat to the travelers and need no rebuke (except maybe the Minotaur). The pilgrim is more enlightened, less apt to quarrel with reason, and less encumbered by confusion and the threat of despair. But now Dante is paralyzed with fear of Geryon. How does he react? Does he master his fear or does it master him?
- Dante’s sensory description of his flight on Geryon is famous for its sublime believability in a time before flight was possible for humans. The imaginative power of our poet shines through! The fact that Dante was able to ride Geryon symbolizes his power to overcome the sins of fraud that Geryon represents.
- Consider why Geryon is a fitting symbol to represent “fraud.”