

The Four Last Things, VI

Why are the lustful punished by a whirlwind in the Divine Comedy? It is for the same reason that hell is conceived like a funnel, which is the shape of sin. Sin is easily accomplished at first, but the longer one does it the more cramped and crowded and narrow its sphere becomes, the less pleasure to be had. And when a soul allows lust to take the place of reason, then that vice will throw the sinner to the heights of pleasure and just as fast bring them down into the grip of inordinate sadness and gnawing frustration. And the attractions of lust quickly propel the soul first to this object and then immediately to another. Dante's right, it is like a whirlwind, with no rhyme or reason. And its end is life without meaning.

Dante knows this about the nature of lust, and he knows it is wrong, yet he cannot yet fully process what he saw. He still feels sorry for the damned. The eternal punishment of the unrepentant is too difficult to comprehend. Sure, some punishment is in order, but the thought of punishment eternal does not sit right with him. And this too is an attitude typical of our times, because he saw the great heroes of old like Achilles in the whirlwind, and we do not like our heroes dying.

The video games pound this into the brain, so that if you make a mistake, you just push a button and start all over as if nothing happened. This is utterly different than chess say, because one false move there and you lose, and you can't restart the game. The comic book movies so popular today are the similar. If someone or a whole mass of people die, then just go back in time and fix it. This is not a resurrection theme as some would fancy; this is making sure death never happens. The whole modern industry of entertainment – whether comic books or Harry Potter novels – avoids the finality, and thus the heartbreak. The consumer wants the happy ending, and the industry is happy to oblige.

But Dante's guide, Virgil, has seen through the charade of the temporary, and knows well the finality of things, which is one reason he must be Dante's guide. In Virgil's great epic poem the *Aeneid*, the hero Aeneas must go down into the underworld, and in one section of it he enters the Mourning Fields, where "Those whom stern Love has consumed with cruel wasting are hidden in walks withdrawn, embowered in a myrtle grove; even in death the pangs leave them not."

And there he encounters the queen of Phoenicia, Dido, whom he once loved. But he left her to go to found Rome, and she took her own life when he sailed away. He sees someone wandering in the dark forest, and he can't be sure at first, but then as she draws closer, Virgil writes,

And as soon as the Trojan hero stood near and knew her, a dim form amid the shadows – even as, in the early month, one sees or fancies he has seen the moon rise amid the clouds – he shed tears, and spoke to her in tender love: 'Unhappy Dido! Was the tale true then that came to me that you were dead and had sought your doom with the sword? Was I, alas, the cause of your death? By the stars I swear, by the world above, and whatever is sacred in the grave below, unwillingly, queen, I parted from your shores. But the god's decrees drove me with their behests; nor could I deem my going thence would bring upon you distress so deep.' With these words amid springing tears Aeneas strove to soothe the wrath of the fiery, fierce-

eyed queen. She, turning away, kept her looks fixed on the ground, and at length, she flung herself away and, still his foe, fled back to the shady grove. Yet none the less, stricken by her unjust doom, Aeneas attends her with tears afar and pities her as she goes.

He never sees her again. There is no reboot, no time travel gimmick in the great epic poems and song of Western Civilization; we live but once, and the consequences of our choices are eternal. Dante has not faced; has not accepted this fact yet, and so he must go deeper into the inferno, he must go into the third circle. Here he must see where a different kind of loving in an evil way is rife; he must see the punishment of gluttony.

It is an awful, terrible sight. All around his feet, the gluttons writhe and moan in a deep, stinking mire; in an endless sea of putrid mud. A cold, hard, heavy, stinking rain falls upon them eternally. Huge hail stones, sleet and snow also constantly pelt the damned souls and create the filthy slop on the ground, and the souls there squirm endlessly trying to get comfortable, but this only makes the filth cling to them. The mud is too horrible to spend any time in, and the rain and hail too painful to escape the slime. And aside from being constantly beaten and pelted by the rain and hail, the souls damned to the third circle of hell are also tormented by Cerberus, a three-headed hound of hell borrowed from Greek mythology.

A monster fierce, the direful Cerberus with triple throat, barks doglike o'er the people here submerged. Red are his eyes; his beard befouled and dark, his belly large, his paws with talons armed; he claws the spirits, flays and quarters them. The endless downpour makes them howl like dogs; trying with one side to protect the other, the abject wretches often writhe and turn in vain attempt to find relief from pain. That demon whose loud, raucous bark so stuns the spirits, that they wish they were deaf.

What is this sin, this gluttony for which the souls are punished? The word comes from the Latin *gluttire*, meaning to gulp down, signifying a way of eating not for sustenance, not in care for anyone else as in a good meal shared with others, and not even in the pleasure of taste, but as St. Alphonsus de Ligouri puts it, "...gulping like beasts, through the soul motive of sensual gratification, without any reasonable object."

Food is the fuel that keeps our blood warm and our heart beating. It is necessary. And bread is the staff of life, and wine gladdens the heart. And the Lord Himself, after His resurrection, shared a morning meal with His disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. But the glutton, whose punishment is in the third circle, makes a god out of food and drink. And like the lustful, he has subjugated his reason to his desire, and his appetite for food or drink casts aside his good thoughts, he lives then like the pigs do, who wallow in muck.

And notice the third circle is underneath the second circle, since pampering the flesh by gluttony is a kind of soil, a set up for a fall into lust.

So the souls in the third circle are still gulping, but without any pleasure in their sin, and so gulp the muck and the swallow the stinking rain. This is similar to those punished for their lust.

And so the taste for the other, that is the very capacity of enjoying good, is quenched in the glutton except in so far as his body still draws him into some rudimentary contact with the outer world. But death removes this last contact. He finally has his wish granted – to live wholly for himself and to make the best of what he finds there. And what he finds there is hell.