

The Four Last Things, IX

After leaving the place of punishment of the wrathful and the slothful, Dante and Virgil are ferried across the river Styx, and a new wailing reaches their ears, worse than what they had heard before. They do not go deeper into hell this time, but approach a fortress city on the same circle; its towers red with fire.

And I peered forward, seeking out its cause. The goodly master then explained to me: “We now approach the citadel of Dis, whose garrison is laden down with sin.” “Master” I said, “already I discern its mosques, all fiery red, as if but now just issued from the flames!” He answered me “Eternal fire, enkindling them within, makes them glow red against the murky gloom of this deep hell, as you have just perceived.”

They have arrived at the City of Despair. When they enter it, they will cross one of the great divides of hell. The circles they have already traversed contain the lost souls who loved or used genuinely good things in an evil way. But now they cross into a region made for those who loved evil itself.

Here tombs were everywhere about, save that they were more bitter to behold. For round about those many monuments flames were scattered, so that they were heated brighter than iron e'er was made to glow. The covers everywhere were lifted off, and from each tomb there rose such piteous groans as only souls in torment could produce. I asked my master: “Tell me, who are these who, buried in the sepulchers, proclaim their anguish with such piteous laments?” He answered: “The archheretics lie here, with all their followers, of every sect; the graves are crowded more than one would think.”

Dante and Virgil try to enter the City, but the monstrously large gates are shut and locked with enormous iron bars, and guarded by the horrible Furies; Megaera, Tisiphone and Alecto; female demons with serpents for hair. Dante is wondering what will happen next, when a being walks across the Styx as on dry land, and with a wave of his hand dispels all the fumes and foul smoke. Dante is about to say something, but Virgil motions to him to hold his tongue. The being takes no notice of the two pilgrims, but resolutely strides towards the gates, and Dante in awe says,

How full of scorn that messenger appeared! He came before the gates, and with a wand he opened them, as though their bars were nought. “O outcasts from the skies, O race despised” he said, while still astride that threshold grim, “Whence comes this insolence that you display? Why do you pit yourselves against that Will which cannot be opposed, and oftentimes when thwarted has increased your sufferings?” Then he returned along the miry way speaking no word to us – like one whose mind is burdened down with graver cares than those of him who chances to be by.

And with this, Dante learns that the power of one Guardian Angel is greater than anything of hell, and that the Guardians are fearless and most serious, and not far from our affairs. This is a medieval view of angels – no rosy cheeked plump babies of the renaissance, but creatures of great gravity, fierce in war, unstoppable except by Divine command. Yet Dante, like us, often forgets their mighty ability, and does not call upon them.

When they enter the city then, the place reeks with an atmosphere of despair, and they see a vast field of marble tombs, their slabs lying beside them, with a fiery glare flickering from their depths. We are in the circle of the heretics; we meet here those who held to the fundamental heresy of materialism. Materialism is the heresy of those who believe that matter or the body is all there is. This is why Epicurus is here. He was a Greek philosopher who taught that pleasure with the absence of pain or passion is the highest human good. He thought the soul was mortal like the body, thus he and his followers to pursue pleasure, according to a principle that realities such as free will, love, altruism, morality – all these can be reduced to matter in motion – and thus meant nothing.

Here Dante and his guide, and we, are faced with the truth of the great medieval principle of *corruptio optima pessima est* – the corruption of the best results in the worst. Not that Epicurus was the best, but he and all those with him in the City of Despair despised their own intellects, their ability to think. The greater the faculty that we corrupt by our sins, the more wicked we become, and the more thoroughly we pervert the image of God in us. So as the intellect is superior both to the appetite and to the irascible faculty that allows us to grow angry at genuine injustice, so the sins that involve a perversion (*pervertere*, to twist) of the intellect are worse.

This is symbolized in the tombs of marble. To be buried in a marble tomb in Dante's day was to receive a great honor, to be extolled, like the intellect is extolled above our other abilities or faculties. But here that which is extolled above becomes the very instrument of torture to the souls who perverted the great faculty of the intellect, by their willing embrace of heresy.

Dante meets a character there whose name is Farinata. He asks a question of Dante, "Who were your family?" Of all the questions he could ask, this is puzzling. He doesn't ask the most obvious question, which would be "How can you be alive and be in this place?" He asks nothing about the truth of the soul or the body, he asks nothing about the love he no longer has. Instead, Farinata asks only about family – an indication that the same sins of the pursuit of the pleasure of power politics and prestige which got him into hell – these he still pursues, but in vain, and in stupidity.

But there is another punishment going on which may not register at first glance. That is, the heretics – and all the damned possess a supernatural ability to see future events. Like those who suffer from hyperopia (far-sightedness), their ability to see decreases as these events comes closer to the present. This ability enables them to be distracted from their punishment to some extent, but because there will no longer be a future once the world ends, the damned souls will no longer have that external awareness to distract them from their eternal suffering, and the lids to the sepulchers will be shut and the heretics entombed alone within them forever.

Could the heretics have repented even at the very last? Certainly, even though it is a poor thing to strike our colors when the ship is going down under us; a poor thing to come to God as a last resort, to offer up "our own" when it is no longer worth keeping. If God were proud He would hardly have us on such terms; but He is not proud, He stoops to conquer, He will have us even though we have shown that we prefer everything else to Him, and come to Him because there is nothing better to be had in the meantime. It is hardly complimentary to God that we should choose Him as an alternative to hell, yet even this He accepts.