

The Four Last Things, V

When Dante arrives in the second circle of hell, he meets those sinners who loved good things in an evil way – namely the impure, those who rejected the 6th and 9th Commandments in their lives, and did not repent. He sees figures of former beauty and nobility swirling in an out of the whirlwind in which they are caught up with their shrieking and madness of cursing God – “the courtly ladies and knights of old” as he puts it. There is Paris of Troy, over there is Cleopatra, and not far from her is Achilles. But this is no pleasant encounter.

Cries and lamentations strike the air, and blasphemies against the Power Divine! I learned that to such torment are condemned the sinners of the flesh, who vilely yielded their reason to carnal appetite. As when in times of cold the starlings fly, borne on their wings in large and crowded flocks; so did that blast convey those wretched souls, now up, now down, now roundabout they whirled: no hope of rest could ever comfort them, or even a moment's lessening of their pain.

Dante calls out and wishes to speak with them. Two respond, and he recognizes them. Their names are Francesca and Paolo. Their story has all the trappings of a tragedy of courtly love. Francesca had been given in marriage – unfortunately for her – to seal a political compromise between two cities. The husband chosen for her was ugly and vicious. But his younger brother was handsome and gentle. Those two fall in love. Or rather, fall in lust.

Our poet aims that we should learn about what love is and what it is not, like he must learn. Francesca made her reason subject to her desire. She severed love from reason, even from the freedom of the will. She describes love like stubble that catches fire and has no choice but to burn. She affirms her sin. She makes it clear that she never asked what would be good for Paolo, and she doesn't care – she cannot care about anyone except herself.

This refusal to take responsibility – she makes it clear that God is at ultimate fault in all this – marks her last words to Dante, which are among the most famous in all of literature. Dante asks her how she knew that Paolo was in love with her. He asks, "But tell me, in that hour when sighs were sweet, how did love let you know, or chance discover the drift of all our fond imaginings?" And she replied,

One day, to pass the time, we read the book of Lancelot, and how love conquered him. We were all unsuspecting and alone: from time to time our eyes would leave the page and meet to kindle blushes in our cheeks. But at one point alone we were overcome: when we were reading how those smiling lips were kissed by such a lover – Paolo here, who nevermore from me shall be divided, all trembling, held and kissed me on the mouth. On that day we read no more.

They were reading of course, the account of Lancelot and Guinevere, the wife of Lancelot's benefactor, and king, and his best friend, Arthur. Had Paolo and Francesca read just a little farther, they would have learned how that adultery destroyed the fellowship of the Round Table. They might have read how Lancelot later repented, and Guinevere repented, and entered religious life after Arthur's death to join a Benedictine convent and ultimately became its abbess. But Francesca and Paolo did not read farther, and didn't turn the page. The book was to blame. The author of the book was to blame. They just got caught up in the whirlwind of love you see, and there was nothing at all they could do about it.

Francesca – who does all the talking – mentions love in three different ways. She refers to "Love which quickly takes a gentle heart, took him for my fair shape." And again, "Love which does not allow *not* to love back, took me for him." And again, "Love lead us to one single death."

Dante is so moved by this, and so overwhelmed by the combination of the lovers being together forever yet punished forever, coupled with the sad fate of Francesca, and on top of this that while she was speaking Paolo was weeping inconsolably – that he passes out – "the anguish of those two so altogether stunned me with compassion."

The line between love and lust is confusing to Dante, and just as confusing to some – even many – in our time as it was in his time. Love is an ennobling power of attraction to the beauty of a whole person. Lust is a destructive force of possessive desire for only part of a person, and is thus selfish in the extreme. It is mixed up with infatuation; a desire for another to sacrifice themselves for our pleasure. This is evil. This is the rejection of God and His plan of salvation.

Yes, St. Thomas thinks of this sin as a sin of passion, not the planned, cold, calculating sin of idolatry say. The idolaters are far deeper down in hell than the lustful. So in the Inferno, this circle of hell is the one farthest away from Satan, and marks the least serious of the seven capital sins.

The least serious, yes, but because Christians have so high an opinion of the body, they consider it a terrible sin to betray that body. And of Dante's compassion Virgil is not impressed at all. He says nothing. For Dante laments the justice of God, but he must learn that he is wrong, that he does not yet understand; that there should be no lamenting the justice of God. The wicked deserve justice. In fact, justice is the only good thing they are capable of receiving. And so the damned continue with their sins, like Francesca and Paolo, but the sins are stripped of all their pleasure.

Dante has not yet learned how foolish is the demand that God should forgive the sinner while allowing him to remain what he is. This notion is alive and well in our times, and you hear it all the time in different ways, but it is a false notion, based on the confusion between forgiving and condoning. To condone an evil is simply to ignore it, or to pretend nothing has happened, to treat evil it as if it were good. But forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete: and a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.

In the long run the answer to those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: "What are you asking God to do? Are you asking Him to wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing over every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has already done so on Calvary. And to forgive them? They do not want to be forgiven. So many want God to just leave them alone. Alas, for the souls in hell, I'm afraid that is precisely what God does.

For the reader of the *Divine Comedy*, for the pilgrim who wants to get back on the path to friendship with God, he must ignore the false tears of Paolo, and utterly reject Francesca's casting of blame onto books, onto the authors of books, and onto her false notion of love, which is completely severed from reason, and onto God.

Instead, each of us must heed the words of St. Jeremias the Prophet; "Know thou and see how evil and bitter a thing it is for thee to have left the Lord thy God." (Jer. 2:19)