

CARNAL SINNERS IN THE SECOND CIRCLE OF HELL IN CANTO V OF DANTE'S *INFERNO*

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Abstract

This paper tries to scrutinize Canto V of *Inferno*, one of the trilogies of Dante's *Devine Comedy*. The first section of the paper overviews the general features of *Inferno* and the general structure of Hell told in *Inferno*. After the general description, the paper then focuses on discussing Canto V which narrates about the carnal sinners in the second circle of Hell. The Carnal sinners are those sinners who abandon themselves to the temptation of lust. It is told in Canto V, that in the second circle of Hell, Dante finds the damned spirits of Dido of Cartidge, Helen of Troy, Cleopatra of Egypt and Achilles of Greek. However, in discussing the carnal sinners, it is hardly possible not to discuss Francesca, one of the inmates of the second circle of Hell made important by Dante by telling her adulterous love story elaborately in Canto V. Thus, in the next section, the paper progresses to discussing the predicaments of Francesca's rhetoric about her love which lead to her damnation in Hell. It is revealed here that Francesca, cast into hell because of her adulterous love to her brother-in-law Paolo, questions her damnation in Hell. She bases her objection on the idea that her yielding into lust is not her fault. It is, she apparently argues, the work of love itself, as an active agent and the romance book she reads, as a stimulating force dragging her into sinful love. This paper tries to reveals that Francesca's rhetorical justification faults and fails because she annihilates the so-called God's given free will man innately possesses.

Key words: *Inferno*, canto, hell, sin, carnal sinners, spirits, lust, passion, reason, damnation, free will.

A. INTRODUCTION

Inferno is one of the three sequels of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The other two parts are *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* (Pinsky, 1997). Consisting of 36 cantos, *Inferno* gives account of Dante's experience as he descended through Hell, with Virgil, the great Roman poet as his guide and protector. Hell, according to Date's *Inferno*, consists of nine circles, each of which is inhabited by sinners with their particular sins. As he progresses from one circle into another circle in Hell, Dante encounters souls who are imprisoned there forever. Circles one to five are inhabited by the souls with the following sins: The unbaptized, the lustful, gluttons, the spenders and the hoarders, the wrathful and sullen. In the sixth circle, there are heretics sinners. The seventh circle is full of souls with violent sins, i.e. violent toward others, toward self (suicide), toward God (blasphemy) toward nature (sodomy), and toward art (usury). Imprisoned in circle eight are the souls with the sins of fraud. They are seducers and panders, the flatterers, the

simoniacs, the diviners, the barrators, the hypocrites, the thieves, the false counselors, the schismatics, and the falsifiers. The souls with the sins of betrayal are condemned in circle nine. They are betrayers of kin, country and party, guests, and benefactors. The furthest point of the ninth circle, accordingly the innermost part of Hell, is called Judecca. In Judecca, named after Judas Iscariot, the worst sinners of all – those who betrayed their benefactors- are punished. There are Judas, Brutus and Cassius.

The second circle is the true beginning of Hell told in Canto V of the *Inferno* (Freccero, 1993). This is the circle of Carnal lust, first of the four circles of incontinence. The sinners are tossed and whirled by the wind as in the life they were helpless in the tempest of passion. This canto describes the circle provided for the sinners of incontinence: the sins of the appetite, the sins of self indulgence, and the sins of passion. These are also the sins of the person who has weakness of free will; those who did not have single minded determination for good deeds; those who yielded too easily to temptation; and those who did not remain steadfast in searching for goodness.

In the second circle of Hell, Dante finds a completely dark place filled with noises worse than the voice of sea storm. The spirits are lamenting, shrieking, moaning, and swept by an unceasing storm. Dante learn that these are spirits doomed in Hell by carnal lust. The sinners in this circle are those who have subjected reasons to the inclination of appetite, called as the carnal sinners. This circle of hell is guarded by the menacing Judge Minos. In ancient mythology, Minos is the judge from the underworld. He is a son of Zeus and Europa, and was King of

Crete, and renowned for the wisdom and severity of his judgment. The place of each sinners in Hell is determined by the number of times Minos' tail curl around his body. Thus, the sinners in Hell admit their sins and hear the sentence before they are sent down. The spirits' admittance about their sins is part of the irony of *Inferno*. These souls, being damned in Hell, can not take any benefits from their awareness of their past sins. Their confession in Hell is a kind of damnation for them.

B. Carnal Sinners in the Second Circle of Hell

Out of the whirlwind of carnal sinners wandering about like starling in a winter, a separate group emerges, flying in a single file and mournfully. Their poetic lament and the way in which they follow one another distinguish them from the random horde. "They suffer here who sinned in carnal things-/ Their reason mastered by desire, suborned" (35-36). So the souls punished in the second circle of Hell are carnal sinners whose sin arises from incontinence, or lack of restraint. In the second circle of Hell, Dante found out the lustful sinners buffeted helplessly by the wind. Dante discerns those famous literary lovers, drawn from the great tradition of ancient epic and medieval romance: There is Semiramis, who succeeded her husband Ninus to become Queen of Assyria. Notorious for her licentiousness and sexual excess, she was supposed to have legalized even incest to justify her own behavior. (45-60). Because of her reputation, her capital Babylon was often confused with the Babylon (Old Cairo). Legend says that Semiramis died at the hands of an illegiti-

mate son. Next to Semiramis, there is Helen of Troy. Helen, wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta, became the mistress of Paris. Her elopement with Paris has caused the rift that led to Trojan War. Legend has her as having died at the hands of a Grecian woman who avenged her husband, killed in the war against Troy. The next is Dido, referred to in Canto V as "That other spirit" (line 58-59) Dido is the wife of Sychaeus, who was murdered by her brother, Pygmalion, King of Tyre. After Sychaeus' spirit tells Dido of the murder, she flees Tyre in order to found a new City in North Africa—Carthage. As told in Virgils' *Aeneid* I and IV (Virgil, 1992) she is in love with Aeneas, the Trojan warrior in his journey to found Rome. In the Midst of her love, Aeneas is reminded by the Gods of his higher destiny as founder of Rome and thus departs for Italy. Dido, in despair, commits suicide. The Carthaginian queen kills herself for love of Aeneas. Dante mentions her faithfulness to Sychaeus; but it is her violent death for love that places her in the second circle of hell. The next is Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, the mistress of first Julius Caesar and then Marcus Anthony, whose beauty was legendary; Cleopatra chooses to commit suicide rather than being captive when the Roman troops besieged Egypt. She killed herself with a poisonous asp. Like Dido, she is placed in the second circle, the place of the suicide.

The male carnal sinners told on Canto V, as summarized by Rodney J. A Payton (Payton, 1992) are, among others, Achilles, Paris and Tristan. Achilles was the principal Greek Hero in the Trojan War. Homer notes that Achilles was killed under the walls of Troy after killing Hector, the main Trojan

Hero. The Middle Ages resources, however, claims that Paris killed Achilles in the temple of Apollo, where he had been lured by promises that he could have Priam's daughter Polyxena if he joined the Trojans. Next to Achilles is Paris. Paris was the son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, and the abductor of Helen. The next is Tristan, hero of medieval French Romance, was the lover of Yseult, wife of King Mark of Cornwall, himself is Tristan's uncle. King Mark wounds Tristan with the poisonous arrow. In his death throws, Tristan embraces Yseult so strongly that both die in that embrace.

C. The Damnation of Francesca in the Second Circle of Hell

Among the lover-sinners in the second circle of Hell, one couple, Francesca and Paolo, catches Dante's attention most. "Poet," says Dante to his guide, Virgil, "I would willingly/Speak with those two who move along together, / And seem so light upon the wind." (64-66). Then in the name of love, Dante calls out to Francesca and Paolo. They descend like doves to the nest, and there begins Francesca's speech relating their love story. The "land where I was born" (97) is the territory of Ravenna, and the speaker is Francesca da Rimini, daughter of Guido da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna. Though married to Gianciotto Malatesta of Rimini for political reasons, she fell in love with his younger brother, Paolo. When Gianciotto, discovered their adulterous love, he killed them.

Francesca, a beautiful young wife, passionately and, as she implies in her narrative, innocently in love with her husband's handsome younger brother, ends up in a tragic death in the hand of the husband. Francesca's

love story with Paolo is so moving that it rightly invites Dante and the reader's sympathy. Eloquent and moving as it is, Francesca's speech employs evasive rhetorical strategy and contains some suppressed reality (Foster 1981). The danger arises if we allow sympathy to Francesca out of belief that she, as she strongly implies in her speech, is really innocent in the affair. Believing in Francesca's innocence means questioning the validity of her damnation in Hell, and to some degree doubting God's justice. Making use of the vulnerability of emotion, she appeals to Dante's emotion and invites his sympathy, an act consistent with her privileging passion over reason in her love affair with his brother-in-law. For some time the poet is taken by the appeal and almost driven to refuting God's justice. Much of her testimony about her love affair with Paolo is a self-defense, as one would expect of any prisoner's account of his or her conviction. Francesca's speech, which dominates the second half of canto V, is a difficult case for Dante because, among other things, it tests Dante's understanding of his moral position in the journey.

There is a principle dramatic contrast between the perspectives of the pilgrims, Dante and Virgil, on one hand, and the perspectives of the damned, Francesca on the other. Minos, a charge hand of the machinery of Hell, who "examines each one's sin, / Judging and disposing (4-5)" and "discerns / For every spirit its proper place in Hell (8-9) rightly welcomes Dante and Virgil at the entrance of the second circle of Hell with the warning, "You, who have come to sorrow's hospice, think well (15). Beware how you come in and whom you trust, don't

be deceived because the gate is wide" (18-19). The demon's warning introduces the upcoming danger of Francesca's speech. The warning implies that the poet should exercise a clear reasoning, or in Minos' words, to "think well" in the upcoming confrontation with Francesca's moving but deceptive narrative. For a moment, Dante allows himself to test his moral judgments. Francesca's being condemned in Hell for her love of Paolo is disturbing enough for him. He is in the grip of pity when he calls Francesca, in a tone showing his unrestrained emotion, "Oh wearied souls! If another does not forbid, / Come speak with us" (71-72). He is moved to pity at the thought of the damnation. "Francesca, your suffering makes me weep/ for sorrow and pity-"(103-4).

Dante seems to allow his emotion govern his reason in judging Francesca. His perception for a while is clouded with pity on Francesca. But allowing pity on sinners in Hell can be subversive against the idea of God's absolute justice if the pity goes so far as doubting the justness of the damnation. Hell is the place where souls received their sin and God's judgment is final. But at the point where Dante is caught up in doubt and ambiguity about Francesca's damnation and, by implication, God's justice in Hell, Virgil, frequently regarded as an allegorical figure of Reason in the journey, awakens and leads him to act according to reason and moral codes. Emotion and pity are poor guide compared to reason. The poet needs to detach himself from his emotion in responding to Francesca's narrative. When Dante bows his head in understanding of Francesca's fate, Virgil prompts him to continue,

When I heard those two afflicted souls, I lowered
My head, and held it so till I heard the voice

Of the poet ask, "What are you thinking?" I answered
"Alas- that sweet conception and passion so deep
Should bring them here!" (98-102)

At the end of Canto V, being affected by Francesca's narration, Dante is left in disorder and paralyzed like a dead body. "my pity/ Overwhelmed me and I felt myself go slack:/ Swooning as in death, I fell like a dying body" (125-26). The concluding lines display Dante's emotional defeat during the confrontation with Francesca. He faints with pity before the lustful Francesca. The words and companionship of Virgil, however, offers a balance with which Dante manages his emotion and reason.

Francesca might convey her narrative in a sophisticated rhetoric. But behind its eloquence and fluency, the narrative, which dominates the second half of canto V, is evasive. She effectively stirs Dante's emotion by invoking the phrases Aeneas uses when he stirs Dido's pity in *The Aeneid* book II lines 4-18. "No sadness/ Is greater than in misery to rehearse/ Memories of joy, as your teacher well can witness" (107-109). Her emphasis, "as your teacher [Virgil] well can witness" is a perfect validation of her appeal for who else but Virgil who understands the kind of sorrow she is telling. The sophisticated rhetoric is sustained in the repetition of the word "love" in a highly mannered and charm like.

Love, which in gentle hearts is quickly born,

Seized him for my fair body – which in fierce
Manner torments my soul, was torn
Untimely away from me. Love which absolves

None who are loved from loving, made my heart
burn
With joy so strong that as you see it cleaves
Still to him, here. Love gave us both one death
(89-95).

However, Francesca's sophisticated rhetoric also implies her highly evasive narrative strategy. Nowhere else is this more obvious than in lines 123-124 of Canto V.

Sometimes at what we read our glances
joined,

Looking from the book each to the
other's eyes,

And then the color in our faces drained.

But one particular moment alone it was
Defeated us: *the longed-for smile*, it
said,

Was kissed by that most noble lover:
at this,

This one who now will never leave my
side,

kissed my mouth, trembling. A Galeotto,
that book! (113-122)

The very eloquence and fluency of the words in the above quotations conceals and erodes the adulterous aspect of Francesca's affair with Paolo through evasive strategy. They read with innocent spirit, she tells; steal intermittent glances to each other, the eyes meet and the countenances shift. Up to this point the episode reaches its climax. But just the time when we expect her to tell what

they do at the climax moment, Francesca interrupts the natural progressions of the narrative. Instead of giving account of what they consciously do as a logical consequence of the preceding actions, Francesca turns to “one particular moment alone” as the active agency of the climax moment. Francesca’s narratives evasiveness is an effective weapon for her moral evasiveness in her affair. She tries to escape the moral responsibility of the scandal by emphasizing that the “particular moment” is a moment of annihilation and thus the irresistibly erotic excitement at the critical moment is beyond her power to control.

Here Francesca presents herself more as a victim of the crime, i.e. the medieval romance she read with Paolo, rather than the actor. The first part of her story describes their love in the clichés of medieval literature: a unique and irresistible passion, kindled on sight, swept them to their death. The second part of the story seems to contradict this: in fact, she confesses, their love was neither spontaneous nor predestined. It was suggested by their reading of the romance of Lancelot. In Hell, Francesca seems to be disabused of her romantic illusions. What appeared to have been love at first sight was in fact love by the book. Book and author seduced the lovers. Here Francesca bears witness to the power of literature more than to the irresistibility of love. She is a lover sinner and yet claimed to be blameless because of love potion by the romance book. She insisted upon the inevitability of love for those “gentle hearts.”

Charles S Singleton (Singleton, 1970) asserts that Canto V portrays Francesca as a deluded victim of medieval romance, like a

thirteenth-century Madame Bovary. The blame is on the romance book of Lancelot and Guenevere and the “one particular moment” which I understand, among other things as the natural erotic urge. I would argue that these are not convincing scapegoats. The book surely has spell of its own, which slowly possess the lovers and appeals to the demands of the lovers’ natural inclinations. The forces of word and natural instincts act across the space between Francesca and Paolo. But these forces work only because the space is lacking moral control and restraints. The fact that she presents Paolo as the leading actor in the climactic moment, “This one who now will never leave my side, / kissed my mouth” and her emphasizing the Lancelot tale at the center of the narrative while she remains at shadow, are another escape from responsibility of the scandal. We might speculate as well that it could be Francesca who seduces Paolo, rather than otherwise. Her leading role in the conversation might suggest that it is she who initiates the affair.

In the anaphoric lines about love above, Francesca seems to conceive love as an independent agency, an overmastering and omnipotent power, which is “quickly born” in the heart and “seized” the lover. She defines herself as prisoner of love impulse, that being love, she could only love in return. “Love which absolves/ None who are loved from loving” (92-93). This is again an effective escape of moral responsibility. She uses the power of love, as an excuse for her irresponsible action rather than a ground of dignity and the core of moral responsibility. Her assertion that that Paolo and she herself sitting alone reading without “any suspicion”

of what subsequently can occur between them is another emphasis that she is innocently taken by love. She seems to suggest that it is love that sneaks in their life and trigger the illegitimate relationship rather than they who invite it. At this point Francesca negates the element of free will man can exercise in dealing with love.

In each phase Francesca's voice exerts claims upon attention and sympathy while concealing the pretensions behind it. Her address to Dante earlier establishes a voice which is delicate, fluent, and capable of considerable sophisticated rhetoric.

"O living soul, who with courtesy and compassion
Voyage through black air visiting us who stained
The world with blood: If heaven's King bore affection

For such as we are, suffering in this wind,
Then we would pray to Him to grant you peace
For pitying us in this, our evil end (79-84)

Here we see again, argues Thomas G Birgin, (Birgin,1970) Francesca's rhetoric flaw, in the sense that the delicacy and fluency of rhetoric falls short. The conditional blessing is a refutation of the idea that God has absolute affection. Her saying "If heaven's King bore affection", presupposes that in the realm of Hell God's affection does not exist anymore, the idea of which is against the absolutism of God's affection. I notice at this too Francesca falters in her eloquent rhetoric. The blessing might give her divine character, but it also betrays her mundane code of behavior. She simply wants to trade with God: If God spares her from damnation, then she would offer Him virtuous deeds

as He prescribes. The failure to retain the strength of her rhetoric and to present herself as convincing virtuous individual who deserves sympathy happens again in the conclusion of the narrative. There, Francesca's voice abruptly breaks off, expressing a hatred for her murderer. She breaks down and utters a harsh expression of detestation, "Love gave us both one death, Caina awaits the one who took our lives"(89-96). The harsh spirit in the narrative she has been suppressing under the graceful and eloquent speech is unraveled.

In her effort to win the poet's sympathy, Francesca intelligently presents herself with all the characteristics of the feminine being potentially invites sympathy: she is kind, graceful, gentle. In spite of her being in Hell, there is still a sense of modesty and charm about her. Her modesty and delicate expression of feeling arouses in Dante and the reader sympathy for her plight. It is this quality which causes Dante to faint at the end of the Canto after hearing her story.

D. Conclusion

Canto V discusses Francesca's speech is a petition of her damnation, why is she cast off in hell. She is judged in the light of the God-given property of human being, i.e. reason and free will. Francesca is measured against the essential principles of Dante's thought in regard to moral responsibility in love, how love should reside in the act of responsible free will, something that Francesca fails to do and fails to comprehend. Her appeal for sympathy and, by implication, questioning damnation in Hell through eloquent, subtle appeal to the pilgrim's sympathy generates from this in-

ability. She talks of love in terms of individual right, as a transcendent individual rights and the external causality, i.e. she is not responsible for the deeds the external factors leads her to do. In Dante's moral codes, she is wrong. She is still responsible for what she does. There might be Paolo, the inducing tale of Lancelot, the "one particular moment" and what not that stimulate her deeds, but there is her very being with a God –given free will to deal with those things. To acquit her for her sin of love is probably the same as to spare Eve for eating the forbidden tree on the ground that it is Satan who first induces her to commit the sin. God still regards her as the major causality of the sin despite Satan's prompts. At the moment of the temptation by Satan, Eve with her free will has the power to choose whether to succumb or resist the temptation. And so does Francesca, at the "one particular moment". Eve is responsible for her flaw and pays it in full in her exile from Heaven to the treacherous earth. Francesca is responsible for the choice she makes and thus deserves her place at the second circle of Hell.

Canto V is a cautionary tale, warning the suggestible reader about the dangers of romance book. But ironically, it might be as seductive as the literature against which it warns. Francesca's name is canonized in this masterpiece of Dante, equated with the legendary heroines in love's cannon such as Helen of Troy, Dido, or Cleopatra. For the twentieth century readers, it might be difficult to understand why Dante considered adultery, or lustfulness, the least hateful of the sins of incontinence. The reason is probably Dante inscribes Hell as a place where the sinner deliberately chooses his sin and

fail to repent. In the case of Francesca, for example, Dante has her argued that she *did not deliberately* choose adultery. Her adultery, she insists, was a gentle lapsing into love for Paolo. It is just a matter of incontinence and of weakness of will. Only the fact that she was killed by her husband in the moment of adultery did not give her opportunity to repent, and for this reason she is condemned to Hell. It might be also reasonably argued that the sin of adultery committed over and over deliberately would be placed in the lower part of Hell.

Francesca insists that her sin is not a sin she committed intentionally. She presents herself as a passionate woman, certainly she is capable of sin and she is certainly guilty of sin, but she is just a woman who concerns much about the man she loves. Francesca feels that love is something that does not need justification. She rejects the charge that he love is a case of some vulgar sexual sin. She admits she is just a woman who has drifted helplessly – though willingly- into love.

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