

CANTO XIV

After Dante's love for Florence moves him to restore the scattered leaves to the soul of his enshrined countryman, the Poets come to the third ring, a plain of burning sand (1–15). There blasphemers (the violent against God) lie upon their backs, sodomites (the violent against Nature) roam the plain, and usurers (the violent against human industry) sit crouched up (16–27) as flakes of fire rain down upon them. Eternally they squirm, roasted by the blazing sands beneath and scorched by the flames above (28–42). Among the blasphemers Virgil and Dante encounter the scornful Capaneus, one of the Seven Kings who besieged Thebes. He was incinerated by a lightning bolt for having defied Jupiter and persists in his blasphemy even now, tormented as much by his inner rage as by the outer sands and flames (43–72). As Virgil leads Dante on, they reach a rivulet of boiling blood that gurgles from the wood of suicides. Its bed and banks are of stone, and its rising steam extinguishes the falling brands so as to offer the Travelers safe passage (73–93). To the fascinated Dante Virgil explains that on Mt. Ida in Crete, the center of the then-known world, midway between Europe, Asia, and Africa, there stands a statue of a great Old Man, representing the history of humankind. Its back is turned to the ancient, pagan world in Damietta, Egypt, and it faces the modern, Christian world in Rome, from which it awaits renewal. Its head of gold symbolizes both the classical Golden Age and the Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden, whereas the subsequent ages are betokened in the silver of its arms and chest, the brass of its lower trunk, and the iron and clay of its legs. The iron foot signifies the Empire, the clay foot the Church, on which too much weight is placed, causing imbalance and disorder in the world. With the exception of the head, the entire statue is cracked, suggesting the subsequent eras marred by sin. The tears of human suffering drip from the fissures and flow down in the interconnected rivers of Hell to punish those who caused them (94–120). Not having seen the connecting links of the fluvial system thus far, Dante remains puzzled. But, as Virgil points out, they have not completed the entire circumference of any circle, so that the required connections lie in the untraversed regions. A final river, Lethe, flows down to Hell from the top of Mount Purgatory, washing away with it the last memories of sin (121–142).

¹ The love of native land was the constraint That moved me to collect the scattered leaves
And give them back to him whose voice was faint.

⁴ We came then to the boundary where there cleaves The second from the third of rings, and where [\[222\]](#)
One sees what horrid but just art achieves.

7 To make more manifest the new things there, I say we came upon an open
field,
Whose bed, repelling every plant, lay bare.

10 It's garlanded by that unhappy weald As by a dismal moat the woods are
bound;[\[223\]](#)
There at its edge we made our footsteps yield.

13 A soil of thick, dry sand lay all around, And yet it was not fashioned
otherwise
Than that which Cato's heel before had ground.[\[224\]](#)

16 O vengeful God, what fear of you must rise Within each one who here may
come to read
Just what was manifested to my eyes!

19 Such herds of naked souls I saw indeed; They all lamented wretchedly their
wrack,
Though different laws appeared for them decreed.

22 Thus, on the ground some lay upon the back; Some sat there all crouched up;
another train
Was a continuously roaming pack.

25 Most numerous were those who roved the plain But fewer those who lay
tormented so,
Though they had looser tongues to cry their pain.

28 And over all the sands, though falling slow, Distended flakes of fire dropped
down like rain, As on the windless heights there falls the snow.

31 Once Alexander in the hot domain Of India observed his armies shelled
By flames that fell, intact, on that terrain,

34 And he with all his legions was compelled To tramp the soil because the
vapors sent
Would be, remaining single, better quelled.[\[225\]](#)

37 Just so was the eternal heat's descent: Like tinder under flint there burned the
sands,
And so the pains were doubled in extent.

40 The dancing movement of the wretched hands, Now here, now there, was
ever wanting rest,
While brushing off the freshly fallen brands.

43 "O Master, you who overcome each test,"
I started, "save those hardened demon breeds
Who at the gateway came to thwart our quest,

46 Who is that giant? It appears he heeds[\[226\]](#)
No fire but lies, with scorn and scowl, outspread, And seems unripened by the
raining gleeds."

49 And that same one, when he perceived the thread Of what concerning him I
asked my Guide,
Screamed: "What I was alive, that am I dead!

52 Though Jove should tire the blacksmith who supplied His anger with the
keen-edged bolt which I
Was smitten with upon the day I died;

55 Or though he tire the rest in turn who ply In Mongibello forges black as night
With 'Help, good Vulcan, help me!' as his cry,

58 Just as he did before at Phlegra's fight, And hurl his shafts with all his
strength applied, His vengeance still would not bring him delight."[\[227\]](#)

61 And now with such a force my Leader cried As I had never heard him use
before:

"O Capaneus, since your haughty pride

64 Remains unquenched, you're punished all the more.
No other torment than your rage would be
Sufficient pain to match your anger's store."

67 But then with better lips he turned to me And said: "This king was one of

seven such
Besieging Thebes; he held, and holds I see,[\[228\]](#)

70 Our God in scorn and prizes him not much; But, as I said to him, the words
of spite
That deck his breast are quite a fitting touch.

73 Now follow me, and see your feet don't light As yet upon the burning sands
to bake,
But always to the woodlands hold them tight."

76 In silence we had come where from the brake A little stream spurts forth, and
even still
Its reddish color causes me to shake.

79 As from the Bulicame flows a rill,[\[229\]](#)
Which with each other wanton women share,
So this one ran across the sand downhill.

82 Of stonework were its bottom part, its pair Of sloping banks, its edges on
each side,
And so I saw that here was thoroughfare.

85 "Of all that I have shown you here inside, Since first we made our entry by
that door
Whose open threshold no one is denied,

88 Your eyes saw nothing so of note before As that which here the present
streams provide,
Extinguishing all flames above the shore."

91 These were the words delivered by my Guide; At this I begged him to supply
the taste
Of that for which the wish had been supplied.

94 "Amidst the sea there sits a land laid waste That bears the name of Crete," I
then was told,[\[230\]](#)

“Beneath whose king the world had once been chaste.[\[231\]](#)

97 There was a happy mountain there, consoled By leaves and seas, and ‘Ida’ it
was styled;

It’s now deserted like a thing grown old.

100 But Rhea chose it once for her small child[\[232\]](#)

As his safe cradling and, so that she might
Best hide his cries, had servants screaming wild.

103 A great Old Man stands in the mount upright;[\[233\]](#)

His back turned towards Damietta far behind,[\[234\]](#)

He looks on Rome, a mirror to his sight.[\[235\]](#)

106 His head is fashioned from a gold refined; Of purest silver are his arms and
chest;

He’s then of brass to where the fork is tined,

109 Below which all is iron, proved the best, Except a right foot baked of clay,
and more

On it than on the other does he rest.

112 And every part, except the golden ore, Is cracked with fissures dripping
down his tears, Which, when collected, pierce the cavern floor.

115 ‘Cross rocks to depths the course they follow steers To form the Ach’ron,
Styx, and Phlegethon,

Then onwards through a narrow channel veers

118 Until descent is done, and thereupon It makes Cocytus too; what kind of
tank[\[236\]](#)

It is I shall not tell—you’ll see anon.”

121 I asked: “But if the present streamlet sank Down from our world thus far,
why have we found

It to appear, then, only at this bank?”

124 He answered me: “You know this place is round, And though you’ve come

with me through quite a space, But always leftwards, towards the lower
ground,

127 You've not made all the circle, in which case If there should yet appear
some thing that's new, It should not bring such wonder to your face."

130 "My Lord, where's Phlegethon, and Lethe too?[\[237\]](#)

From speaking of the one," I said, "you've shied And say that from this rain the
other grew."

133 "I'm pleased with all your questions," he replied, "Though by the boiling of
the reddish brew

One of your queries' knots should be untied.

136 Outside this chasm, you will come to view The river Lethe, where the souls
are led

To wash when they've removed the faults they rue.

139 It's time to quit the forest now," he said, And so be sure to follow me close
by:

The banks unburnt have made a way ahead,

142 And every vapor has been quenched on high."