**Canto XXXIV**

ninth circle: cocytus **1**

*Compound Fraud*

round four: judecca

*The Treacherous to Their Masters*

the center

*Satan*

“On march the banners of the King,”**2**Virgil begins as the Poets face the last depth. He is quoting a medieval hymn, and to it he adds the distortion and -perversion of all that lies about him. “On march the banners of the King—of Hell.” And there before them, in an infernal parody of Godhead, they see Satan in the distance, his great wings beating like a windmill. It is their beating that is the source of the icy wind of Cocytus, the exhalation of all evil.

All about him in the ice are strewn the sinners of the last round, Judecca, named for Judas Iscariot.**3**These are the Treacherous to Their Masters. They lie completely sealed in the ice, twisted and distorted into every conceivable posture. It is impossible to speak to them, and the Poets move on to observe Satan.

He is fixed into the ice at the center to which flow all the rivers of guilt; and as he beats his great wings as if to escape, their icy wind only freezes him more surely into the polluted ice. In a grotesque parody of the Trinity, he has three faces, each a different color, and in each mouth he clamps a sinner whom he rips eternally with his teeth. Judas Iscariot is in the central mouth: Brutus and Cassius**4**in the mouths on either side.

Having seen all, the Poets now climb through the center, grappling hand over hand down the hairy flank of Satan himself—a last supremely symbolic action—and at last, when they have passed the center of all gravity, they emerge from Hell. A long climb from the earth’s center to the Mount of Purgatory awaits them, and they push on without rest, ascending along the sides of the river Lethe, till they emerge once more to see the stars of Heaven, just before dawn on Easter Sunday.

 “On march the banners of the King of Hell,”

 my Master said. “Toward us. Look straight ahead:

 can you make him out at the core of the frozen shell?”

 Like a whirling windmill seen afar at twilight,

5or when a mist has risen from the ground—

 just such an engine rose upon my sight

 stirring up such a wild and bitter wind

 I cowered for shelter at my Master’s back,

 there being no other windbreak I could find.

 I stood now where the souls of the last class

10(with fear my verses tell it) were covered wholly;

 they shone below the ice like straws in glass.



 Some lie stretched out; others are fixed in place

 upright, some on their heads, some on their soles;

 another, like a bow, bends foot to face.

15When we had gone so far across the ice

 that it pleased my Guide to show me the foul creature**5**

 which once had worn the grace of Paradise,

 he made me stop, and, stepping aside, he said:

 “Now see the face of Dis!**6**This is the place

20where you must arm your soul against all dread.”

 Do not ask, Reader, how my blood ran cold

 and my voice choked up with fear. I cannot write it:

 this is a terror that cannot be told.



 I did not die, and yet I lost life’s breath:

25imagine for yourself what I became,

 deprived at once of both my life and death.

 The Emperor of the Universe of Pain

 jutted his upper chest above the ice;

 and I am closer in size to the great mountain

30the Titans**7**make around the central pit,

 than they to his arms. Now, starting from this part,

 imagine the whole that corresponds to it!



 If he was once as beautiful as now

 he is hideous, and still turned on his Maker,

35well may he be the source of every woe!

 With what a sense of **awe** I saw his head

 towering above me! for it had three faces:**8**

 one was in front, and it was fiery red;

 the other two, as weirdly wonderful,

40merged with it from the middle of each shoulder

 to the point where all converged at the top of the skull;

 the right was something between white and bile;

 the left was about the color one observes

 on those who live along the banks of the Nile.

45Under each head two wings rose terribly,

 their span proportioned to so gross a bird:

 I never saw such sails upon the sea.

 They were not feathers—their texture and their form

 were like a bat’s wings—and he beat them so

50that three winds blew from him in one great storm:

 it is these winds that freeze all Cocytus.

 He wept from his six eyes, and down three chins

 the tears ran mixed with bloody froth and pus.**9**



 In every mouth he worked a broken sinner

55between his rake-like teeth. Thus he kept three

 in eternal pain at his eternal dinner.

 For the one in front the biting seemed to play

 no part at all compared to the ripping: at times

 the whole skin of his back was flayed away.

60“That soul that suffers most,” explained my Guide,

 “is Judas Iscariot, he who kicks his legs

 on the fiery chin and has his head inside.

 Of the other two, who have their heads thrust forward,

 the one who dangles down from the black face

65is Brutus: note how he **writhes** without a word.

 And there, with the huge and sinewy arms, is the soul,

 of Cassius,—But the night is coming on**10**

 and we must go, for we have seen the whole.”



 Then, as he bade, I clasped his neck, and he,

70watching for a moment when the wings

 were opened wide, reached over dexterously**11**

 and seized the shaggy coat of the king demon;

 then grappling matted hair and frozen crusts

 from one tuft to another, clambered down.

75When we had reached the joint where the great thigh

 merges into the swelling of the haunch,

 my Guide and Master, straining terribly,

 turned his head to where his feet had been

 and began to grip the hair as if he were climbing;**12**

80so that I thought we moved toward Hell again.

 “Hold fast!” my Guide said, and his breath came shrill

 with labor and exhaustion. “There is no way

 but by such stairs to rise above such evil.”

 At last he climbed out through an opening

85in the central rock, and he seated me on the rim;

 then joined me with a **nimble** backward spring.

 I looked up, thinking to see Lucifer

 as I had left him, and I saw instead

 his legs projecting high into the air.

90Now let all those whose dull minds are still vexed

 by failure to understand what point it was

 I had passed through, judge if I was perplexed.

 “Get up. Up on your feet,” my Master said.

 “The sun already mounts to middle tierce,**13**

95and a long road and hard climbing lie ahead.”



 It was no hall of state we had found there,

 but a natural animal pit hollowed from rock

 with a broken floor and a close and sunless air.

 “Before I tear myself from the Abyss,”

100I said when I had risen, “O my Master,

 explain to me my error in all this:



 where is the ice? and Lucifer—how has he

 been turned from top to bottom: and how can the sun

 have gone from night to day so suddenly?”

105And he to me: “You imagine you are still

 on the other side of the center where I grasped

 the shaggy flank of the Great Worm of Evil

 which bores through the world—you *were* while I climbed down,

 but when I turned myself about, you passed

110the point to which all gravities are drawn.

 You are under the other hemisphere where you stand;

 the sky above us is the half opposed

 to that which canopies the great dry land.

 Under the midpoint of that other sky

115the Man**14**who was born sinless and who lived

 beyond all blemish, came to suffer and die.

 You have your feet upon a little sphere

 which forms the other face of the Judecca.

 There it is evening when it is morning here.

120And this gross Fiend and Image of all Evil

 who made a stairway for us with his hide

 is pinched and prisoned in the ice-pack still.

 On this side he plunged down from heaven’s height,

 and the land that spread here once hid in the sea

125and fled North to our hemisphere for fright;**15**

 And it may be that moved by that same fear,

 the one peak**16**that still rises on this side

 fled upward leaving this great cavern**17**here.”

 Down there, beginning at the further bound

130of Beelzebub’s**18**dim tomb, there is a space

 not known by sight, but only by the sound



 of a little stream**19**descending through the hollow

 it has eroded from the massive stone

 in its endlessly entwining lazy flow.”

135My Guide and I crossed over and began

 to mount that little known and lightless road

 to ascend into the shining world again.

 He first, I second, without thought of rest

 we climbed the dark until we reached the point

140where a round opening brought in sight the blest

 and beauteous shining of the Heavenly cars.

 And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.**20**

**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:**Which aspect of the ninth circle of Hell do you find most horrible? Why?

**2. (a) Recall:**In lines 22–23, what does Dante say he cannot write or describe?**(b) Interpret:**How does he succeed nevertheless in communicating his experience?

**3. (a) Recall:**Who are the three figures in Satan’s mouth?**(b) Infer:**What sin do all three have in common?**(c) Analyze:**Why do you think Dante chooses to situate the punishment for such sin in a frozen lake?

**4. (a) Recall:**In line 65, which aspect of Brutus’ suffering does Virgil emphasize?**(b) Generalize:**Why might language be denied to the inhabitants of the ninth circle of Hell?

**5. (a) Evaluate:**In what ways do you think Dante the character’s feelings about the lost inhabitants of Hell have changed since the beginning of the*Inferno* ?**(b) Analyze:**What message about tolerance for sin might Dante the poet be expressing through his characters emotional evolution?

**6. Hypothesize:**If you were to undertake a journey such as Dante’s, whom would you choose as your guide? Explain your answer.