

Mary Jo Bang

Three Cantos from Dante's Inferno

XV

The hardened margin holds us and on we go.
The vapor rose off the boiling stream and became a hovering
Cloud that protected the banks and water from the fire.

Like the Flemish between Wissant and Bruges
Who, fearing flood tides,
Build a dike to keep the sea behind,

And like the Paduans who erect embankments
Along the Benta to protect their towns and mansions
From the summer snow-melt runoff,

So some Frank Lloyd Wright designed these banks,
Except whoever he was, he didn't build them
As thick or as high as those.

It was when the thicket was already so far off
Behind the mist—if I'd turned back to look
I wouldn't have seen it—

15

That we came to a group of souls
Running parallel to the bank; they stared up at us
Like men will sometimes eye one another

At dusk in the dim white of a fingernail moon—
Brows knitted and eyes squinting
Like a forty-plus tailor threading a needle's eye.

Studied like that, one recognized me;
He reached up, grabbed the hem of my coat
And cried, “What a thing! Isn’t this amazing?”

While he stretched his arm out to me,
I searched the scorched face and behind
The burnt features, I could see

A man I’d once known; lowering my hand
As if to touch his face, I said, Signore Brunetto,
“Are you down here?”

30

“My boy, I hope you won’t be annoyed
If Brunetto Latino retraces his steps a little
To talk to you and lets the group run on ahead.”

“Not at all,” I said, “I wish with all my heart you would;
Or if you’d rather, we could just sit here—
As long as the one I’m with doesn’t object.”

“My boy,” he said, “if any of this flock of birds stops,
For even a second, he has to lie down for a century
And not brush off the fire that falls on him.

Just keep walking ahead, I’ll hang on
To the hem of your coat and afterward catch up with the
band
Of those who go about crying over their eternal outcome.”

I didn’t dare climb down from our higher perch
To his lower level but walked like the reverential walk,
With my head bowed.

45

He began, “What luck or doom brings you down here
Before your time’s run out,
And who’s this who’s playing docent?”

I answered, “Up there above,
Where it’s light, I lost my way in a dark valley,
Even before I had had half a life.

I left the edge of it early yesterday; but then
Turned and went back in. That’s when he came along,
And now he’s leading me home along this walkway.”

He told me, “All you have to do is follow your fixed star,
Your ship can’t fail to arrive at greatness—that is, if
When I was happily alive I read the cards right.

If I’d lived longer,
Because heaven’s clearly deemed you a golden boy,
I would have encouraged you in all your work. 60

However, that mob of malicious ingrates, who came down
A long time ago from Fiosole, but who still
Smack of the mountain rube and the crude rock pile,

Will become your enemies because of the good you do,
And that makes sense, sweet figs shouldn’t ripen
In an orchard of bitter Whitty Pears.

They’ve famously been called blind; as a group,
They’re greedy, envious and arrogant.
Don’t let yourself be like them.

You’re so clearly destined for such high honors
That you’ll look like a tasty piece of Neptune’s toast
To both parties, so don’t let the goats reach the grass.

Let those Fiosole brutes eat themselves,
And not the plants—
If any still grows on that shite-pile 75

That contains the sacred seed
Of the few pure Romans who stayed
When the others built their viper's nest."

"If I had my way," I told him,
"I wouldn't have let you be banished yet
From humanity.

The image I have of you, which now makes me sad,
Comes from remembering how sweet, loving,
And like a father you were as you patiently and steadily

Taught me how we make ourselves immortal.
As long as I live, I'll feel compelled
To tell anyone who'll listen how grateful I am to you.

What you're now telling me about the future, I'll keep
In the vault with another text I'm taking to a woman
Who'll make sense of them, if I ever reach her. 90

I can tell you this much for sure—as long as
I've done nothing to bother my conscience,
I'm prepared for whatever fortune has in her lockbox.

I've already been told what I've been promised,
So let fortune turn her wheel—whatever,
And let the bumpkin hoe his row."

My teacher then glanced back at me
Over his right shoulder and said, "Remember
The proverb, 'Those who have ears, ought to hear this.'"

Meanwhile, I continue talking to Signore Bernetto
As we walk along; I ask him who's the most notorious
Of those he runs with, who's the most distinguished.

He told me, "It's good for you to be aware
Of some of them, but as for the rest, let it go;
There's not time enough to name them all. 105

What you should know is that those in my group
Were all clerics and great and famous scholars
Who were ruined in the world by a single sin.

Priscian travels with those degenerates, as does
Francesco d'Accorso; and if you have a taste for lowlives,
You might have spotted in the middle of them

The Bishop who the Servant of Servants transferred
From Arno to Bacchiglione
Where his erect nerves are now interred.

I'd love to stay and keep talking but I can't;
That smoke you see in the distance coming
Off the sand means a group of souls

I'm not allowed to be with is headed this way.
Keep my Trésor in your memory; that's where
I go on living. I don't ask you for more than that." 120

Watching him turn back, he reminded me of a runner
In the yearly race at Verona; he looked a lot like the one
Who comes in first and takes the green-flag,

And nothing like the one who comes in last.

Notes for Canto XV

10: Frank Lloyd Wright: American architect (1867-1959) associated with the Prairie School movement; Prairie School buildings are usually defined by horizontal lines and solid construction; the primary tenet of the school was that the structure should appear “organic” to the site.

19: At dusk in the dim white of a fingernail moon—: Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Moonrise”:

I awoke in the Midsummer not to call night, in the white and
the walk of the morning:
The moon, dwindled and thinned to the fringe of a finger-
nail held to the candle,

29: Signore Brunetto: Brunetto Latini (c. 1220-1294) was a Florentine philosopher, orator, translator (of Cicero), author, and statesman. He wrote, as Dante did, in vernacular Italian. His most famous works are (in Italian) a long poem titled, *Tesoretto*, and (in French) *Li Livre dou Trésor*, a prose work.

55: your fixed star: Sylvia Plath, “Words”:

Years later I
Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

While Dante’s exact date of birth is not known, many Dantists interpret lines 151-154 in Canto XXII, “As I revolved with the eternal twins, I saw revealed from hills to

river outlets, the threshing floor that makes us so furious,” to mean he was born under the star sign of Gemini (May 22-June 21).

61-62: malicious ingrates, who came down/A long time ago from Fiosole: Fiosole is a hill town in Tuscany, approximately 5 miles from Florence. It was originally the home of a Roman traitor, Catiline; the town was conquered by the Romans who then built Florence at the foot of the hill, there “they welcomed into their midst those Fiesolans who wanted to stay on and live there.” (Villani, I, 38).

66: Whitty Pears: Whitty Pear is another name for the Sorb Tree; because the fruit is high in tannins, when first picked from the tree it is extremely astringent.

71: a tasty piece of Neptune’s toast: Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act I, sc iii, lines 45-48:

where's then the saucy boat
Whose weak untimber'd sides but even now
Co-rivall'd greatness? Either to harbour fled,
Or made a toast for Neptune.

“Toasted bread immersed in wine, ale, (or for weak stomachs,) water was considered a delicacy.” Footnote to line 48 in *Troilus and Cressida*, ed Harold N. Hildebrand, supplemental ed, T.W. Baldwin. (J. B. Lippincott Co, Phila and London, 1953): 45.

76-78: That contains the sacred seed / Of the few pure Romans who stayed / When they built their viper’s nest: Villani (I, 38) described the situation: “The Florentines are always in disagreement and at war among themselves. Nor need that cause amazement, since they descend from two so opposed, inimical, and very different peoples—namely, the

noble and virtuous Romans and the crude, war-embittered Fiosolans.” Dante believed that he himself was a direct descendent of pure Roman blood.

82-85: The image I have of you . . . as you patiently and steadily . . . Taught me how we make ourselves immortal: It’s not clear what Dante means by “how we make ourselves immortal” but many commentators point to the fact that Brunetto also wrote rhyming allegorical didactic verse in Italian; Dante is very possibly gesturing toward his debt to Brunetto for the poetic model he’s using for the *Comedia*.

89-90: In the vault with another text I’m taking to a woman / Who’ll make sense of them, if I ever reach her: The woman is Beatrice; “another text (*altro testo*)” refers to Farinata’s prophecy in Canto X. In the event, it’s not Beatrice who interprets these prophecies, but Cacciaguیدا, Dante’s great-great-grandfather, who acts as her spokesperson in Purgatory (Canto XVII).

108: a single sin: The nature of the single sin that unites the group is unstated however most commentators argue that the sin is sodomy. If that is the case, placing the sodomites in the 7th Circle, instead of in 2nd, where sins of lust are punished by tormenting hurricane-force winds, suggests that Dante was defining homosexuality not as a crime of lust but as a crime of violence (against nature—or reproductive sexuality).

Many writers suggest that Dante’s feelings about homosexuality are nuanced. His obvious deep respect for Brunetto suggests a lack criticism, as does his choice of Virgil, who “was inclined to passions for boys,” as a guide. (quoted from Donatus’s (fl. mid-4th C AD) *Life of Virgil*,—which is believed to have been based on *Vita* by Suetonius (a Roman Empire historian c. 69/75-130). In addition, the Sodomites

are placed with the lustful in Circle VII of Purgatory, not with the violent. Those who argue that the single sin is not homosexuality but rather blasphemy or the denial of the supremacy of the Empire point to the fact that there are no descriptions anywhere in recorded history of Brunetto, Priscian, or Francesco d' Accorsco that suggest they were homosexual.

109: Priscian: Priscianus Caesariensis (c. 500 AD) was a Latin grammarian; his work, *Institutiones Grammaticae* (Grammatical Foundations), written in Old Irish (and possibly in Ireland) was the standard Latin textbook in the Middle Ages and parts of which have remained in print until the present. To see reproduction of a page from a copy, done in 850-1 (with handwritten notes, in pen): <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/csg/0904>

110: Francesco d' Accorso; Franciscus Accursius (1225-1293) was a Bolognese jurist and professor of civil law. He taught at the University of Bologna and at Oxford University in England.

112-113: The Bishop who the Servant of Servants transferred/From Arno to Bacchiglione: Andrea de' Mozzi (d. 1296), born in Florence, was appointed Archbishop of Florence in 1287 and served until 1295. Because of his "unseemly living" (Footnote, Singleton, 271), he was transferred by Pope Boniface VIII to Vicenza. "The Servant of Servants" is a phrase used by Popes, in Latin, at the beginning of Papal bulls (announcements); Dante is using it sarcastically here to express his disdain for Boniface who reputedly convinced Pope Celestine to step down and then conspired to have himself elected in his place.

114: Where his erect nerves are now interred: De' Mozzi died in Vicenza five months after he arrived and he was buried there; those who argue that he is a Sodomite, take his "erect nerves" to suggest a state of permanent sexual readiness. That reading is contested by those who argue that these men are guilty not of homosexuality but of other non-sexual crimes.

119: my Trésor: Treasure in English. This possibly refers to Brunetto's book *Li Livre dou Trésor*, an encyclopedic prose work on history, natural science, ethics, rhetoric, and political science, which he wrote in French when took refuge in France after learning that the Guelphs had lost decisively to the Ghibellines and the latter had expelled him from Florence. Boccaccio argues for this volume, as does Longfellow. Robert Hollander suggests that the book in question is the *Tesoretto*, the long allegorical poem written in Italian. He points out that in the text of that volume one finds Brunetto calling the work "this rich Treasure, which is worth silver and gold."

122-123: In the yearly race at Verona; he looked a lot like the one/Who comes in first and takes the green-flag: The footrace, established in 1207 to commemorate a military victory, was run annually on the first Sunday of Lent. The winner received a piece of green cloth, the loser, a rooster. The race was run naked.

XVIII

There's a place in Hell called Malebolge;
It's made of stone that looks like iron that matches
Exactly the color of the cliffs that surround it.

Dead center in the middle of that vast malevolent expanse,
There's an excavation, both extremely wide
And incredibly deep. I'll get back to this later.

Between the pit and the high hard escarpment
Where we walked, are ten circular ditches—
Each separated by a circular path.

Similar in design to a system of numerous moats
That circles a castle and offers protection
To those inside, this arrangement too

Had its rationale. Just as a fortress
Like that would have a series of narrow bridges
That went from front gate to outer rampart, so here, 15

Beginning at the base of the cliff, ridges of broken rock
Ran across the ditches until they met in the center
Where the pit cut them off and gathered them in

Like spokes at the hub of a wheel. This is where
We found ourselves once Geryon had shaken us off;
The poet kept to the left and I came close behind.

On my right, I saw new miseries—
New punishments and new tormenters;
The first ditch was filled of them.

There were two moving columns of naked sinners—
The closer line was walking toward us around the circle;

The farther walked with us, but went faster.

This was the scheme the Romans used
To get pilgrims across the bridge in the year of the Jubilee
When the city was packed with huge crowds; 30

All those on one side walked facing the castle
As they proceeded to St. Peter's; on the opposite side,
Those coming back from St. Peters faced the hill.

The black rock ravine was lined with horned demons
With huge bullwhips
Which they used to cruelly lash the backs of their charges.

Amazing, how devilishly good they were at making them
Race forward with a single flick of the switch.
Trust me, no one waited around for a second or third.

While I was walking along my eyes met those of one
Who made me think, as soon as I saw him,
"I'm sure I've seen that face before."

I stopped to have a better look;
Virgil, ever-patient, stopped too and suggested
I should go back a bit if I wanted to. 45

The one being whipped tried to conceal his face
By tucking in his chin, but it didn't work. I said,
"You, staring down at the ground,

Unless you're wearing a Halloween mask,
You must be Venedico Caccianemico.
What brings you to this bitter Sing Sing?"

"I generally don't like to talk about it," he said, "but
You sound as if you know what happened in the world

Which makes me feel like speaking. I'm the one

Who tricked my sister, Ghisolabella, into allowing
The Marquis in so he could have his way with her—
Whatever other awfulness you may have heard.

I'm not the only Bolognese down here weeping,
This place is packed with us; there are more down here
Than live between the two rivers that border Bologna— 60

That area where they're famous for saying 'whatever'
instead of
Simply saying 'yes.' If you doubt how many are down here,
Just think of the enormous and varied appetites we indulge."

As he was talking to me, a demon lashed him
With his whip, saying, "Keep moving, pimp,
There are no women here you can enlist to line your
pockets."

I went and rejoined my escort;
After a few steps we came to a natural bridgeway
That juts out from the cliff;

We scrambled up, then veered to the right
Along the top of the stone reef's ragged surface,
Leaving behind the walls that go on circling forever.

When we reached the part of the ridge that's open,
And underneath which the whipped ones trudge,
My teacher said, "Stop and take a look 75

At these other poor souls who were all born on a bad day;
You haven't seen their faces before,
Since they've been moving clockwise with us."

From the primeval ridge we could see
Those in the file now coming toward us,
Rushing forward, like the others, in front of the lash.

I hadn't noticed one until my teacher pointed him out.
He said, "Look at that undaunted one headed this way.
He's in great pain, but not a tear.

He reminds me of the Queen. It's Jason,
Who through nerves of steel plus street smarts,
Finessed the Golden Fleece so adored by the Colchis king.

He stopped by the Isle of Lemnos
After those crude and ruthless women
Had murdered all the men among them. 90

There, with sweet talk and a few trinkets, a pelican of lies
He loosed to deceive the girl Hypsipyle, who had
Herself already deceived her sorority sisters.

There he left her, pregnant and alone.
That's why he's suffering here, and why he should be—
That, and also the way he betrayed Medea.

Like him, all the others in this trough were tricksters
And double-crossers. That's all you need to know
About those you see between the jaws of darkness in this
ditch."

We were now where the ridge meets
The second embankment and buttresses
The arch beneath it.

We could hear people in the next ditch whimpering
Loudly, chuffing air through their noses,
And smacking themselves with their hands. 105

The banks were covered with a thick crust of mold
That comes from a miasma that drifts up from below;
It stuck to the walls and burned my nose and eyes.

The bottom was so deep and shrouded in darkness
We could only see it by climbing up to where
The high point of the ridge forms the apex of the arch.

So we went up and from there, looking down
Into the ravine, I could see people immersed
In what had to be untreated sewage.

While examining the bottom, my eyes lit on a man
Who was so plastered with shit I didn't know whether
 he had
A full head of hair, or was tonsured like Friar Laurence.

He called me out, "You got a problem with me?
Out of this whole filthy lot down here?"
I told him, "If I'm not mistaken," 120

I saw you once when your hair was dry—
You were called Alessio Interminei of Lucca.
That's why I'm looking at you instead of at the others."

He tapped his gourd several times and said, "I'm sunk
To this because of a bad habit; I couldn't open
My stinking mouth without drooling flattery."

Then my teacher said, "Lean a little bit
Further forward
So you can get a better view of the face

Of that nasty, disheveled handmaid-slash-harlot
Down there scratching herself with her dirty nails.
Now she's squatting; now she's standing up.

Mary Jo Bang

That's Thais, the whore who, when her lover asked,
'Do you thank me much for what I gave you?'
Said, 'Much? More like a million trillion thanks.' 135

With that, I think we've seen enough."

Notes for Canto XVIII

1: There's a place in Hell called Malebolge; Dante invented this name by combining the words male ("evil") and bolge, which Benvenuto interpreted as "valleys"; other commentators, however, have interpreted bolge as "pouches," "sacs," or "purses." The Sansoni English-Italian/Italian-English Dictionary (The Centro Lessicografico Sansoni under the general editorship of Vladimiro Macchi, 3rd Edition, 2001) gives the following definition for *bolgia*:

bolgia f. (pl. -ge) 1 (dell'inferno dantesco) pit (in Dante's Inferno). 2 (confusione) bedlam. infernale pit of Hell.

Malebolge makes up the eighth Circle; the entire circle is comprised of a series of ten circular valleys—each representing a different kind of fraudulent behavior—that are arranged like moats around a fortified castle. Here, however, in place of the castle, we have the central pit that forms the bottom of Hell, the ninth and final Circle.

16-17: Beginning at the base of the cliff, ridges of broken rock/Ran across the ditches until they met in the center: All except a crucial one of these natural bridgeways span the ten valleys, like drawbridges connect a series of moats and lead to the castle in Dante's simile. Here, the bridges end at a deep central pit, rather like an inverted castle.

25-27: There were two moving columns of naked sinners . . . The farther walked with us, but went faster: The inner column, those walking clockwise toward Dante, is made up of panderers—those who deceived women for money; the outer column, moving counter-clockwise, is composed of the seducers—those who promised women marriage and then afterward abandoned them.

28-30: This was the scheme the Romans used / To get pilgrims across the bridge in the year of the Jubilee / When the city was packed with huge crowds: During a Jubilee year, any Roman who visited both the Cathedral of St. Peter and the Cathedral of St. Paul for thirty straight days (for non-Romans, fifteen days) would have all his or her sins pardoned, provided the sins had been, or would be, confessed. Pope Boniface VIII (who Dante places in hell) proclaimed the first Jubilee in 1300. For that event, to commemorate the birth of Christ, Villani writes that at all times, two hundred thousand pilgrims were either in Rome or entering or leaving. (Villani, VIII, 36) The bridge is the Ponte Sant'Angelo, which goes over the Tiber. It was the only bridge to St. Peters so would have been extremely crowded. Some commentators say Dante was in Rome in 1300, others says he was there in 1301 but even if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, would have undoubtedly heard about how the bridge traffic had been ingeniously handled. Currently the Jubilee is celebrated every twenty-five years, the last one was in 2000.

50: You must be Venedico Caccianemico: The son of the head of the Bolognese Guelph party, he killed his cousin. He also, for money, admitted his supporter, the Marquis of Este, to his sister's bedroom where she succumbed to his advances. The Marquis then discarded her. She later married Niccolò da Fontana of Ferrara.

51: What brings you to this bitter Sing Sing?: Sing Sing is a maximum security prison in Ossining, New York. For the history of Sing Sing, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sing_Sing.

61-62: That area where they're famous for saying 'whatever,' instead of/ Simply saying 'yes.': In Dante's day, the Bolognese dialect substituted *sia* (modern *sepa*) for *si*. Both mean "yes."

85-87: It's Jason, / Who through nerves of steel plus street smarts, / Finessed the Golden Fleece so adored by the Colchis king: In Green mythology, Jason was the leader of the Argonauts when they went to the land of Colchis to steal the golden fleece.

88-94: He stopped by the Isle of Lemnos . . . There he abandoned her, pregnant and alone: Hipsipyle, daughter of Thaos, king of Lemnos, was leader of a group of women who had killed all their husbands. During the massacre, she saved her father. On the journey to Colchis, Jason seduced and abandoned her. She had twins by him. When the women of the isle learned she had spared her father, she was forced to flee.

91-92: a pelican of lies/He loosed: John Berryman, "Dream Song #20: The Secret of the Wisdom":

When worst got things, how was you? Steady on?
Wheedling, or shockt her &
you have been bad to your friend,
whom not you writing to. You have not listened.
A pelican of lies
you loosed: where are you?

95-96: That's why he's suffering here, and why he should be— / That, and also the way he betrayed Medea: Medea, the daughter of King Colchis, in exchange for his promise to marry her, helped Jason deceive her father so he would give him the golden fleece; Jason did marry her but later abandoned her for Creusa, the daughter of King Creon. Medea avenged herself by killing Creusa and her own two children. Jason is being held up as the prototypical serial seducer of women. He abandons two women, the one before marrying her, the other, after.

98: That's all you need to know: John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

99: About those you see between the jaws of darkness in this ditch: William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act I, scene i:

And ere a man hath power to say ‘Behold!’
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.

116-117. I didn’t know whether he had/A full head of hair, or was tonsured like Friar Laurence: Tonsure is the practice by religious orders of shaving the crown of the head. Friar Laurence is the well-intended go-between in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

122: Alessio Interminei of Lucca: A knight of noble birth from Lucca, and apparently a habitual flatterer.

133: That’s Thaïs, the whore who, when her lover asked, / ‘Do you thank me much for what I gave you?’ / Said, ‘Much? More like a million trillion thanks.’: Thaïs is a courtesan in Terence’s comic play, *Eunuchus*. In the play, she doesn’t actually speak directly to her lover but to an intermediary. Commentators believe the error arose because Dante wasn’t familiar with the play itself, but was only aware of the character through Cicero’s use of her as an example of the language of flattery (see Vernon, 60).

XIX

O Simon Magus! And O you miscreant apers of him!
The officers of God should only marry goodness
Gratuitously given but you sell church favors like sad
 women

On their backs sell sex. And leave me to walk around
Like a town crier ringing a bell to tell the world
That you live down here in the third ditch.

We had reached the cemetery that was next
In the series and stood at the summit of the ridge
Where it overlooked the middle of the valley.

O infallible judgment, what an artwork you've made
Of the heavens and the earth and the evil world
And what perfect punishments you mandate.

All along the walls and the bottom of the ravine,
Circular holes, each the same size,
Had been drilled in the dark rock.

15

They appeared no larger than the small fonts
Designed for baptismal priests to stand in
Inside my beautiful Church of San Giovanni,

Where not long ago I broke one—and let this be
My sworn story if anyone out there thinks otherwise—
Not out of sacrilege but to save someone who was dying
 in it.”

The feet of each sinner, along with his legs
Up to his thighs, poked out of the mouth
Of each hole; his head and torso remained tucked inside.

Both soles were on fire; the naked legs
Thrashed with such violence they would have broken
Any strap or band designed to tie them together.

You've seen how fire consumes the outer layer
Of a well-oiled surface, that's how it blazed here
All along the sole from tip of the toe to the back of the heel.³⁰

I asked, "Whose legs are those kicking more furiously
Than any of the rest and whose feet
Are being eaten away by a redder red than all the others?"

He said, "If you'll let me carry you down
To the low point of the slope he can talk to you himself
About his crimes and misdemeanors."

I said, "I want whatever you want. You're the liege
And I'm the loyal follower, you know that;
You even know what I want before I ask."

We walked down to the fourth embankment,
Then turned left and made our way
To where the cramped bottom was riddled with holes.

My helpful teacher carried me on his hip
And didn't put me down until we were just outside
The opening where the man was kicking like crazy. 45

"Whoever you are, miserable sinner, feet up
With your head in a bucket, planted like a post,"
I said to him, "talk to me, if you can."

I was crouched down like a friar hearing the confession
Of an unrepentant killer about to be buried head-down
And who calls you back only to delay his inevitable dying.

He shouted, “Is it you already? Is it you already,
Boniface? Standing there? If so,
The book of time was off by several years.

Are you already finished consuming the riches
You so blatantly swindled from our lady of religion—
And afterward bartered her body for cash.”

I stood there like someone embarrassed
Because they’ve been asked a question they don’t understand
So can’t possibly give an answer. 60

“Tell him quickly,” said Virgil,
“I’m not him, I’m not the one you think I am.”
I quickly said what he said to say.

At that he vehemently flapped his feet,
Then sighed and whined,
“Then what do you want with me?”

If you’ve scrambled down the bank and come all this way
Just to learn my name, I can tell you
I once wore the magnificent red cloak of a pope.

But behind that, I was the son of a she-bear, so eager
To advance my own pups that up there
I stuffed my pockets with money and here I put myself
in one.

Underneath me are the crushed others
Who were Simonists before me, flattened now
Into the fissures of the rock. 75

It will be my turn to drop down next
When that one who I thought you were
When I questioned you a little too quickly arrives.

I've already spent more time having my feet
Seared while standing on my head
Than he'll have to remain planted here with his feet on fire.

After him a rogue shepherd will come
From the west, one whose even worse corruption
Will make him a fitting lid for the two of us.

He'll be another Jason from the Book of Maccabees;
Just like that king favored that one,
The king of France will favor this one."

I don't know whether it was foolish of me
But I took a tone when I answered:
"So, how much money was it 90

That Christ asked St. Peter to pay
Before he agreed to let him be keeper of the keys?
Didn't he simply say, 'Follow me, etcetera'?

And the same for Peter and the others,
They weren't promised gold and such by Matthias
In order to be chosen by lot to take the Judas spot.

So stay right where you are, you've earned your pocket.
It's where you can keep the dirty-money
You took to stand firm against Charles d'Anjou.

If reverence for the divine keys you once held
When you were happily alive
Didn't keep me from speaking

I'd let you know what I truly think of you.
Because your kind of greed cripples the world,
It makes the good go without and elevates evil. 105

It's clergymen like you that John the Evangelist

Had in mind when he envisioned a harlot
On water having sex with kings. She was born

With seven heads, each a gift from the Ghost of God,
And with ten horns, each a commandment; she only knew
How to govern as long as her husband was virtuous.

You've built yourselves a god from silver and gold.
Is this any different from idolatry, except that those
Worshippers have one god and you have a hundred.

Constantine, look what evil you instigated,
Not by your conversion but by the lavish gift
Of money you gave to the first church father.”

And while I sang this song to him, whether he was
Bitten to the quick by the all-shaking thunder of rage,
Or by shame, he kicked fast and hard with both feet. 120

I suspected my teacher approved
Of my forthright diatribe because he listened
Throughout with a look of intense satisfaction.

And afterward picked me up and clasped me
To his chest and retraced the steps
He had taken for the descent.

He held me tight the entire way without tiring
Until we arrived at the summit of the arch
That crosses from four to five.

It was here he gently set his cargo down;
He had to be gentle, the rock was so steep and jagged
We would have had trouble climbing it even if we'd
been goats.

From there, another enormous valley was unveiled.

Notes for Canto XIX

1: O Simon Magus: A first century A.D. sorcerer from Samaria who was converted to Christianity by Philip the evangelist. Most accounts of him come from early Christian writers. According to Acts 8:9-24, he attempted to purchase the power of “laying on of hands” from the Apostles. The sin of “simony” has since been applied to the buying and selling of ecclesiastical positions or influence. Simon Magus was mentioned by Chaucer in “The Persones Tale” and may have been the inspiration for Christopher Marlowe’s Faustus and Goethe’s Faust.

13-15: All along the walls and the bottom of the ravine,/Circular holes, each the same size,/Had been drilled in the dark rock: This architectural regularity gestures toward the Florentine Baptistry mentioned in the lines that follow.

16-17: They appeared no larger than the small fonts / Designed for baptismal priests to stand in / Inside my beautiful Church of San Giovanni: In Dante’s time, the Cathedral of San Giovanni in Florence had a central octagonal baptismal font that incorporated four wells in which priests would stand during the rite of Baptism—which was usually done on Easter Eve when large crowds were present. The wells, which were waist high, protected the priests from being jostled and possibly dropping the infant.

19-21: Where not long ago I broke one—and let this be/My sworn story if anyone out there thinks otherwise—/Not out of sacrilege but to save someone who was dying in it: Commentators are unclear whether this event is to be read literally, or allegorically. Most believe Dante is referring to an actual, but otherwise undocumented, event where he must have broken one of the wells with an ax to save someone, possibly a priest who was in some distress and couldn’t be

otherwise removed from the well. He appears to want to quell any rumors that this was done as a political gesture.

23-33: whose feet / Are being eaten away by a redder red than all the others: Papal shoes are red—velvet slippers for indoors, leather for out.

36: About his crimes and misdemeanors: *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is the title of a darkly comedic film written and directed by Woody Allen and released in 1989. It was nominated for several Academy Awards. The central dilemma involves the question of whether it's possible to live with the guilt of having committed murder. This moral quandary echoes that of the novel *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, first published in 12 monthly installments in 1866 and later published as a complete novel. For the novel's publishing history, plot summary, themes and structure, etc, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime_and_Punishment
For more information about the film, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crimes_and_Misdemeanors

52-54: He shouted, "Is it you already? Is it you already, / Boniface? Standing there? If so, / The book of time was off by several years: Pope Nicholas III mistakes Dante for Boniface VIII and expresses his surprise that Boniface has come early—since the poem is set in 1300 and Boniface will not die until 1303. (See note to Canto VI, lines 67-69 and Canto XV, lines 112-113 in for previous mentions of Boniface.)

55-57: Are you already finished consuming the riches / You so blatantly swindled from our lady of religion— / And afterward bartered her body for cash." Villani writes about Boniface (VIII, 6, 64): By aggrandizing the church and his relatives, he became very rich; nor did he have any scruples

about making profits, for he said that everything that belonged to the church was lawfully his. . . . In his time he created several cardinals from among his friends and confidants, among them two very young nephews of his, and an uncle who was his mother's brother. He also created twenty bishops and archbishops from among his relatives and friends in the small city of Anagni, giving them rich dioceses; and, to his other nephew and to his sons, who were counts . . . he left an almost infinite fortune."

69: I once wore the magnificent red cloak of a pope: Pope Nicholas III (Giovanni Gaetano Orsini) was a Roman nobleman who was elected Pope in 1277 and died in 1280. He was only Pope for three years but his tenure was characterized by nepotism and simony.

Popes in Medieval times wore a long red cape. At the papal coronation, the bestowal of the cloak, which symbolically represented the bestowal of papal authority, was accompanied by the words "Investio te de Papatu Roman out paresis urbi et orbi" ("I invest you with the Roman papacy, that you may rule over the city and the world.") Today the mantle is white, not red.

70-72: But behind that, I was the son of a she-bear, so eager / To advance my own pups that up there, / I stuffed my pockets with money and here I put myself in one: The Italian word for "bear" is orso and the members of the Orsini family were commonly referred to as filii ursae, or "bear cubs." Bears were thought to be especially protective toward their young.

82-84: After him a rogue shepherd will come / From the west, one whose even worse corruption / Will make him a fitting lid for the two of us: Since Nicholas died in 1280, he's been on his head in Hell for twenty years, Boniface will

arrive in 1303 and he'll be supplanted in 1314 when the next pope, Clement V, dies. (Commentators take this to mean that either this Canto was written after 1314 or that Dante was able to go back and revise the Canto after 1314 in order to accurately predict the papal reign and 1314 death of Clement V.)

85-87: He'll be another Jason from the Book of Maccabees/
Just like that king favored that one, / The king of France will favor this one: Clement V (Bertrand de Got) born in Gascony, was made Pope in 1305. It was during his papacy that the papal see was moved to Avignon, where it remained for seventy years—a period called the Babylonian Captivity. According to Vilani, the French king, Philip the Fair, set Clement up as a puppet pope. Jason, whose brother Onias III was the High Priest in the Temple of Jerusalem, in 175 BCE bribed the king, Antiochus IV to unseat his brother and make him High Priest. He then tried to re-introduce pagan rites. The Book of Maccabees relates to the first book of seven collectively referred to as the Books of the Maccabees. Book I covers the history of a Jewish rebellion from 175-134 BCE.

93: 'Follow me, etcetera': Matthew 4:18-19: "As he was walking by the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea (for they were fisherman). And he said to them, 'Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'"

95-96: They weren't promised gold and such by Matthias / In order to be chosen by lot to take the Judas spot: Acts 1:26: "And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles."

98-99: the dirty-money / You took to stand firm against Charles d'Anjou; Nicholas was involved in many plots for and against various royal houses, one of which was a rebel-

lion against Charles of the house of Anjou which was later known as the Sicilian Vespers.

106-111: It's clergymen like you that John the Evangelist /
Had in mind when he envisioned a harlot . . . she only knew /
How to govern as long as her husband was virtuous:
Revelation 17:1-3: "And there came one of the seven angles that had the seven bowls, and he spoke with me saying, "Come, I will show thee the condemnation of the great harlot who sits upon many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication . . . And he took me away in spirit into a desert. And I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet-colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns . . ."

110: And with ten horns, each a commandment: The Ten Commandments

115-117: Constantine, look what evil you delivered, / Not by your conversion but by the lavish gift / Of money you gave to the first church father. Constantine (c. 272-c. 337) was the first Christian Roman Emperor. He supported the church financially and exempted the clergy from taxes.