

Journal Entry #2 – Virgil’s “Purgatorio” in *terza rima*

In several journal entries, namely those of Rodi, Bobby, and Melissa, students have written about relationships between father and child and their relevance to the *Commedia*. Bobby’s journal entry is particularly pertinent, for it describes the father-son relationship between Virgil and Dante. Through all of *Inferno*, and twenty-seven cantos of *Purgatorio*, Virgil is at Dante’s side to hold his hand and guide him upwards towards Heaven. His importance is undeniable in both the guidance that he provides and the example of what and what not to do he sets through his actions. I was disturbed, however, that he disappears from the story in Canto XXVII of *Purgatorio*. I decided to write my own Canto XXVIII, but in terms of Virgil’s experience upon returning to Limbo. The following is Canto XXVIII of Virgil’s *Purgatorio* in *terza rima*.

NOTE: The number twenty-eight struck me as a fitting number for Virgil, for two is one short of three, and eight one short of nine, which is three times three. Thus, Virgil embodies twenty-eight in that he was unable to accept fully the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of Christianity, nor the trinity of volumes in the *Commedia*. This falling short of three is just as significant as Ulysses’s overstepping of the number three.

1 No sooner had the words from his mouth departed
 than the cloaked forms disappeared in fog,
 climbing from his sight, light-footed and light-hearted.
 Virgil wrapped his cloak more tightly to guard against the smog
 5 which he felt already from below, pulling him from the gates, barred
 even to those who lived outside the infernal bog.
 Turning away, his pace slow, he followed the path of marred
 soil marked by his living company, tangible reminder
 of what he left there above, a soul to be unscarred.
 10 As he made his way right, he heard a voice, her
 melody forcing his feet to still; from the air it sprang,
 filling his ears with its sweetness, feeding his hunger.
 “Stand tall! You lived a good life, and have no need to hang
 your head in sorrow - smile, though your place may be empty of
 15 the rewards for which in your heart you feel a pang.
 Watchful eyes have seen the tears of pity and love
 shed for you, Virgil, who have led, though driven,
 yet without the aid of the light which is born above.
 You should feel proud, for the aid to Dante you have given
 20 may have saved him from succumbing to the ruse
 by which the serpent left the worlds of God and man forever riven.”
 The music faded from his ears, the sun hid, blues
 gave way to black and melodies to memories of song,
 his tired legs fading with the sky’s hues.
 25 As a mother curls about her young on nights cold and long,
 so Virgil wrapped his cloak around his weary frame
 and slept, forgetting that sleep is where dreams belong.
 He awoke to starless darkness and the crying of his name;
 unsure and blank of face, he arose and replied,
 30 “Is that great Homer whom I hear so sweet?” “The same.”
 The shadows released another form, who smiled and cried
 upon seeing his old friend, “I heard you were returning
 from your journey - join us by the fire inside.”
 Virgil sighed, and said, “Again I find myself on soil turning
 35 to dust, in torture after seeing the lights which dazzle
 the heavens, the place for which my heart is yearning.
 I see now the dust covering the ground; the tassel
 on your robe that used to sparkle bright I now know
 is dull, like our once beloved shining castle.”
 40 “Dear friend, is your memory so poor that you no
 longer remember our colorful hall,
 filled with warmth, so far from the frigid ice below?”
 As in a windstorm the crackling of the branches as they fall

fills the air, so sounded the logs that lay
 45 within the fire, which disregarded their tortured call.
 Conversation flourished about what had passed; gay
 laughter and warm fire finally roused Virgil's numbed feet
 into waking, and he stood, his words burning like the light of day:
 "How can you laugh and sing and know that you will meet
 50 your King and Father before his holy throne
 and be banished from the sight of his heavenly seat!
 Your souls will be uncoupled from their spiritual bone
 and cast from His kingdom for all that's left of time,
 and with your remains His divine sword He will hone.
 55 There is nothing here to make your faces shine,
 except that the time you lived and where you lived it save
 you from the deepest well and fates far worse than mine.
 I know, for I have seen the path where souls, brave
 to find themselves purged and clean, innocent anew,
 60 try to see the light that blood and mercy gave.
 And I have seen the sword He wields - follow me and do
 as I do to save yourselves in that time far
 when he will come again to sweep clear this land that men grew.
 My advice is sound - if you cannot break the jar
 65 that traps your soul in Limbo, here you will remain
 forever after, rejected for your ignorant mar.
 No one will come to you then, and not even Cain
 will comfort your sorry soul; for indecision
 will make you to both Hell and Heaven bane."
 70 Silence filled the darkened hall; no derision
 came from the silent faces that formed a ring
 around the standing figure's quiet resolution.
 "Sing, brothers," cried Ovid, standing tall with Virgil, "Sing,
 for our venerated father's words have carried
 75 us so far before - praises to our righteous King!"
 "He is an old man who with his faith tarried
 until he was alive only as memory to make
 a choice that now with our bodies above is buried."
 Horace's angry words made every stone in Hell shake -
 80 "Do not pay homage to the God that has forsaken
 us nor this foolish man, so quick a friend to take!
 The others souls squirmed in their clothing as bacon
 in a frying pan twists to escape the grease,
 indecisive - their breath his words had taken.
 85 Silence fell upon the clustered five, a crease
 furrowing each speaker's troubled brow. As choice
 slipped away, in their heads they found doubt, not peace.
 Virgil slipped away then, no longer finding within him voice

to reform their tortured souls, for they had picked
90 a way that forced him to flee from their senseless noise.
Across the bridge above the dull and lifeless moat, he kicked
aside a tumbled stone and lay down upon bare dirt,
his eyes beginning to leak like a full wineskin pricked.
He look upwards at the dark and cried, his hurt
conscience searching for any reason
95 for the emptiness inside the flesh beneath his shirt.
God and friends had left him beaten; it felt like treason
to his good and honest heart which cried for caring,
loving hands at the turning of the season.
The stars and planets spin in sequence, sharing
100 a light that lulls men into thinking justice flows
equally throughout, though at times it misses caring.
He had never seen the mountaintop, the Cosmic Rose;
he couldn't dream of sister Venus and brother Mars,
nor cry with friends, or describe those visions with his prose,
105 but wept alone, and finally slept, and dreamt of stars.