Canto XXXIV: Ciardi Translation:

“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,

Or 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

(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.

When we had gone so far across the ice

That it pleased my Guide to show me the foul creature

Which once had worn the grace of Paradise,

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

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

Where 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:

Imagine 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

The Titans 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,

Well 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:

One was in front, and it was fiery red;

The other two, as weirdly wonderful,

Merged 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 that one finds

On those who live along the banks of the Nile.

Under 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

That 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.

In every mouth he worked a broken sinner

Between 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.

“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 once who dangles down from the black face

Is 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

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

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

Watching for a moment when the wings

Were opened wide, reached over dexterously

And seized the shaggy coat of the king demon:

Then grappling mattered hair and frozen crusts

From one tuft to another, clambered down.

When 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;

So 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

In 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.

Now 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. Upon on your feet,” my Master said.

“The sun already mounts to middle tierce,

And 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,”

I 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?”

And 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

The 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 mid-point of that other sky

The Man 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 faces of the Judecca.

There it is evening when it is morning here.

And 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

And fled North to our hemisphere for fright;

And it may be that moved by that same fear,

The one peak that still rises on this side

Fled upward leaving this great cavern here.

Down there, beginning at the further bound

Of Beelzebub’s dim tomb, there is a space

Not known by sight, but only by the sound

Of a little stream descending through the hollow

It has eroded from the massive stone

In its endlessly entwining lazy flow.”

My 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

Where a round opening brought in sight the blest

And beauteous hinging of the Heavenly cars.

And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.

1. List the names other than Satan used to refer to him in this Canto.
2. What does Satan have six of?
3. How is Satan part of the punishment for all souls in circle 9?
4. Who is headfirst in Satan’s mouth?
5. What did Virgil use as a staircase?
6. What perplexed Dante?
7. Who “writes without a word”?
8. Who is “the man who was born sinless and who lived beyond all blemish?
9. After leaving Hell, where did Dante find himself?
10. Name one modern (but dead) person who belongs in circle 9 and explain why.