



*Canto V*

ARGUMENT

In this canto are found several striking similes drawn from birdlife, which Dante loved to depict. The second circle, with its wind-wafted spirits, offers fit opportunity for these portrayals of starlings, cranes, and doves. Cranes are put to a like use by Virgil in *Aen.*, X, 264-266:

Quales sub nubibus atris Strymoniae dant signa grues atque aethera tranant  
Cum sonitu, fugiuntque Notos clamore secundo.

(Even as amid black clouds Strymonian cranes give signal, while clamorously they skim the air, and flee before the south winds with joyous cries.)

Torraca quotes from the *Tesoro* of Brunetto Latini as follows: "Gru sono uccelli the volano a squadre, a modo di cavalieri the vanno in battaglia." The eager flight of the dove to her young was noted later by Rabelais (*Pantagruel*, IV, iii): "Il n'est que vol de pigeon, quand it a ceufz ou petitz, pour l'obstinée sollicitude en lui par nature posée de recourir et secourir ses pigeonneaux."

The descent from Limbus to the second circle is not described; we have no means of conjecturing the size or the steepness of the cliff. The journey through Hell being physically impossible, Dante purposely refrains from furnishing particulars that might destroy the illusion, while abounding in such details as serve to heighten it. As the pit narrows progressively toward the bottom, the terraces correspondingly decrease in circumference, but the penalties become more and more severe. At one point in the round of this shelf is a break, where

the rock has fallen. When Dante mentions this *ruina*, in l. 34, he offers no explanation: shrieks and curses are redoubled here, but we know not why. Our suspense lasts until we reach Canto XII, ll. 31-45. There we are told that when Christ descended into Hell, his coming was preceded by an earthquake, which shook down the walls of the abyss in three spots. Mat. xxvii, 51: "And behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent." Those broken places lie beside the circle of the pagans, just beyond the enclosure of the heretics, and over the hypocrites by whom Christ had been condemned (XXI, 112-114; XXIII, 133-138) - all close to the abodes of those who had offended the Savior by disbelief in his mission. In each case the word 'ruin' is used. The sight of the first *ruina* moves the souls of the second circle to lamentation, because it reminds them of the time when the neighboring Hebrew spirits in the Limbus were rescued, while all the other souls in Hell were left to eternal torment.

Most of the fallen angels, or fiends, are in the lower Hell; a few, however, appear as presiding genii outside the City of Dis: so Charon, Cerberus, Plutus, Phlegyas, and, at the threshold of the second circle, Minos, the judge. Both theologians and simple folk were prone to look upon the heathen gods as demons who had beguiled men into their worship. It is not strange, therefore, to find in a Christian Hell many classic personages, especially such as were already associated with the lower world. Dante did not treat all the pagan divinities alike; if he depicted Plutus as a devil, the Muses and Apollo were to him simply allegorical figures, while Jove apparently represented the ancient poets' dim conception of the Supreme Being. Minos, the great king and legislator of Crete, holds in the 11th book of the *Odyssey* the noble office of judge of the dead.

In the *Aeneid*, VI, 432-433, though briefly sketched, he retains the same honorable function

Quaesitor Minos urnam movet; ille silentum  
Conciliumque vocat, vitasque et crimina discit.

(Minos, presiding, shakes the urn; 'tis he calls a court of the silent, and learns men's lives and misdeeds.)

In Dante he has become a hideous demon, arbiter of the damned - the symbol, it would seem, of the guilty conscience.

The second circle punishes *lussuria*, or lust, the first of the sins of incontinence. The luxurious are forever blown about in the darkness by stormy blasts, typifying the blind fury of passion. In some previous tales of Hell a wind torments evildoers, notably in the *Visio Alberici*, XIV, where souls are driven by the fiery breath of a dog and a lion. Dante divests the torment of all grotesqueness, and, indeed, treats sinners of this class with special consideration. This may be due

in part to sympathy, and partly, no doubt, to a sense that their fault is the result of a mistaken following of love, the noblest of human emotions. Theologically speaking, the fate of lost souls should arouse no pity, as the sight of sin should excite only repugnance. But we must remember that the Dante who is visiting Hell is himself still a sinner. Moreover, allegorically interpreted, these harassed souls are men and women loving and suffering on earth; and even the most sinful, as long as they live, are fit objects of compassion.

Compassion, tenderness, sympathetic curiosity, and anguish reach their climax when Dante meets and converses with Francesca da Rimini. This unhappy lady was the daughter of Guido Minore da Polenta, a powerful citizen of Ravenna, and was married to Giovanni di Malatesta da Verrucchio (called Sciancato, or Gian Ciotto), master of Rimini. Of her love for Paolo, her husband's brother, and the murder of the two by Giovanni, we have no record before Dante, although the event must have been well known. It probably occurred about 1285. When Dante was eighteen, in 1282-83, Paolo was for five months in Florence as Capitano del Popolo; he is not mentioned among Malatesta's sons in 1287; and in 1288 there is evidence of a child born to Giovanni by a second wife. In 1285 Paolo was some 35 years old, had been married sixteen years, and had two children; Francesca had one child. Paolo's daughter married a son of Aghinolfo of Romena. After Francesca's adventure had been made eternally famous by Dante's poem, many fables grew up about it; her fate is still a favorite theme for artists and authors. Of all the episodes in the *Commedia*, this has always been the most popular.

It is not alone the undying passion of Francesca that moves us, but even more her gentleness and modest reticence. In her narrative she names none of the participants; not even her city is called by name. Her identity is revealed by Dante, who, recognizing her, addresses her as "Francesca." Everything in her story that could mar our pity is set aside, and nothing remains but the quintessence of love. Amid the tortures of Hell, where all is hatred, her love does not forsake her, and she glories in the thought that she and Paolo shall never be parted.

Should we be inclined to question whether mere impersonal sympathy, however natural and profound, could have sufficed to lead a religious poet, a stern moralist, thus to idealize an adulteress and mitigate her punishment, we might feel ourselves justified in seeking some special reason for his kindness. As we look through the *Commedia*, we find that in one place or another the exiled poet contrived to pay an appropriate tribute to all those who had befriended him in his need: it was the only return his grateful heart could make. His last and probably his happiest years were spent in Ravenna under the protection of Guido Novello da Polenta, himself a poet, a nephew of our Francesca.

Now, we do not know exactly when Dante went to that city, but in any case it is almost certainly at a period later than the time when the *Inferno* was composed. His son Pietro, however, established himself in Ravenna, perhaps as early as 1317, receiving a benefice from Guido's wife; and his daughter Beatrice entered a convent there. It is possible that previous courtesies, of which we have no record, were extended to Dante or his kindred before this *cantica* was completed. Guido Minore da Polenta, Francesca's father, was *podestà* of Florence in 1290, when Dante was 25. There is, then, some slight ground for the supposition that this passage was intended as an incidental homage to Guido's family (there being no other tribute to it in the poem), a rehabilitation of Francesca's memory. Love, she says, comes to gentle hearts with irresistible force -- "a nullo amato amar perdona." Had she lived, she would have repented; it was her sudden taking off that damned her. Her fate is contrasted with that of her husband: her soul is one of the highest in Hell; his, one of the lowest. This canto is an excellent example of Dante's creative imagination. His emotion once stirred, he conjured up a whole scene in all its details. So he did with the story of Count Ugolino in *Inf.* XXXIII.

Così discesi del cerchio primaio  
giù nel secondo, che men loco cinghia  
e tanto più dolor, che punge a guaio. 3  
Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia:  
essamina le colpe ne l'intrata;  
giudica e manda secondo ch'avvinghia. 6  
Dico che quando l'anima mal nata

4. *Minòs*: in medieval schools, Greek proper names, in the nominative, were very commonly stressed on the last syllable, this having been apparently regarded as the regular Greek accentuation - hence *Cleopatras*, *Paris*, *Semirantis*, and elsewhere *Calliopè*, *Semelè*, etc. For some reason *Cleopatras* (1. 63), with an *s*, seems to have been considered the correct form. In the last chapter "De Accentu" of the *Catholicon* of Giovanni da Genova, we read that barbaric words are oxytonic (e.g., *Jacob*, *Amèn*); so also Greek words which in the oblique cases have a long penult (e.g., *Tián*, *Apollò*): E. G. Parodi in *Bull.*, III, 115-117.

6. *Avvinghia*, 'entwines.'

7. *Dico*, 'I mean.'

1. *Primaio* = *primo*. 4. *Minòs* = *Minosse*. 5. *Intrata* = *entrata*.

li vien dinanzi, tutta si confessa;  
e quel conoscitor de le peccata  
vede qual loco d'inferno è da essa;  
cignesi con la coda tante volte  
quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa. 12  
Sempre dinanzi a lui ne stanno molte:  
vanno a vicenda ciascuna al giudizio,  
dicono e odono e poi son giù volte. 15  
« O tu che vieni al doloroso ospizio »,  
disse Minòs a me quando mi vide,  
lasciando l'atto di cotanto officio,  
« guarda com' entri e di cui tu ti fide; 18  
non t'inganni l'ampiezza de l'intrare! ».  
E 'l duca mio a lui: « Perché pur gride? »  
Non impedir lo suo fatale andare: 21  
vuolsi così colà dove si puote  
iò che si vuole, e più non dimandare».  
Or incomincian le dolenti note 24  
a farmisi sentire; or son venuto  
là dove molto pianto mi percuote.  
Io venni in loco d'ogne luce muto, 27  
che mugghia come fa mar per tempesta,  
se da contrari venti è combattuto.

8. *Li* and *gli* were used interchangeably.

9. *Peccata*: collective feminine plural (originally neuter plural) forms in *-a* were much commoner in Dante's day than now.

19. *Fide* = *fidi*. So, in 1. 21, *gride* = *gridi*. The forms in *-e* are the older.

20. Cf. Mat. vii, 13: "wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction." Also *Aen.*, VI, 126-127:

facilis descensus Averno:  
noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;

(Easy is the descent to Avernus: night and day the door of gloomy Dis stands open.)

21. *Pur* seems to mean *tu pure*, i.e., as well as Charon.

23. The same formula was used in III, 95-96.

28. Cf. 'dove il sol tace' in I, 60.

9. *Peccata* = *peccati*. 11. *Cignesi* = *si cinge*. 18. *Offizio* = *ufficio*.

La bufera infernal, che mai non resta,  
 mena li spirti con la sua rapina;  
 voltando e percotendo li molesta.  
 Quando giungon davanti a la ruina,  
 quivi le strida, il compianto, il lamento;  
 bestemmian quivi la virtù divina.  
 Intesi ch'a così fatto tormento  
 enno dannati i peccator carnali,  
 che la ragion sommettono al talento.  
 E come li stornei ne portan l'ali  
 nel freddo tempo, a schiera larga e piena,  
 così quel fiato li spirti mali  
 di qua, di là, di giù, di sù li mena;  
 nulla speranza li conforta mai,  
 non che di posa, ma di minor pena.  
 E come i gru van cantando lor lai,  
 facendo in aere di sé lunga riga,  
 così vid' io venir, traendo guai,  
 ombre portate da la detta briga;  
 per ch'i' dissi: «Maestro, chi son quelle  
 genti che l'aura nera sì gastiga ? ».  
 «La prima di color di cui novelle  
 tu vuo' saper», mi disse quelli allotta,  
 «fu imperadrice di molte favelle.

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38. *Enno* = *sono*.40. *Stornei* = *stornelli*.45. 'I do not say hope of rest, but even hope of less punishment.' 48. Dante was fond of the expression *trarre guai*, 'to utter wails.' 49. *Briga*: the strife of conflicting winds, l. 30.53. *Allotta* = *allora*.54. Semiramis, queen of Assyria, of whom Dante had read in the *Historia* of Paulus Orosius, I, iv. In *Mon.*, II, viii, 3, Dante says that Ninus, her husband, "Asiam totam sibi subegerit" (subdued all Asia to himself).34. *Ruina* = *rovina*.39. *Sommettono* = *sottomettono*.

A vizio di lussuria fu sì rotta  
 che libito fè licito in sua legge,  
 per tòrre il biasmo in che era condotta.  
 Ell' è Semiramis, di cui si legge  
 che succedette a Nino e fu sua sposa:  
 tenne la terra che 'l Soldan corregge.  
 L'altra è colei che s'ancise amorosa,  
 e ruppe fede al tener di Sicheo;  
 poi è Cleopatràs lussuriosa.  
 Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo  
 tempo si volse, e vedi 'l grande Achille,  
 che con amore al fine combatteo.  
 Vedi Paris, Tristano"; e più di mille  
 Ombre mostrommi e nominommi a ditto,

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56. To excuse her own unnatural passion, "praecepit ... quod cuique libitum esset, licitum fieret" (she prescribed ... that each should be free to do as he pleased), i.e., she made every one's pleasure lawful.

60. The lands in Egypt and Syria which the Sultan now rules. For this use of *corregge*, see Ps. xcvi (Vulg.), to: "*correxit orbem terrae*" (for he hath corrected the world). Two Babylons were distinguished in the Middle Ages: "Babylonia antiqua a Nembroth gygante (Nimrod) fundata" and "Babylonia altera, id est Memphis (i.e., Cairo) super Nilum." Dante perhaps made the Sultan ruler of both. See *Romanic Review*, IV, 484.61. *Altra* here, as very often in Dante, means 'second.' The story of Dido's fatal love for Aeneas (and her infidelity to the memory of her dead husband, Sychaeus) is told in *Aen.*, IV.62. Note *Aen.*, IV, 552: "non servatae fides cineri promissa Sychaeo." (The faith vowed to the ashes of Sychaeus I have not kept!)64. Here, and in ll. 65, 67, some texts have *vidi* for *vedi*. With the reading *vidi*, the quotation should close with l. 63. - *Elena*, Helen, 'on whose account so many evil years were spent' in the Trojan war.66. 'Who fought with love up to the end': the Old French poet, Benoit de Sainte More, in his *Roman de Troie*, developing an allusion in Dares's *Excidium Trojae*, narrates that Achilles, madly in love with Polyxena, was lured into an ambush, where he perished. See also Servius's Commentary on *Aen.*, III, 322. - *Combatteo* = *combattè*.67. *Paris*, son of Priam. *Tristano*, Tristram, hero of the most famous medieval love romance.68. Some texts have *nominolle*.56. *Libito*: Lat. *libitus*. - *Licito* = *lecito*. 57. *Tòrre* = *togliere*. - *Biasmo* = *biasimo*. 58. *Semiramis* = *Semiramide*. 60. *Corregge* = *regge*. 61. *Ancise* = *uccise*. 63. *Cleopatras* = *Cleopatra*. 67. *Paris* = *Paride*.

ch'amor di nostra vita dipartille. 69  
 Poscia ch'io ebbi 'l mio dottore udito  
 nomar le donne antiche e' cavalieri,  
 pietà mi giunse, e fui quasi smarrito. 72  
 I' cominciai: «Poeta, volentieri  
 parlerei a quei due che 'nsieme vanno,  
 e paion sì al vento esser leggiere ». 7s  
 Ed elli a me: «Vedrai quando saranno  
 più presso a noi; e tu allor li priega  
 per quello amor che i mena, ed ei verranno». 78  
 Sì tosto come il vento a noi li piega,  
 mossi la voce: « O anime affannate,  
 venite a noi parlar, s'altri nol niega!». 84  
 Quali colombe dal disio chiamate  
 con l'ali alzate e ferme al dolce nido  
 vegnon per l'aere, dal voler portate;  
 cotali uscir de la schiera ov' è Dido, 84  
 a noi venendo per l'aere maligno,  
 sì forte fu l'affettuoso grido. 87

69. *Dipartille = le diparti*; the *le* is superfluous.

78. *I = li*.

81. *Altri*, 'some one.' God is never named to the damned, nor by them, save in blasphemy.

82. This beautiful simile was doubtless suggested by *Aen.*, V, 213-217:

qualis spelunca subito commota columba,  
 cui domus et dulces latebroso in pumice nidi,  
 fertur in arva volans plausumque exterrita pinnis  
 dat tecto ingentem, mox acre lapsa quieto  
 radit iter liquidum celeris neque commovet alas.

(Even as, if startled suddenly from her cave, a dove whose home and sweet nestlings are in the rocky coverts, wings her flight to the fields and, frightened from her home, flaps loudly with her wings; soon, gliding in the peaceful air, she skims her liquid way and stirs not her swift pinions.)

Dante, however, while keeping a part of the general picture and a few of the expressions ("sweet nest" and "motionless wings"), alters the situation, making the dove fly to her nest instead of flying away from it; furthermore, he infuses an entirely new spirit into the figure by his conception of love as the sole power that sustains the mother bird in her flight.

71. *Nomar = nominare*. 74. *'nsieme = insieme*. 77. *Li priega = pregali*. 81. *Nol niega = non lo nega*.

« O animal grazioso e benigno  
 che visitando vai per l'aere perso  
 noi che tignemmo il mondo di sanguigno, 90  
 se fosse amico il re de l'universo,  
 noi pregheremmo lui de la tua pace,  
 poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso.  
 Di quel che udire e che parlar vi piace,  
 noi udiremo e parleremo a voi,  
 mentre che 'l vento, come fa, ci tace. 93  
 Siede la terra dove nata fui  
 su la marina dove 'l Po discend  
 per aver pace co' seguaci sui.  
 Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende, 96

88. *Animal*, 'living creature.'

89. *Perso*, 'perse,' a term often used by Dante in the sense of 'dark,' denotes properly "un colore misto di purpureo e di nero, ma vince lo nero": *Conv.*, IV, xx, 2.

92. "Pace" is what Francesca most desires; and she imagines that everyone else must crave peace - even the rivers running to the sea, as in 1. 99.

96. In 1. 31 the poet tells us that the "bufera infernal" never rests. But the "bufera" seems to indicate the whole storm of conflicting blasts: in a single spot the gust may die down for a moment - *come fa*, 'as it now does.'

97. *Terra*, 'city': Ravenna, then only one mile from the sea and connected with the Po by canals.

99. 'To have peace with its pursuers': the tributaries are conceived as chasing the Po down to the sea. Petrocchi finds ample manuscript support for such rhymes as *voi - fui - sui* here. Cf. his *Introduzione*, p. 4711.

100. Note the recurrence of *amore* and *amare* in Francesca's speeches, especially the use of *amore* at the beginning of three successive tercets in 11. 100, 103, 1106. - According to the doctrine formulated by the Bolognese poet Guido Guinizzelli, who belonged to the generation before Dante, love exists potentially in the noble heart (and there only) from its birth, and is immediately awakened to activity by the sight of a worthy object:

Al cor gentil reppaira sempre amore come  
 l'ausello in selva a la verdura;  
 né fe' amor anti che gentil core,  
 né gentil core anti ch'amor natura.

This doctrine was adopted and developed by Dante and his fellow poets of the "dolce stil nuovo." So Dante, in the 10th sonnet of the *Vita Nuova*, XX, 3-5):

Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa,  
 sì come il saggio in suo dittare pone.

90. *Tignemmo = tingemmo*.

prese costui de la bella persona  
 che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor 'offende. 102  
 Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,  
 mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,  
 che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.  
 Amor condusse noi ad una morte. 105  
 Caina attende chi a vita ci spense». 108  
 Queste parole da lor ci fuor porte.  
 Quand' io intesi quell' anime offense,  
 china' il viso, e tanto il tenni basso,  
 fin che 'l poeta mi disse: « Che pense ? ».  
 Quando rispuosi, cominciai: «Oh lasso,  
 quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio 111  
 menò costoro al doloroso passo!».  
 Poi mi rivolsi a loro e parla' io,  
 e cominciai: «Francesca, i tuoi martiri 114  
 a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio. 117  
 Ma dimmi: al tempo d'i dolci sospiri,  
 a che e come concedette amore  
 che conosceste i dubbiosi disiri ? ».  
 E quella a me: «Nessun maggior dolore  
 che ricordarsi del tempo felice

ne la miseria; e ciò sa 'l tuo dottore.  
 Ma s'a conoscer la prima radice  
 del nostro amor tu hai cotanto affetto,  
 dirò come colui che piange e dice. 126  
 Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto  
 di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse;  
 soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto. 129  
 Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse  
 quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;  
 ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse. 132  
 Quando leggemmo il disiato riso  
 esser basciato da cotanto amante,  
 questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,  
 la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante. 135  
 Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse:  
 quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante». 137  
 Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse,  
 l'altro piangéa; sì che di pietade  
 io venni men così com' io morisse.  
 E caddi come corpo morto cade. 142

101. Love seized him, Paolo, 'for the fair body that was taken from me'; and 'the way (in which it was taken from me) is still harmful to me,' because, murdered as she was without a chance to repent, she incurred eternal punishment.

103. 'Love, which exempts no loved one from loving in return, seized me for his charms with such might ...' *Piacer* is used here like the corresponding Provençal word *placer*, 'attraction,' 'charm.'

107. Caina, the abode of traitors to kindred, at the bottom of Hell, awaits Francesca's husband, Gian Giotto.

108. *Da for ci fur porte*, 'were offered us by them,' although they were spoken by Francesca alone.

109. *Offense* = *offese*, 'injured.'

111. *Pense* = *pensi*: cf. l. 19.

112. Evidently there is a pause between question and answer.

120. *Disiri* = *desideri*.

123. *Il tuo dottore*, Virgil, who was happy and glorious on earth, and is now condemned to eternal exile.  
 127. The French prose romance of Lancelot of the Lake, which tells of the love of the hero for Guinevere, wife of King Arthur.

129. *Sospetto*, 'misgiving.' - In the romance, Lancelot and Guinevere were not alone, as Paolo and Francesca were.

130. *Li occhi ci sospinse*, 'made our eyes meet.'

133. Il disiato riso, i.e., the worshiped lips.

137. Gallehaut was the intermediary who brought Lancelot and Guinevere together; Paolo and Francesca had no such go-between - the book was their Gallehaut, their guide to love. Gallehaut in the French Lancelot was a model prince and knight, type of the faithful friend and discreet helper in love. Dante was strongly influenced by the beautiful romance, with its idea of courtly love.

127. *Leggiavamo* = *leggevamo*.

129. *Lancialotto* = *Lancillotto*.

131. *Scolorocci* = *ci scolorì*.

134. *Basciato* = *baciato*. 138. *Avante* = *avanti*. 139. *Spirto* = *spirito*. 141. *Morisse* = *morissi*.