

Conquering the Moment: Love and the Subsisto

The noted Dante scholar Dorothy L. Sayers, in her essay “The Meaning of Heaven and Hell,” puts forward a vision of Hell as a place founded on illusion, in which the “self,” instead of finding its true center in God, chooses to “find its...end in itself and to revolve around that” (62). This sort of transgression seems roughly analogous to that defined in the pagan concept of hubris, in which man meets his downfall in the obstinate insistence that his own status equates to that of the divine. And indeed, Sayers would seem to agree, for her “illusion” is, at its base, man’s insertion of self in the place of God, a clinging to the notion that “he is ‘as God’” (65). Thus does the descent into Hell alongside Dante/Pilgrim and Virgil in the *Commedia* promise encounters with “selves” who have become increasingly, oppressively overbearing, to the exclusion of the divine light that man, according to the Christian tradition, was originally created to reflect. Regarding Francesca da Rimini, one of the more frequently referenced personages in *Inferno*, the self-inflation is not immediately clear. Certainly, the contrapasso is evident enough: the “wheeling and pounding” (Alighieri, *Inferno* V. 33) of the “hellish hurricane” (V. 31) is an external manifestation of the internal physical impulse behind the damning and overpowering bouts of lust that have “seize[d]” (V. 100) the unhappy denizens of this circle. But the danger of contrapasso is that it turns the *Commedia* into a tidy sort of figurative puzzle, the sterilized object of some straightforward symbolic sleuth work, in which one is tempted to pick a couple of telling keywords, derive a metaphor, fit it to the “crime,” and chalk up the text as well-read. There’s really no question that such a course of action feels both analytically constructive and personally satisfying. But *Inferno* – and the *Commedia* as a whole – is about much more than a

series of contrapasso riddles, as Sayers and anybody else who has read the poem on more than a textbook level would hasten to insist. And so, in the case of Francesca, it is necessary to take the next step, bypassing the appropriate symmetry of her punishment to ask why she has found her way to Hell in the first place. She is not in Hell because there's some contrapasso waiting for her there, though the device helps to vivify the nature of the sin. Nor is she damned because she plays the so-called 'blame game', deflecting the immediacy of her own wrongdoing by indicting the book that occupied her and her lover on that fateful day ("A Gallehault indeed, that book and he who wrote it, too" [V. 137-138].) People, after all, don't point the finger until after they are called to task. So why? The general charge is that she "subject[ed] reason to the rule of lust" (V. 39), but it remains to be seen where the illusion in such behavior is to be found. The answer lies with Francesca's transitional narrative remark, "one point alone defeated us" (V. 132-133). This is subtle because what Francesca is referring to directly is simply one moment in the story that she and her lover were reading at the time of their downfall. The notion of one moment proving to be the ultimate downfall is eminently appropriate if one steps back and views it a bit more generally. For isn't this, in some sense, what lust is: when only one moment matters, and is allowed to conquer, to dominate, to defeat? Lustful action is accompanied by no consideration of consequences, no thought of a future with the object of that lust, no questioning as to what might be the repercussions of surrendering one's body. In short, there is no reason, none of the measured rationale that man uses to navigate time as a linear progression, weighing a million different moments past, present and projected. It is reason that takes note of prior encounters, experiences, information and extrapolates future costs, penalties, and ambitions. Conversely, the moment is the domain of impulse, of visceral and instinctive reaction. Thus, it is the domain of lust, and cannot be complemented by the rational. The only realm in the *Commedia* where

unreserved fixation on a moment appears to be appropriate is Paradise. Here alone, the timeless existence, the eternal moment, is fitting and ordained. As Sayers puts it, “[in Paradise] eternity is...all times and all places known perfectly in one deathless and ecstatic present” (55). For mortal, corporeal man to believe that he can taste such an existence – and truly in the moment of lust he believes this, for the rational consciousness that would tell him otherwise has been suspended – is the illusion, man’s intrusion on what is given to the divine. Sheldon Vanauken, author of *A Severe Mercy*, makes a similar mistake, treading wrongly in his perception of love and having to be told by his friend C.S. Lewis that “perpetual springtime is not allowed” (211). And Lewis himself is depicted in the roughly biographical 1993 film *Shadowlands* as reluctant to acknowledge the inevitable end of his own love, only to be told that such an acknowledgment is precisely what “makes it real.” Man’s lot on Earth is not timelessness. To fancy that it is or that it can be is to face damnation, or, as Sayers would have it, to suffer the “fall into illusion, which is Hell” (62).

What, then, would Francesca have to learn in dialogue with the characters in Harry Chapin’s ballad “A Better Place to Be?” Certainly, first of all, must come the realization that there can be no damning illusion of the timelessness of love. When the midnight watchman comes too near this notion, deciding of his female companion that “I did not want to share her with the world or break the mood,” he is almost immediately confronted with the latter’s frank assertion, “It’s time that I moved on” (lms. 55, 58). But even beyond this is a communication of love’s very purpose. It is not about the surrender to lust any more than it is the inflation of self that lust entails. Rather, one might say that love is the use of one’s person, one’s identity, one’s ‘I Am,’ (or, as Dante/Poet would have termed it, one’s *subsisto* [*Paradiso* XXIX. 15]) to give life to others who have lost theirs. The loss of the “I Am” appears jarringly clear in the case of the

“lovely lady,” who, when the watchman attempts to brighten the bedroom, makes a point of asking that he “please leave the light off” (Chapin lns. 28, 44). This request alone, made with the pretense that she “do[es]n’t mind the dark” (ln. 44), is a glaring indication that somehow what Sayers calls “the right end of every creature...to shine back to God...and to be able to say, thus shining; ‘I Am – subsisto’” (48) has been snatched from her. If – as Sayers tells us – “God is the light” (48), then what Chapin is figuratively conveying is that this woman has become so disoriented as to deny her need for God. But God is not all that is lost. Indeed, because she is to be a reflection of Him, the result of her turning from His light is that she loses touch with herself as well (“she was long past lonely, and well nigh unto lost” [Chapin ln. 31].) The divine truth, “the centre of reality” (Sayers 62), has been compromised, and, to make the point even more poignantly evident, the woman responds to the watchman’s sentiment, “I just could not believe it, to think that she was real” with the tellingly ironic statement, “I know just how you feel” (Chapin lns. 48-49). Here, she seems to have no reference, no sense of her own reality and therefore can step outside herself and sympathize in an eerily direct fashion with his impression. In the end, it is the act of love, the introduction of another’s subsisto, that can fill and fortify the emptiness at the barmaid’s core. Where she was previously directionless, “going nowhere” (Chapin ln. 40), ironically like the “lovely lady,” unable to find the light of God as a focus about which to “wheel [her] will and desire” (Sayers 62), she can now reorient herself through the love of another human being, affirming for real that “lovin’ someone is a better way to be” (Chapin ln. 51). The watchman has, through his love, successfully mobilized his own subsisto to prop up that of another. And it is this that Francesca fails to understand. By allowing her own “I Am” to take on a commanding stature in a self-righteous surrender to her lust, she has left no space for the “I Am” of her partner. She makes no meaningful reference to him, he is simply “this one,”

whom, it is related, “wept” (V. 135, 140), as the Pilgrim casts his final glance. The watchman in Chapin’s song, by way of contrast, is allowed to have the final words as he, like his newfound lady friend, confronts his loneliness, affirming his subsisto through that of another, and ending quite fittingly with the infinitive from which the “I Am” is derived: “Cause I know I’m going nowhere and anywhere’s a better place *to be* [emphasis mine]” (ln. 71).

Harry Chapin, A Better Place To Be

- 1) It was an early morning bar room,
- 2) And the place just opened up.
- 3) And the little man come in so fast and
- 4) Started at his cups.
- 5) And the broad who served the whisky
- 6) She was a big old friendly girl.
- 7) And she tried to fight her empty nights
- 8) By smilin’ at the world.
- 9) And she said, “Hey Bub, It’s been awhile
- 10) Since you been around.
- 11) Where the hell you been hidin’?
- 12) And why you look so down?”
- 13) But the little man just sat there like he’d never heard a sound.
- 14) The waitress she gave out with a cough,
- 15) And acting not the least put off,
- 16) She spoke once again.
- 17) She said, “I don’t want to bother you,
- 18) Consider it’s understood.
- 19) I know I’m not no beauty queen,
- 20) But I sure can listen good.”
- 21) And the little man took his drink in his hand
- 22) And he raised it to his lips.
- 23) He took a couple of sips.

- 24) And he told the waitress this story.
- 25) "I am the midnight watchman down at *Miller's Tool and Die*.
- 26) And I watch the metal rusting, and I watch the time go by.
- 27) A week ago at the diner, I stopped to get a bite.
- 28) And this here lovely lady she sat two seats from my right.
- 29) And Lord, Lord, Lord she was all right.
- 30) Oh, she was so damned beautiful that she'd warm a winter's frost.
- 31) But she was long past lonely, and well nigh onto lost.
- 32) Now I'm not much of a mover, or a pick-em-up easy guy,
- 33) But I decided to glide on over, and give her one good try.
- 34) And Lord, Lord, Lord she was worth a try. Tongued-tied like a schoolboy, I stammered out some words.
- 35) But it did not really matter much, 'cause I don't think she heard.
- 36) She just looked clear on through me to a space back in my head.
- 37) And it shamed me into silence, as quietly she said,
- 38) 'If you want me to come with you, then that's all right with me.
- 39) Cause I know I'm going nowhere, and any where's a better place to be.
- 40) Any where's a better place to be.'
- 41) I drove her to my boarding house, and I took her up to my room.
- 42) And I went to turn on the only light to brighten up the gloom.
- 43) But she said, 'Please leave the light off, for I don't mind the dark.'
- 44) And as her clothes all tumbled 'round her, I could hear my heart.
- 45) The moon light shown upon her as she lay back in my bed.
- 46) It was the kind of scene I only had imagined in my head.
- 47) I just could not believe it, to think that she was real.
- 48) And as I tried to tell her, she said 'Shhh... I know just how you feel.
- 49) And if you want to come here with me,
- 50) Then that's all right with me. 'Cause I've been oh so lonely, lovin' someone is a better way to be.
- 51) Any where's a better way to be.'
- 52) The morning come so swiftly, but I held her in my arms.

- 53) But she slept like a baby, snug and safe from harm.
- 54) I did not want to share her with the world or break the mood,
- 55) So before she woke I went out and brought us both some food.
- 56) I came back with my paper bag, to find that she was gone.
- 57) She'd left a six-word letter saying, 'It's time that I moved on.'
- 58) The waitress took her bar rag, and she wiped it across her eyes.
- 59) And as she spoke her voice came out as something like a sigh.
- 60) She said, 'I wish that I was beautiful, or that you were halfway blind.
- 61) And I wish I weren't so dog-gone fat, I wish that you were mine.
- 62) And I wish that you'd come with me, when I leave for home.
- 63) For we both know all about loneliness, and livin' all alone.'
- 64) And the little man,
- 65) Looked at the empty glass in his hand.
- 66) And he smiled a crooked grin,
- 67) He said, "I guess I'm out of gin.
- 68) And know we both have been so lonely.
- 69) And if you want me to come with you, then that's all right with me.
- 70) 'Cause I know I'm goin' nowhere and any where's a better place to be."

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