

John N. Serio: On "Fire and Ice"

Most readers of Robert Frost's poem "Fire and Ice" agree with Lawrance Thompson's view that the poem is a marvel of compactness, signaling for Frost "a new style, tone, manner, [and] form" (*Years of Triumph* 152). Thompson interprets "Fire and Ice" as hinting at the destructive powers of "the heat of love or passion and the cold of hate," sensing that "these two extremes are made so to encompass life as to be a gathering up of all that may exist between them; all that may be swept away by them" (*Fire and Ice* 122). But a closer look at the poem reveals that in structure, style, and theme "Fire and Ice" is a brilliant, gemlike compression of Dante's *Inferno*.⁽¹⁾ As such, it presents a much more profound distinction between the two extremes of love and hate. Like Dante, Frost follows Aristotle in condemning hatred as far worse than desire.

At its most obvious, formal level, "Fire and Ice" has nine lines, mirroring Dante's nine circles of hell. Although Frost's poem is not exactly funnel shaped like Dante's hell, it does narrow considerably at the end as Frost literally cuts in half his general pattern of four stresses (iambic tetrameter) to close on two lines having only two stresses each (iambic dimeter). Interestingly, the one line near the opening or top of the poem that contains two stresses, "Some say in ice," evokes the frozen punishment awaiting the worst sinners at the constricted bottom of Dante's hell. In addition, and surprisingly overlooked by most readers, Frost employs a modified terza rima, the rhyme scheme Dante invented for his *Divine Comedy*: aba, abc, bcb.

But it is at the thematic level that Frost most tellingly follows Dante, for the poem reflects the same system of ethics that Dante employs to classify the sins and punishments of hell. In reading the *Inferno*, readers are often puzzled by Dante's arrangement, because flatterers, fortunetellers, hypocrites, thieves, even counterfeiters are placed below murderers. The explanation that Dante provides in canto 11 derives from Aristotle: Sins of reason are worse than sins of passion. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observes that what distinguishes human beings from other life forms is reason; therefore, human beings must function with reason in order to fulfill their maximum potential, what Aristotle terms arete - excellence or virtue (17). As a Catholic, Dante modifies this principle by adding that reason is God's greatest gift to humankind and, therefore, its perversion or misuse constitutes the worst possible sin: "But since fraud / Is the vice of which man alone is capable, / God loathes it most" (Ciardi 11.24-26).

All the damned know they have committed sin, but those in the upper circles such as the carnal, the gluttons, the hoarders and wasters, the angry and sullen (note the Aristotelian lack of moderation in these categories) let passion sway their reason. Those in middle hell such as the murderers, warmongers, suicides, and homosexuals exercise emotion in alignment with reason: Violent though some of their actions may be, these sinners do what they think. But those in lower hell - the flatterers, hypocrites, thieves, and those who have betrayed family and country - exercise deceit. They use their reason to camouflage their true intent and thus pervert the proper use, according to Dante, of God's most distinctive gift to humans. Those in the ninth circle, the traitors to friends, family, and country, are frozen in ice, a most fitting punishment for their icy hearts. Though logically all the sinners in hell suffer the same

consequence - eternal separation from the presence and love of God - those in the lower regions of hell have committed more serious sins and suffer more. In the very pit of hell, excoriated in the three mouths of icebound Satan, lie the arch-betrayers of all time: Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot.

Frost's "Fire and Ice" contains this same organizational pattern. The understated opening two lines, "Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice," at first seem merely to suggest the biblical and scientific predictions about the end of the world: an apocalyptic holocaust or a new ice age. However, as figurative representations of desire and hatred, fire and ice embody the very system of Aristotelian ethics Dante employs in arranging the Inferno: Sins of reason are worse than sins of passion. Frost associates fire with the senses and places it first or, so to speak, near the top of his poem as the lesser of the two types of sin: "From what I've tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire." The verbs are sensuous and although not direct allusions, they recall characters in Dante's upper hell such as the glutton Ciaccio the Hog ("tasted"), the adulterous lovers Paolo and Francesca ("hold"), and the hoarders ("favor"). In addition, by aligning the poem's speaker with a group of others ("I hold with those who favor fire"), Frost implies this is a more common and less serious sin.

When Frost speaks of hatred, however, instead of seeing it as an emotion or feeling, like anger, he presents it as a consequence of thought, of conscious choice: "I think I know enough of hate / To say that for destruction ice / Is also great / And would suffice." The emphasis here, as in Dante, is on reason, or better, on the perversion or misuse of reason, because it is employed not for Christian love but for hatred. The intellectual distancing contained in the repetition "I think I know" the change from the present perfect tense, implying a past action ("I've tasted"), to the present tense ("I think I know"), and the utter isolation of the repeated 'T' without any reference to others mark hatred as worse than desire. Frost underscores this by making it the cause of a second death ("But if it had to perish twice") far more terrible by implication than the first. The pun on the word "ice" in "twice" and "suffice" accentuates the bitter coldness of hatred, and the triple repetition of "ice" at the end of the poem recalls Satan's futile efforts to escape - it is the very beating of his wings that causes the river Cocytus in the ninth circle to freeze.

Like Dante, Frost employs a first-person speaker in his poem. In his dramatic narrative, Dante creates a character named Dante to recount his journey. Although the author and narrator are distinct (after all, Dante the author did not hesitate to place characters in hell whom Dante the narrator pities), there are haunting, autobiographical overtones, as if the Inferno served as a warning not only to others but also to the poet himself:

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood [...]. (Ciardi 1.1-3)

In "Fire and Ice," the force of the lyric "I" similarly contains an autobiographical edge. The deceptively casual, even flippant tone of the persona masks a deeper, understated meaning.

Whether it is a stark admission by Frost of his ambitious and unforgiving nature or an exorcising of the demon - interestingly enough, Frost included "Fire and Ice" as one of the "Grace Notes" in *New Hampshire* (1923) - we will never know. But by modeling his poem in both structure and theme on Dante's *Inferno*, Frost has enriched considerably the meaning of his brief lyric.

NOTE

1. In addition to the internal evidence, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest Frost's familiarity with Dante's *Inferno*. Frost's personal library, now housed at the Fales Library of New York University, contains four editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Although the Fletcher translation of 1931 is too late to have been an influence (the poem first appeared in *Harper's* in December 1920), the other three - two poetic translations by Longfellow, originally published in 1865, and a prose translation by Charles Eliot Norton in 1892, which relied heavily on Longfellow's popular verse translation - could clearly have had an impact. I am grateful to Helice Koffler of the Fales Library for this information.

The torments of hell are first hinted at in canto 3, when Virgil and Dante, after passing through the Gate of Hell, listen to Charon admonish the souls waiting to be ferried across the river Acheron. Both Longfellow and Norton use the same words "heat" and "frost" to describe the unexpected antithesis of punishment awaiting the damned below: "I come to lead you to the other shore, / To the eternal shades in heat and frost" (Longfellow 3.86-87). Much later, and in what I think is a veiled tribute to Robert Frost, John Ciardi translates these lines as:

I come to lead you to the other shore, into eternal dark, into fire and ice. (3.83-84)

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