

Dante's Swamp of Depression

Glenn F. Chesnut

Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 7

(trans. based on Mark Musa's)

The water was a deeper dark than purple dye,
and we, with its somber waves for company,
made our way down along a rough, strange path.

This sad [*tristo*] stream, when it has reached
the bottom of the gray malignant slopes,
becomes a swamp that has the name of Styx.

And I, intent on looking as we passed,
saw muddy people moving in that marsh,
all naked, with their faces scarred by rage.

They fought each other, not with hands alone,
but struck with head and chest and feet as well,
and with teeth they tore each other limb from limb.

And the good teacher said: "My son, now see
the souls of those that anger [*ira*] overcame;
and I ask you to believe me when I say,

Beneath the slimy top are sighing souls
who make these waters bubble at the surface;
your eyes will tell you this -- just look around.

Bogged in this slime they say, 'Sad [*tristi*] we were
in the sweet air made happy by the sun,
continually carrying our depression [*accidioso*]
inside us;

now we lie sadly [*attristiam*] here in this black muck!
This is the hymn they gurgle in their throats
but cannot sing in words that truly sound."

Then making a wide arc, we walked around
the pond between the dry bank and the slime,
our eyes still fixed on those who gobbled mud.

COMMENTARY

The Fifth Circle of Hell: Anger & Depression

The fifth circle of hell is composed of the swamplike river Styx. To understand the geography of hell, we need to know something about the Seven Deadly Sins of medieval Christian teaching. These were:

Pride or Vainglory (*superbia, vana gloria*)

Envy or Jealousy (*invidia*)

Anger or Rage (*ira*)

Covetousness or Avarice (*avaritia*)

Lust (*luxuria*)

Gluttony (*gula*) = greed. In medieval thought this included not only eating disorders, but any compulsive behavior involving the gullet or throat, especially alcoholism, and in the modern period, other addictions of the gullet such as smoking tobacco, marijuana, or crack cocaine, or taking any mood altering drugs which come in pill form

Accidie (clinical Depression, *acedia* or *tristitia*). In current English, the name of this deadly sin is frequently misleadingly translated as "Sloth," but that word in modern English means simple laziness. Accidie is a deeply pathological condition that cannot be conquered by simply trying to bludgeon and whip yourself with will power, and lecturing yourself on the need to work harder.

All of these defects can be given modern psychotherapeutic names, because the medieval thinkers who worked them out were very acute psychologists -- it is the technical vocabulary that has changed more than any difference in actual observation.

Some of the Italian words (by their associations) point very clearly to the Styx as the place where the raw sewage from latrines and sewers and gutters was piped to rot. It was a slimy mixture of feces and garbage and every foul substance known to the human race.

The people struggling above the surface of the dark swamp were afflicted with the vice or deadly sin of "Anger." A modern psychotherapist would describe them as people who are acting out a deep, submerged rage. Good psychotherapy would work to bring to light whatever deep inner resentment lies behind this rage, and would employ techniques to defuse the underlying resentment.

The symbolic scenes that Dante created in the poem were designed either to show, in metaphorical images, the fundamental nature of the behavior into which the person had become locked, or what the actual end result was going to be, in terms of the person's inner psychological state of mind, of trying to live life in that neurotic way.

The people sunk below the surface of the sewage were afflicted with a different vice: the deadly sin of *acedia* or *tristitia*. It is

probably best to revive the old English word *Accidie* to refer to this vice, since the word currently used to translate it (most of the time) is the totally misleading word "Sloth."

In modern English, "Sloth" just means simple laziness. The ancient vice (*acedia* or *tristitia*) referred to something much deeper and more pervasive: a chronic, perpetual sadness and gloominess; a near total paralysis where we procrastinated and delayed until we could finally no longer will ourselves to do anything at all; or a frantic search for any device or excuse which we could find for never finishing any task. In the early modern period, the western world used the word "melancholy" to refer to this state.

In a good many of these cases, a modern psychotherapist would use the technical term *depression* to talk about chronic *acedia* or *tristitia*. Dante has accurately seen that depression is closely linked to buried feelings of rage at the world around us, and that it is in fact a resentment which has turned in on itself, plunging the person thereby into a chronically dark and gloomy mood where nothing seems worthwhile any more. Depressives regard themselves as failures, and as people who could never ever do any better. For them, everything in life has lost its point, and nothing is any longer worth doing.

Sunk in the sewage of your own mind -- what better metaphor could one find for the black mood of someone locked into continuous depression?