

IDEALISTIC AND DISTORTED: DANTE'S VISION OF THE CITY BECOMES ITS
OWN TRAVESTY IN HELL

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Abstract

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Idealistic and Distorted: Dante's Vision of the City Becomes Its Own

Travesty in Hell

(Under the direction of Dr. Dino Cervigni)

Dante Alighieri's pride in being a Florentine citizen is clearly demonstrated in his life choices and in his writings. Attempting for years as a public official and then as a writer to influence public opinion, Dante's eventual exile out of his beloved Florence led to the most powerful work of his career, the writing of the Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. In the Inferno, Dante takes his boldest, explicit steps in representing his own judgments as to what has become of his beloved and ideal city, and what should happen to those in power, and thus responsible for its downfall. Throughout this thesis, various themes of the ideal city, their parodies, and their distortions in the Inferno of La Divina Commedia will be explored.

Dedication

First and foremost, I want to dedicate this thesis to the Lord God and His Son Jesus Christ, for the ever present strength and guidance in my life.

To my wonderful parents, Joe and Paulette Debs: thank you for your unconditional love, support, and always believing in me and my dreams. I love you.

To Dr. Alessandro Gentili: my Florentine professor who was the first to introduce me to Dante Alighieri and instilled the passion within me for learning Italian literature.

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Introduction

“In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth ... So God created man in His own image, in the image of God, He created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ ” (Genesis 1:1, 1:27–28)

These words begin the Holy Bible, the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Here, God commands power to Adam, the first man created, to exert over all of the creatures on the earth. In subsequent passages, mankind is initially offered the habitat of the perfect Garden of Eden. Soon, however, mankind begins to use its power of reason to “sin” against God’s wishes and finds that his perfection is now not to be found on earth. Adam is expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating the forbidden fruit; Cain kills his brother Abel. Sin marred their perfection, and whereas before, man did not have a reason to use judgment for their

actions. Now, judgment was not only necessary; judgment of millions of men and women in the subsequent history has yielded differing results that many times themselves become the subject of judgment. One person in history who took the various aspects of judgment to heart was Dante Alighieri. Dante's entire adult life between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was spent challenging the aspect of the possibilities of the ideal city of Florence contrasted with the evils and problems brought about by the abuse of power and the greed of those in powerful positions. For Dante, it was a moral tragedy that mankind could take gifts of God, such as the fabulous city of Florence along with the power and freedom God gave man, and abuse these gifts. Attempting for years as a public official and then as a writer to influence public opinion, Dante's eventual exile out of his beloved Florence led to the most powerful work of his career, the writing of the Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. In the Inferno, Dante takes his boldest, explicit steps in representing his own judgments as to what has become of his beloved and ideal city, and what should happen to those in power, and thus responsible for its downfall. Throughout this paper, themes of the

ideal city and its parody and distortion in the Inferno of La Divina
Commedia will be explored.

Torn by Conflict and Corruption: Florence in Turmoil:

Background on Dante's Beloved City of Florence

At the time of Dante in the 1200s and 1300s, the city of Florence was one of the largest cities in Italy with a population of approximately ninety-five thousand. Considered to be a center for cultural activities, Florence also had a worldwide reputation for business, such as banking. At this time, Florence was even given the nickname of “little Rome,” as it was seen as a possible successor to Rome because of the revolutionary movements in art and politics. Joan Ferrante notes that “Florence is full of wealth; she defeats her enemies in war and civil strife; she possesses the sea and the land and the whole earth; under her leadership the whole of Tuscany is happy” (3).

Other cities, such as Naples and Venice, were rich and powerful at this time, but none had the personal growth rate that Florence experienced. Infrastructure and the Catholic Church were increasing in

power. To live within the walls of Florence meant that one enjoyed freedom and protection.

The country of Italy was a central location for musicians, artists, politicians, and intellectuals, yet it was far from perfect. Beginning roughly in the early 1100s and continuing through the Renaissance period, Italy was in political and social turmoil. Warring political factions were taking their disagreements from the governmental buildings to the outside streets. Governmental leaders might have thought that the decisions they made were for themselves and their own power. However, nothing could have been further from the truth. Every new decree that came down affected the city as a whole; the leaders, the city's structure, and most importantly, its citizens. The rampant disagreements amongst the leaders spread to the citizens like a plague. This was especially true for the city of Florence. Considered to be the center of political and cultural development of these time periods, Florence was a busy hubbub within its walls. Although perfection was a goal to strive for in the minds of its leaders, in reality, it was far from perfect. On the other hand, the understanding of the situation did not deter many intellectuals. While

many people had their own, personal opinions about the future of Florence, bloody rivalry between political factions would become the primary source of influence on the Florentine citizens. Finally, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this would never become as clearly apparent as in the longstanding conflict between the Guelf and Ghibelline parties.

The Guelfs, who supported the pope and church power, and the Ghibellines, who supported the Holy Roman Emperor, had been at war for years. No one could agree on who had the right to control the Italian territories. Then, by the late 1290s the Guelfs split within themselves into the Blacks and the Whites, which further complicated the state of affairs.¹ The Black Guelfs continued to support the pope and his authority, but the White Guelfs began to disagree with this. Specifically, the White Guelfs were opposed to the authority of Pope Boniface VIII during his papacy from 1294 to 1303. The constant verbal and physical

¹ Ruud, Jay. Dante: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work. New York: Facts On File, Inc, 2008.

confrontations put a huge strain on the people, and ultimately caused damage to what had once been a proud and magnificent city.

Amidst the chaos, another man established himself as a writer, one who deserves the highest level of recognition. In the year 1265, Dante Alighieri was born in Florence. His family members were prominent in the city, and were part of the Guelf party. When Dante was in his twenties, he already was becoming involved in the political scene. Like so many others, as a Florentine politician himself, Dante was intimately familiar with the city affairs of Florence, and was passionate about them. Throughout his life, Dante had a “love–hate” relationship with the city of Florence.² He felt a great loyalty to it and a great friendship with many of its citizens. Dante demonstrates this in his writing. For instance, in his Vita nuova Dante’s loving words and tender scenes detail a love for Florence, which set the scene in which he met the love of his life, Beatrice. Similarly, during his famous journey in La Divina Commedia, Dante draws specific attention to different Florentine citizens that he holds in high esteem. One of these is Brunetto Latini, a former mentor

² In Dante and the City, Keen mentions that Florence, which many Florentines referred to as a “second Rome” is the city that Dante speaks of the most often in his works (27).

and respected intellectual. Through these writings, Dante showed which personal qualities he admired, and what types of ideas he thought would benefit his home city. On the other hand, Dante also abhorred Florence in as many ways as he adored it. Dante himself was a White Guelph, which was the predominant party for a considerable length of time. Eventually, in the year 1302, the Blacks seized control of the city, and Dante, along with his fellow Whites, were in trouble. Many of his friends and allies were executed, and a death sentence was pronounced on Dante, should he ever be caught returning to his beloved Florence. This alienation from Florence prevented him from putting his ideas about politics into actions. Or did it?

It is true that Dante felt tremendous sadness and a sense of loss to be forbidden from seeing the city he loved, admired, and despite its faults, was a part of. Despite the obvious hardships, he did not allow himself to be oppressed, and found other ways to get his point across. For Dante, this is immediately apparent in his writings. Just as he had used his words to detail the people and things he loved, Dante's writing while in exile served an important purpose in the understanding of his

personal feelings, varying opinions on politics. These not only served as insight into Dante's intellectual side, but also into how he saw all of the conflict in Florence accumulating into something on a worldwide scale that would affect mankind as a whole. As previously mentioned, Dante, while working in the political field, was always passionate about what he did, and the feats he set out to accomplish. When he was exiled, this passion remained with him for the rest of his life. In fact, it seemed to grow in intensity, even though he was now an outsider looking in.

Under the threats and kind of penalty like the ones enforced on Dante, the primary method for circulating one's beliefs was writing, and this is something Dante accomplished with excellence and success. Once in exile, Dante's views on Florence began to change. While he still loved it, anger and frustration with city affairs began to both subtly and explicitly appear as he wrote. Ironically, it is in his exile and through the discovery then channeling of these feelings where Dante draws strength and inspiration to write his messages. Through the grand injustice surrounding his exile, Dante sought to find reasoning behind governmental systems and their function. Dante decided to use imagery

that people could identify with, but it would also shock them into the realization of what they were doing to their community. For Dante viewed the concept of the city as something that defined mankind's ability to come together as a powerful entity in and of itself that could make a positive impact on the world. His pride and admiration for Florence and its inhabitants had made it seem like an earthly paradise. However, upon his exile, Dante became painfully enlightened to the rampant corruption around his perfect city. The perfection was forever marred by the sin of man. And so, his heavenly city soon became a grossly perverse hell on earth. Using his personal opinions and beliefs as a basis, Dante hoped to draw the attention of his fellow citizens to certain, critical points. First of all, where the power and right to rule over others came from, and how this right to rule came into human hands. Secondly, Dante wanted the people to use these origins of power in order to remember how to better conduct themselves so that they can enrich their city, along with all of its inhabitants, to become strong, powerful, and just. By combining all of these different elements, Dante used them,

along with the situation of his exile, and wrote his most influential work:

La Divina Commedia.

La Divina Commedia or The Divine Comedy detailed a personal journey on epic proportions that would become the subject of literary discussion and debate almost immediately and then continue until the present day, over seven hundred years later. Dante began the journey by descending into Hell, a location where the lowest a human soul could go in the afterlife, and the farthest point away from God and His love. The punishments, spiritual torment, and physical location provided important insight as to how Dante the Author felt about the tumultuous events happening in his own life. He made examples of these damned souls as to how people on earth should *not* act. Dante continues this journey by ascending Mount Purgatory with Virgil as his guide in Purgatorio, part two of La Divina Commedia. While souls here are under punishment, there are clear differences. They are not suffering for eternity, instead, they are moving towards a goal of redemption, just as a climber aims for the summit. After reaching the summit of Mount Purgatory, a soul is cleansed of his past sin, and the final move towards Paradise is made.

At this point, Dante's lifelong love, Beatrice, becomes his guide.

The final stage of the journey is made in Paradiso, where Dante seeks to explore Heaven. This is where Dante believed that as Christians, all humans should aspire to end up here after life on the earth. It is in Heaven that those who have lead a virtuous life are found. Heaven is the polar opposite of Hell, as the souls here draw closer and closer to God Himself. It would make logical sense that if Good bests Evil, it should be mentioned first. Yet it is not until Dante reaches Heaven that he realizes that it is the opposite. Only after he journeys through Paradise that he realizes just what he has gone through. Heaven is everything that is good just as Hell is everything that is evil. Paradiso is the place where the ideal community is defined. There is unity in diversity; one heart is shared by different persons, and the mutuality of affection is nothing less than the divine life of the Trinity. There is the Three in One and the One in Three.³ In Hell, Dante sees Lucifer as the epitome of everything that has gone wrong against God. However, it is also important to understand

³ This quote, taken from Peter Hawkins' essay on Civitas, explains that in Heaven, Dante the Pilgrim as well as the reader discover the reasoning behind the parody of Hell. Having seen pure evil, Dante is able to realize the pure good. For example, just as L'Inferno climaxes with the encounter with Lucifer, Paradiso ends with the culmination of good, God Himself .

evil in order to fully appreciate benevolence. God is the pinnacle of the mystery that God is Himself the transcendent commonwealth of persons, a community of lovers, who calls the blessed to discover their own citizenship in Him.⁴

⁴ As reported by Peter Hawkins, Heaven is the ultimate, ideal city, where all those who are worthy are citizens.

Parody: Disfiguring Goodness and Truth

In order to show just what Dante meant by a hell on earth, the notion of parody must first be examined. According to the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, "Parody is the exaggerated imitation of a work of art. Like caricature, it is based on distortion, bringing into bolder relief the salient features of a writer's style or habit of mind. It belongs to the genus **satire**, and thus performs the double-edged task of reform and ridicule" (600). To create a caricature, an artist bases his work on an original, flawless figure, and then disfigures it to alter the image. Similarly, in writing, an author takes an image, and then uses words, structure, and allegorical figures to construct his literary caricature. Also, the Princeton Encyclopedia states that "parody may be directed not only at style, but also at content, or 'habits of mind'" (43). The author combines the elements of literary structure, such as rhyme scheme, with the parodic words and ideas. When used together, they form the desired effect of the author. Parodic references are numerous in the Commedia.

One example of the Commedia's parodic reference is in the physical descriptions of the landscape throughout Inferno . In her essay "The City of Dis," Dorothy Sayers makes the comment that "The map of Hell is the map of the black heart. If we want to verify it, we cannot do so in books" (130). Dante was coming from Florence, which is surrounded by natural beauty, such as rolling hills, small mountains, and green forestry. Those were elements that he loved, yet for the scenery in Hell, everything was a morbid image of itself. For example, instead of those gentle, vibrantly colored hills surrounding the city, there "comes a cliff with a great drop" (140) and the descriptions of rocks are often used. When these details are mentioned, they are very harsh, knife-like, and serrated.⁵ Also, elements necessary for living things, such as rivers and fresh grass, which thrive on earth and on the summit of Mount Purgatory, have the same initial appearance, but are hugely distorted. Dorothy Sayers underlines another instance here: "The river, the wood, and the sand are all barren. We are left in a society that has exhausted all

⁵ Sayers is calling attention to all details which make Hell's environment a parody of the perfection of Heaven. Hell progresses downwards, further away from God, while Heaven progresses upwards and closer to God.

pleasure, stripped the earth bare, and no longer cares either to live or to propagate itself" (142). Instead of being in an oasis of serenity, the sinners are in a desert of chaos which drains them, not replenish them. It is not only in the descriptions of the hard landscape that identify Hell as a parody of Heaven. Other feelings that can be felt physically are described as inversions of each other. Freezing rain and ice pour down onto the circle of the gluttonous, rather than the warm love of God shining down on them. As the journey into Hell progresses, it becomes even more apparent just how much it is a reversal of what people *should* strive for.

The Parts of the Medieval City Make A Whole...And Not Just in Hell

For Dante, different elements had to work together in order to make up an ideal city. When creating his own image of hell, Dante took each of these and made each a part of the parody. Dante modeled the afterlife city of Dis after Florence. While Florence and the city of Dis share similarities, they also differ greatly. Everything that was beautiful, positive, and admirable about Florence on earth in Dante's early years was ugly, hated, and feared in the diabolical Dis. Dante related specific aspects of Florence to Dis that clearly identify it as a city, be it an accursed one. The first evidence is presented almost immediately, as Dante and Virgil are approaching the edge. The gates that grant entrance, and the walls themselves, are both reminiscent of a once strong Florence. In the medieval city, the physical structure was noticed first and foremost. To enter the city, one had to pass through the main gate. Upon entering, the person was inside a different world with different possibilities and opportunities for the future.

In Dante's Inferno, the opportunities are quite the opposite. In Canto III, Dante and Virgil are approaching the gates of Hell. Instead a sense of excitement, wonder, and a sense of homecoming, there is an immediate feeling of dread.

PER ME SI VA NE LA CITTÀ DOLENTE,
PER ME SI VA NE L'ETTERNO DOLORE,
PER ME SI VA TRA LA PERDUTA GENTE.
GIUSTIZIA MOSSE IL MIO ALTO FATTORE;
FECEMI LA DIVINA PODESTATE,
LA SOMMA SAPIENZA E 'L PRIMO AMORE.
DINANZI A ME NON FUOR COSE CREATE
SE NON ETTERNE, E IO ETTERNO DURO.
LASCIATE OGNE SPERANZA, VOI CH'INTRATE.⁶

These words confront Dante the Pilgrim before passing through Hell's gate. There is no welcoming feeling, only brutal honesty about what is to come. With these words, one can see that Dante the Pilgrim is journeying

⁶ Dante and Virgil encounter this inscription, whose words begin Canto III of the Inferno, just before entering Hell itself.
The Inferno. Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. p. 46.

away from God to follow Hell's path. Through God is the way to the eternal city of light. Through a path of sin was the way to damnation. In addition to the point of entry, a city was also surrounded by tall, strong walls that made a formidable impression on its visitors or would-be enemies. Inside these walls, there were various towers that belonged to the rich and powerful. In addition to this, the city walls symbolized much more than just fortitude. Not only did they keep unwanted parties outside the city, but they also kept everything pertinent to the city itself *inside*. Everything inside the walls made much of the outside world seem insignificant, for the inside was like a world of its own.⁷ To be inside the city was to have a sense of belonging and camaraderie with one's fellow citizens. To be outside the city was to be more than simply "out of the loop" with city affairs. The threat of exile was one of the worst punishments possible, for it jeopardized one's own identity. To experience exile was to suffer a great, personal loss. This is evident in the very beginning of the work. Dante wanders through a dark wood,

⁷ According to Frugoni, "The interior of the city is also the place for the churches, and for humankind, which belongs to God, with the walls denoting the separation from the surrounding space- a space that is natural, unmarked by human action, hence inhabited by demons and evil" (10).

with no real sense of direction or purpose. He is losing himself in the darkness of his situation.

A first impression made by what was on the inside was just as important as the city's outside. The essence of any city was its citizens that inhabited it. Not only did they dwell there, but the people created the very identity of the city. The full meaning of citizenship went much deeper than just living in a space. Within the walls of Dis, monstrosities run as rampant as the number of souls. What strikes Dante almost immediately is the painful wailing of the souls. Just as humans inhabit Florence, the souls represent the damned citizens of Hell.

The Infernal City of Dis and its Inhabitants as a Parodic Image of the Ideal

Medieval City and its Citizens

As previously stated, the citizens in the medieval city of Florence came together in order to create the city itself. In Hell, that commonality does not exist. It is left to each soul to fend for itself, and thus left to suffer their torment alone. One primary example lies within Canto III, in which Dante encounters the “l’anime triste di coloro che visser sanza ‘nfamia e sanza lodo” and thus rejected by both Heaven and Hell.⁸ They are doomed to aimlessly pursue banners around the banks of the River Acheron while being stung by wasps and bitten by flies. Parody is demonstrated here from a few aspects. The first can be found within the nature of the souls’ earthly lives. By refusing to make definite choices to do good or evil, they are not considered to have ever been a true, participating citizen. This indecisiveness is parodied in their condemnation to wander, without any specific destination being possible.

⁸ Text taken from Canto III of the Inferno. Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander (49).

Because they were not a part of their society in life, they receive the same status in death. They are placed in an “Ante-Inferno”, and so do not claim “citizenship” to either Heaven or Hell. On the other hand, given the fact that they are being punished, they are still considered to be a part of Hell. These outskirts of Hell are also considered to be a representation of the medieval city’s suburbs. A suburb is technically a part of the city, but it is on the outskirts, away from the main activity and proceedings. The inhabitants there were generally considered to be outsiders, which is exactly how these souls are viewed. The blank banners are representative of continuous empty decisions. The final piece of evidence with these outsiders comes as the presence of the wasps and flies. In their earthly life, there was nothing to make them decide to do anything. Choices were a product of free will, which they chose to ignore and waste. The perpetual stinging of the wasps and annoyance of the flies serve as a constant and ironic stimulant that forces the souls forward in unknown directions.

Civic leaders and those who enforced the laws are also given their own parodic versions of themselves within the city of Dis. Dante often

used mythological characters or creatures to fulfill these two societal roles. In any city, there was need to have those who held the authority to pass judgment on other citizens. Unfortunately, during the 1200 and 1300s, legal proceedings were rarely fair, as the judges used their position to manipulate the various outcomes. In Hell, Dante calls attention to this corruption by highlighting Dante the Pilgrim's encounter with a specific character from Greek mythology in a judicial position. At the beginning of Canto V, Dante and Virgil encounter Minos, the legendary king of Crete. Minos sits at the beginning of the Second Circle of Hell, waiting to judge and render a verdict on each new soul. He then sentences them to the subsequent circle that fits their sin. Ironically, Minos' justice is always fair, as he sends each and every soul to its proper punishment. There is another meaning in Minos' role. Despite the corruption rooted in the Church, Dante views Catholicism and Christianity as the true religion. In other words, despite Minos' key role, he is still in a circle of the Christian Hell, judging the souls of the damned. Finally, just as there were military personnel to enforce the laws of the medieval city, there were also soldiers to enforce the rules in Hell. Similarly to the

role of Minos, mythological creatures were placed to ensure that each sinner was suffering accordingly. The Minotaur stands at the entrance of the Seventh Circle in Canto XII, like a living personification of an enraged torture device, to remind the souls of their bloodthirsty ways. After sidestepping the Minotaur's rage, Dante the Pilgrim "vidi un'ampia fossa in arco torta, come quella che tutto 'l piano abbraccia, second ch'avea detto la mia scrota; e tra 'l piè de la ripa ed essa, in traccia corrien centauri, armati di saette, come solien nel mondo andare a caccia (221).⁹ Just as they had been diligent soldiers in the mythological world, they held the same duties in the Christian underworld. Their intimidating physique combined with the endless supply of sharp arrows, ever ready to fire upon a rogue soul, made for a horrifying enforcer of the laws of Dis.

The fact that figures with pagan roots had authority was bitterly ironic. During these tumultuous years, the Church held this same kind of authority for common citizens in Florence. Dante believed that church

⁹ In Greek mythology, the centaurs were creatures that were human from the torso up and the lower half of the body was that of a horse. They were thought to be wild hunters and fierce warriors, especially known for their fight with the mythical Lapith people. Canto XII, The Inferno. Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. p. 221.

leaders were transitioning from men of God to men of themselves. They used their religious positions as a ruse to deter from their actions. As an outspoken Guef, Dante encountered countless opposition from church authority. The infamous struggle between Dante and Pope Boniface VIII manifests itself in Canto XIX. Dante is now in the third bolgia of the eighth circle that punishes the Simoniacs, or those who have bought and sold church offices or pardons. There is another simoniac pope there, Pope Nicholas III, who mistakes Dante for Boniface VIII. Clearly insulted, Dante corrects him. In reality, Pope Nicholas is foreshadowing the ultimate fate of Boniface to be within this circle, to be buried head-first with flames on his feet. As Pope Boniface is still alive when this journey was taking place, to refer to his fate in the afterlife is a very expressive reference. Dante says, “Però ti sta, ché tu se’ ben punito; e guarda ben la mal tolta moneta ch’esser ti fece contra Carlo ardito...io userei parole ancor più gravi; ché la vostra avarizia il mondo attrista, calcando i buoni e sollevando i pravi” (351).¹⁰ Dante the Pilgrim is reflective on how Dante

¹⁰ Canto XIX, The Inferno. Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. p. 351.

the Author is feeling. Boniface represented what Dante despised about the Church's meddling authority in their attempt to gain political power.

The Civitas Dei vs the Civitas Diaboli: Who Will Emerge Victorious?

In addition to the experiences in Florence, Dante's views of the city were influenced by other writings. During the late antiquity, St.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) wrote a book titled De Civitate Dei, or, The

City of God. This work discussed Augustine's views on Christianity and

the philosophy of the religion, and it had a huge impact on Dante's

thought process while structuring the Inferno. The central theme of St.

Augustine's book concentrates on a long-standing struggle between the

citizens of the City of Man and the City of God. The City of God is

described as being inhabited by moralistic beings who uphold the

traditional values of Christianity. The City of Man is filled with the rebels,

those who have turned their backs upon these values and even God

Himself. This rivalry was described as having an outcome that would

ultimately favor those in the City of God. Augustine's great paradigm is

the *civitas Dei* in Heaven, the city as it was first created and meant to be,

wherein each creature, be it angel or human, finds God in the ultimate

object of desire and therefore the common bond with everyone else.¹¹ As a parody of the City of God, it makes sense that Dis is also known as the *Civitas Diaboli*, or the City of the Devil. This *Civitas Diaboli* as a city was a “direct negation” (74) of the *Civitas Dei* in the following ways. In the City of God, His love is given to everyone and that love is reciprocated. The fallen angel Lucifer refused to return that love. Instead, he fought against it. In Dante’s eyes, this refusal is what lands him in the bottommost, frozen pit of Judecca.

Peter Hawkins does not only describe the *Civitas Dei* and *Civitas Diaboli* as parodies of each other. They are bitter enemies at each other’s throats, “rival notions of *civitas* that inspired the structure of the Commedia” (73).¹² The supreme general of rebellion, Lucifer’s decision to defy God demonstrates a gross satire on free will. Free will is given by God to people of a city to exercise at their discretion. According to Dante, what results is an evil parody for one’s own actions in which the

¹¹ Hawkins’ essay points out that every citizen of Heaven, every being whether a human soul or supernatural, maintains God as the focus of their existence. This will eventually be turned completely around by the damned souls, who have let other foci into their lives, and in many cases, have abandoned God completely.

¹² This notion of rivalry is distinctly reminiscent of the battle of Heaven, in which Lucifer and his army were cast out by the army of angels lead by Archangel Michael. As a result, the supernatural “structures” of the Christian Heaven and Hell were created.

soul is imprisoned and must endure forever. Upon entering, a citizen of Hell grieves; grieves for the loss of earthly pleasures. “Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai risonavan per l’aere sansa stelle, per ch’io al cominciar ne lagrimai. Diverse lingue, orribili favelle, parole di dolore, accenti d’ira, voci alte e fioche...”.¹³ Finally, Hawkins notes:

For what do we see when we pass through the gates of Dis but the grotesque portrait of a medieval city, a hill town sucked in upon itself into a kind of massive sinkhole, so that its dark, narrow passageways wind down instead of leading up, finally bringing the traveler to Satan’s travesty of a throneroom. (77)

The throne room signifies the ultimate parody of city hierarchy. God sits upon the celestial throne in Heaven, and Lucifer lays entrapped in the center of his own realm.

¹³ The Inferno. Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. p. 47.

Dante's Parodic City: Inside and Outside the "Nightmare and Dream: The Earthly City In Dante's Commedia" by Peter S. Hawkins

Dante's journey through Hell is certainly a daunting and emotionally heavy trip. However, Dante the Pilgrim does not realize the full meaning of this journey until he completes it. The final stretch occurs when Dante leaves Mount Purgatory with another guide, his beloved Beatrice. It is in Heaven, at the very top of morality, that Dante comes to realize the full meaning of the purpose of a soul hitting rock bottom, Hell. Peter S. Hawkins wrote an essay concerning the subject of *civitas*, or citizenship and other ideas relating to the city-state. The essay, entitled "Nightmare and Dream: The Earthly City In Dante's Commedia", further explores the parody of the ideal medieval city. The essay also touches on different areas on the parodic image by highlighting the reversal through topsy-turvy representations of the city of Hell and the city of Heaven. These representations are taken from the foundations of Florence, destroyed while building Dis, and then reconstructed in the City of God.

In Canto VIII of Paradiso, the soul of Charles Martel asks Dante,

Or dì: sarebbe il peggio per l'omo in terra, se non fosse cive?

Sempre natura, se fortuna trova discorde a sé, com' ogne altra
semente fuor di sua region, fa mala prova. E se 'l mondo là giù
ponesse mente al fondamento che natura pone, seguendo lui, avria
buona la gente.¹⁴

When Dante travels to Heaven alongside Beatrice, different questions are asked that cause him to reflect on what he has been through. In the previous quote, the attention is again brought to the importance of citizenship. During the whole of La Divina Commedia, Dante is concerned with the concept of *civitas*, or citizenship, and it continues to be a consistent theme.¹⁵ The citizens are one of, if not *the* key element of the city. It was Dante's ultimate dream that all citizens of the world would one day be united under a universal empire with a just, wise, and fair monarch. Therefore, Dante answers Martel's question with a yes. If a person was not a citizen a part of this universal empire, it would be a

¹⁴ Canto VIII, Paradiso, Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander. p. 208-209. In. 115-116, 139-144.

¹⁵ This was thought to be the main theme and focus of Dante as he wrote the Divine Comedy. Peter Hawkins believes that it demonstrates Dante's concepts of civic order and what they entail.

type of “hell on earth.” There would be no sense of belonging and even an absence of identity. Dante the Author’s can understand this on a very personal level. In his being sentenced to exile from Florence, he feels rejected by everyone. Even if he is welcomed in other parts, especially in Ravenna, it doesn’t matter to him. It is nothing in comparison with being a Florentine. The emptiness consumes him, and he feels very much alone. Likewise, in Hell, the sinner–citizens are grouped together according to the type of sin. Yet there is no sense of togetherness, camaraderie, alliances, or fellowships. It is each soul for himself, left alone to suffer the eternal torment. Peter Hawkins says,

Thus, the absence of Dante’s own city becomes the presence of the poem: a diverse commonwealth of social worlds encircled by its own hundred canto walls, a ‘world city’ built out of terza rima, from whose vantage point, the poet might both wage war against the world and tender his peace.

By using people and events from his own birthplace, Dante is able to provide concrete examples to illustrate the problems he saw on a world–

wide scale. A sound political system does not exist in the City of Dis.

Each accursed soul vies for supremacy, a battle that they will never win.

Conclusion: The Critical Understanding of Hell

In the Inferno, Dante boldly parodies the Florence that has been consumed by those who wield power. He portrays his deep concern and anger at what has become of his beloved and ideal city, and provides bold images of what he feels should happen to those in power, and thus responsible for its downfall. As Peter Hawkins mentions, Dante is deeply concerned with the concept of *civitas* throughout his Commedia. Also, the mechanics of the city and how each soul contributes to the function are of utmost importance. Claire Honess suggests that for Dante, citizenship implies, therefore, far more than a mere accident of birth, or geographical notion; it involves a fundamental stimulus within the human make-up, a stimulus which human beings ignore at their (eternal) peril (37). A person's home city is not just where events have occurred in their lives, nationality makes a citizen *who they are* fundamentally as a person just as much as hair color, morals, and social status does. A Florentine man was who Dante was, and when that was taken from him, he lost himself. The people were then brought together to form a community, in

which becomes a city. The question then became this: who would be in charge?

As previously mentioned, in Canto XXXIV lies Judecca, the nadir of *Inferno*. According to Dorothy Sayers, the last part of society is dissolved here. Everything comes to a head when Dante and Virgil come upon Satan himself. Within the circle of betrayal, Satan is the personification of corruption, treason, and ultimate betrayal Dante's description of his gnawing upon the head of an infamous traitor provides a literary caricature of the Holy Trinity. It is an eternal reminder of the one Lucifer betrayed, God Himself. "Here, in the heart of cold, in the place that knows neither obligation nor community nor coherence nor exchange, treachery devours treachery forever...this is the vision of Dante's corrupted society¹⁶."

Since the fall of Adam and Eve, no one person was content to stand idly by and let someone else take over. In a mad scramble for control, man resorted to sin to gain it by any means necessary. Corruption

¹⁶ Dorothy Sayers believed that in order to truly understand the ideal that Dante was parodying, it was critical to understand all of the parodic elements of the *Inferno*.

divided the unity of the citizens. When tainted by this immorality, the city fails its citizens and the citizens fail their city. From the disappointments and moral catastrophes stemming from the beloved-turned-despised city of Florence, Dante created an unforgettable image of the afterlife, one that made it clear that the city would not be left behind on earth.

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