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The *History*
of *Hell*

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Dante's Inferno

THE VOLUMES OF COMMENTARY WRITTEN about Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) would fill his own Inferno, and the part of those volumes that has to do with that Inferno's engineering and geography would form a substantial subdivision. The architectural ingenuity Dante put into his landscape of Hell has always fascinated readers: modern editions of the *Divine Comedy* carry maps and diagrams, while illustrators have presented not only the characters and monsters of the story but also the wonderful underground embankments, moats, castles, paved trenches, and the City of Dis with walls of red-hot iron. Galileo himself did a technical report on the structure of the Inferno in 1587 as a playful student thesis. Virgil's Hades is a spectacular stage set without much depth, but Dante's Inferno is limned in three dimensions, right down to the cracks, fissures, and ruins created in the infrastructure at the time of the great earthquake that followed the Harrowing of the First Circle.

Writing his great poem in exile, Dante was concerned with history, with Florentine politics, with the corruption of the clergy, with the moral position of his contemporaries, and most of all with the state of his own psyche. At a distance of seven centuries, we can no longer easily appreciate any of these things except the last—Dante is generous with his emotions. But anyone reading the *Inferno* “just for the story” can still marvel at not only the stories the Pilgrim is told but also at the sights and sounds—and smells!

Dante took every theme traced in this book—philosophic, mythic, Orphic, demonic, repulsive, fantastic, allegorical, grotesque, comic, psychological—and put them together with meticulous care for all time. His religious views were orthodox, but his imagination was not. Even if his artistic contribution had been limited to the radical step of marrying the classical attributes of Hades to those of the Christian Hell of the vision tours, it would be a milestone. But his influence went far beyond that.

On earth, Dante led a complicated life. Orphaned early, he was brought up by well-to-do relatives in the city-state of Florence, where he received an excellent education in both the classics and the poetry of his time. He was interested in vocabulary and at one point wanted to construct an “all-Italian” language merging the many dialects of the peninsula; this project was completely undermined by his decision to write the *Comedy* in his own Florentine dialect, which, together with the later contributions of Petrarch and Boccaccio, made Tuscan once and for all time Italy’s literary language. At various times he worked as a businessman, a soldier, a politician, and a professor of philosophy. Because he ran afoul of the tangled politics of the period, he was forced to spend the last twenty years of his life in unhappy, though not uncomfortable, exile.

The most famous event of Dante’s childhood was his encounter with Beatrice Portinari when he was nine and she a year younger. Theirs was a model of courtly romance, for they seldom met, each married someone else, and he continued to write poetry to her all his life. She died in 1290, a date remembered because Dante set the *Comedy* in 1300, just ten years later. In the poem, she appears as Divine Love or Grace, which inspires and guides the Pilgrim after Human Reason, represented by the poet Virgil, can go no farther. Dante had other reasons for choosing 1300: he was thirty-five at the time, “midway along life’s journey”; it was a centennial year, and numbers are essential to the scheme of the poem. It was also the year his political troubles began.

To picture Dante’s physical and ethical universe, think of the round ball of the earth pierced in the northern hemisphere to its center by a hole in the shape of an irregular cone or funnel. The center of that hole is Jerusalem, and its diameter, the width of the circle around Jerusalem, is equal in size to the radius of the earth, about 3,950 miles, though Galileo’s calculations showed it a few hundred miles less. This hole was formed by the weight and force of Lucifer and his angels striking the earth as they fell

from Heaven. The matter displaced by the impact, forced upward and backward along the tunnel Virgil and Dante use to escape, formed the mountain of Purgatory that rises in an inverted cone on an isolated island in the southern hemisphere. On top of Purgatory is the Earthly Paradise. The opening to Hell is covered by a vault of earth that Galileo calculated to be $405\frac{1}{22}$ miles in depth, though obviously there are irregular shallower fissures such as the one by which the poets enter.* In the Dark Wood of the *Inferno's* first canto, where the Pilgrim flees from the leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf, is a hill that must be climbed to reach the entrance to the lower depths where the famous words are inscribed: *Abandon hope, all you who enter here.*

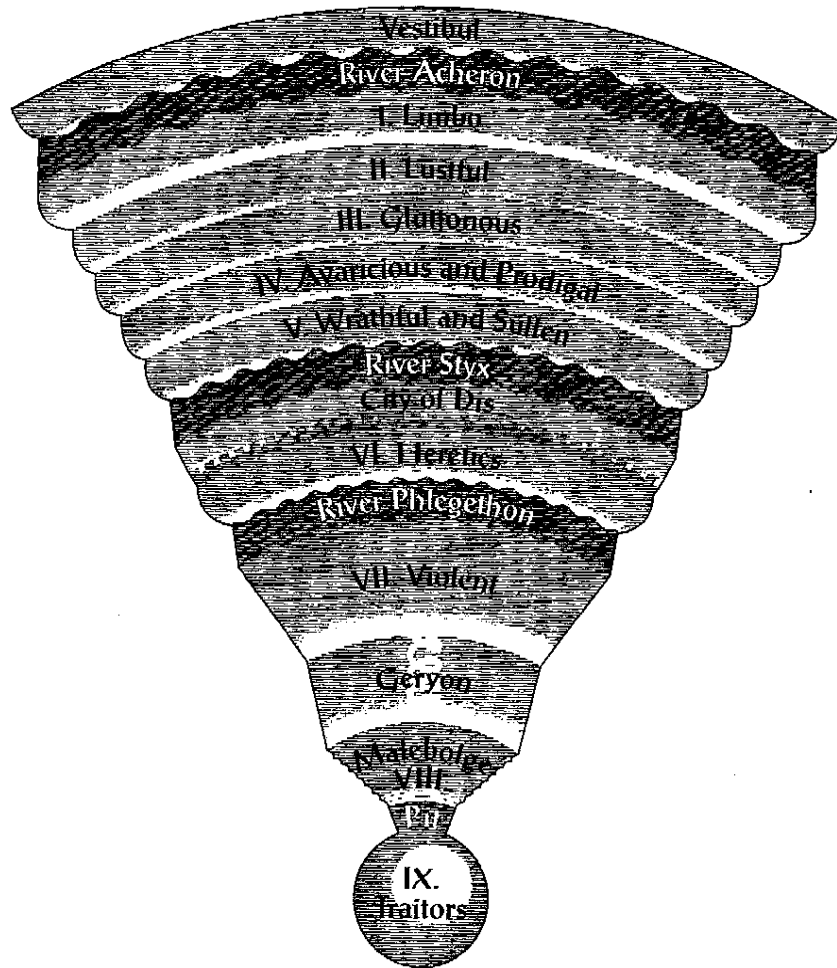
To complete the picture, remember that for Dante, though notoriously not for Galileo, the earth was at the center of a Ptolemaic universe around which circled nine crystalline heavenly spheres—the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the fixed stars, and the primum mobile or “first mover,” which keeps the universe in order. (The three outer planets had not yet, of course, been discovered.) Beyond the spheres was the vast Empyrean, home of God, the angels, and saints, but Dante's heavens are lodged in the spheres. The nine circles of Hell are a direct inversion of the scheme; the vestibule makes a tenth area, as does the Empyrean, as does the earthly paradise atop the nine levels of Purgatory.

Dante's love of precise structure and symbolic numerology extends to the poetry itself. It is written in *terza rima*, in which the first and third lines of each three-line stanza rhyme while the second rhymes with the first and third line of the next stanza. Each of the three sections, the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, is further divided in thirds, of thirty-three cantos each, with an introductory canto to make one hundred in all. To have carried off this structure so readably is amazing.

When the two poets enter the Gate of Hell in Canto III, they find themselves in the vestibule, an area where Dante places the “indecisive,” those who have never committed to anything, including life—thus though they have not earned Hell they get no real death either. This vestibule slopes down to the river Acheron, the first of three circular rivers, each of which debouches into the next, finally to flow into Cocytus, the frozen lake at

*According to *The Weekly World News* of August 28, 1990, Hell is nine miles beneath the surface of a point in western Siberia where Soviet engineers drilling for oil broke through. They capped their hole after smelling the smoke and hearing the cries of the damned.

Dante's Inferno



Map of Dante's Inferno

the center of the earth. The fourth traditional river of Hell, Lethe, Dante locates in Purgatory for dramatic reasons. All of these waters, Virgil tells the Pilgrim in an image worthy of Hesiod, flow from the tears of a great metal statue at the core of Mount Ida in Crete (the statue comes from Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2.31-34, but the tears are Dante's).

The entire underground cone is terraced in descending ledges or circles of narrowing size down to the nethermost well or pit at the center of the earth, which holds Cocytus. Between the Acheron, across which Charon

the boatman ferries the poets, and the Styx are Hell's first four circles, the highest of which is technically Limbo, the residence of virtuous unbaptized souls, mostly pagan. No one is punished in the First Circle, which resembles the Elysian Fields of asphodel in the *Aeneid* and has its own Castle of Philosophy and its own fresh little stream, which seems to have nothing to do with bitter tears. Virgil himself inhabits this circle together with Homer (Dante is thought to have known Homer's work only by reputation) and other famous pagans. The Hebrews had, of course, been rescued in the Harrowing. Dante avoids the question of unbaptized babies.

The next four circles punish the Incontinent, those who, in life, gave in to their passions. Dante followed Aristotle's ethical system in his classification of sins rather than the more common Seven Deadly Sins listing. Thus the Second Circle, guarded by Minos, holds the lustful, whirled forever in winds of desire. The Third, guarded by Cerberus, traps gluttons in a cold, smelly garbage heap. The Fourth, guarded by Plutus ("Father Rich Man" in yet another guise), pits misers and spendthrifts, many of them priests, against one another. The Styx itself, a filthy marsh, forms the Fifth Circle and also a moat for the City of Dis, as well as the boundary between Upper and Lower Hell. In the swamp, the angry tear at one another, while under the mud the slothful and sullen gurgles incoherently.

The poets are ferried by Phlegyas across the Styx from the great tower on the upper bank to the City of Dis (or Satan), the capital of Hell and home to the fallen rebel angels—who will not permit the poets to enter until an angelic messenger forces the gate. All of Lower Hell lies within the walls of this city—really a citadel—guarded by the Furies and Medusa. Immediately beyond the gate is the Sixth Circle of heretics, who burn in fiery graves; in Dante's *Inferno*, despite its name, the traditional punishment of fire is used only inside the walls of the citadel.

Down a steep slope guarded by the Minotaur, the poets scramble toward the Seventh Circle and the Phlegethon, the river of boiling blood guarded by the Centaurs, one of whom, Nessus, takes them across it. The Seventh Circle, which punishes the sins of Violence, is divided into three rounds, the first being the Phlegethon itself. Immersed in its horrid flow are the murderous: warmongers, tyrants, predators, gang members, psychopaths. The next round, guarded by Harpies, is the Wood of Suicides (perhaps Dante's eeriest conception), while at the wood's edge are the wastrels. Then comes the Burning Plain of usurers, blasphemers, and homosexuals, which

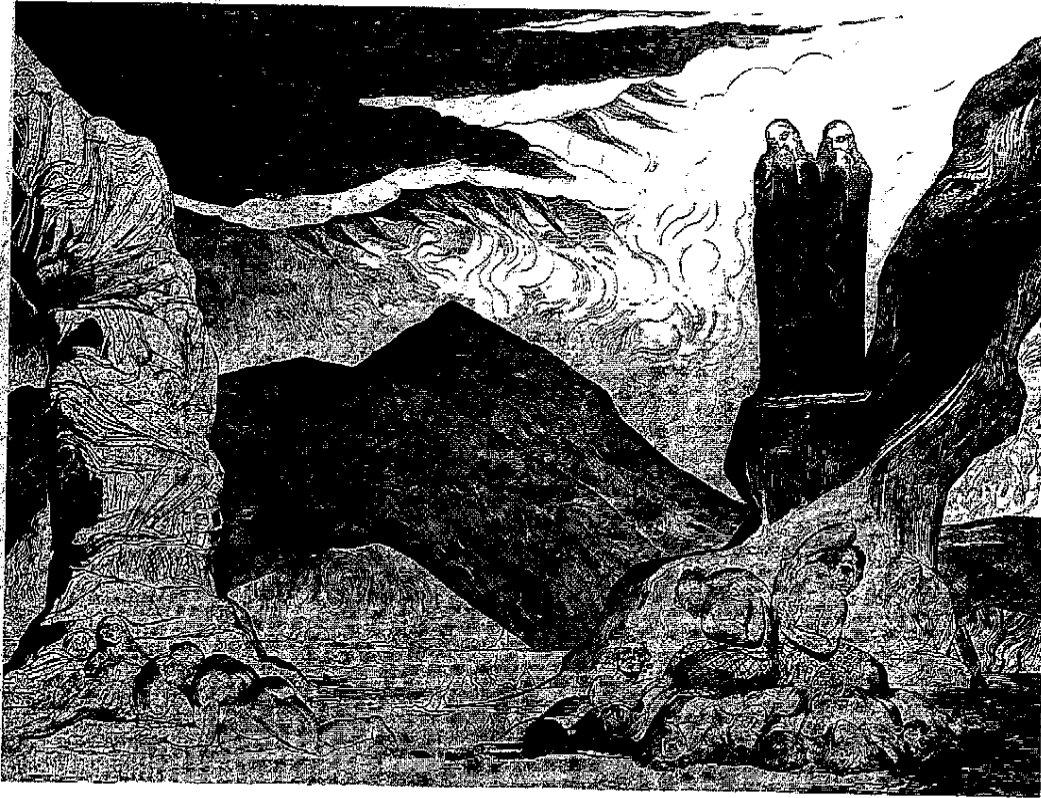
THE HISTORY OF HELL

the poets can cross only by following the bank of the paved conduit along which the end branch of the Phlegethon flows to a great waterfall at the edge of a cliff.

The monster Geryon flies them down the cliff's edge to the most elaborate circle of them all, and the beginning of a new and final set of sins, those of Fraudulence and Malice. Malebolge is shaped like a great stone amphitheater with a spokelike series of stone bridges leading down to a central well over ten concentric ditches or *bolge*. Each *bolgia* holds a group of sinners: in the first, horned demons chivy pimps in one direction and seducers in another. In the second, flatterers wallow in excrement; in the third, corrupt ecclesiastics, including at least one pope, are plunged upside down into something resembling a baptismal font while their feet are "baptized" with flames. False prophets and soothsayers trudge through the fourth with their heads twisted entirely around so that their tears flow down to their buttocks; Tiresias, sadly demoted from his position in the *Odyssey*, is here.

The Wood of the Suicides, by Gustave Doré



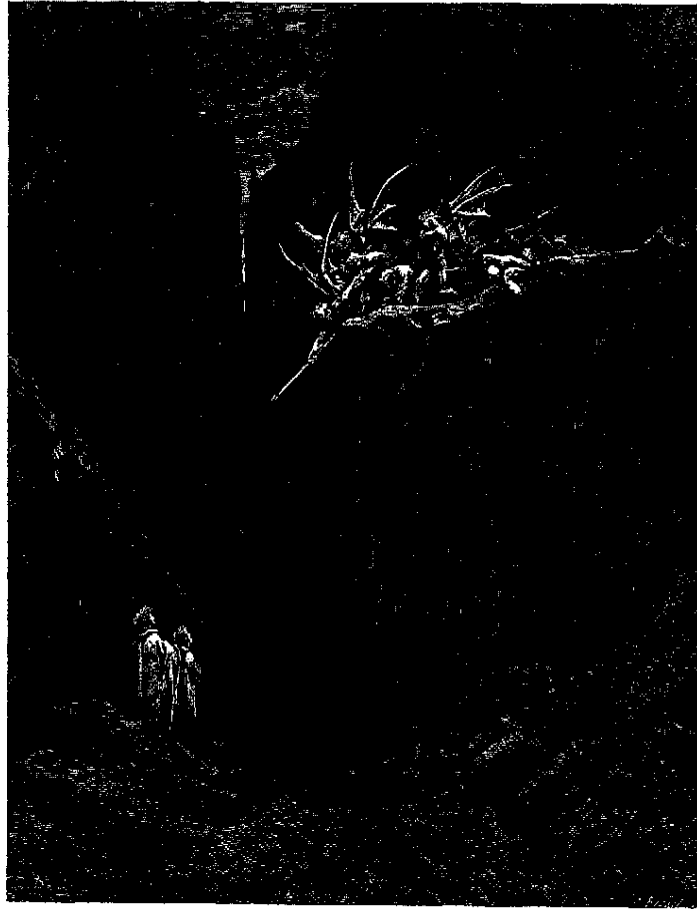


William Blake put fossils of human bones into the stone of the bridges over the bolge.

At the fifth *bolgia*, Dante introduces us to the Malebranche (“Evil-Claws”), a band of antic devils like those of the mystery plays who athletically and almost playfully toss “barrators”—grafters and public swindlers—into boiling pitch. The mood turns to grotesque comedy, and Canto XXI ends with a traditional fart.

Dante chose to inject comic relief at this particular point because this is his own *bolgia*: back on earth, he had been exiled from Florence on the grounds of barratry, or political corruption, as well as on vaguer charges of intrigue and hostility to the pope. Grim burlesque is his response to the charges, and it is no accident that the next *bolgia* holds the hypocrites with whom he must actually consort.

The poets find that the bridge over the sixth *bolgia* has been broken by the earthquake that followed the Harrowing. In order to escape the angry Malebranche, they must slide down the rubble into the realm of the hypocrites, who shuffle in single file, weeping from the weary weight of their



The poets escape from demons down a broken bridge, by Gustave Doré.

lead-lined cloaks. Arduously, the two climb up the ruins on the other bank to regain the bridge, from which they look down to see the amazing shape-shifting in the seventh *bolgia*, where thieves and reptiles merge and remerge.

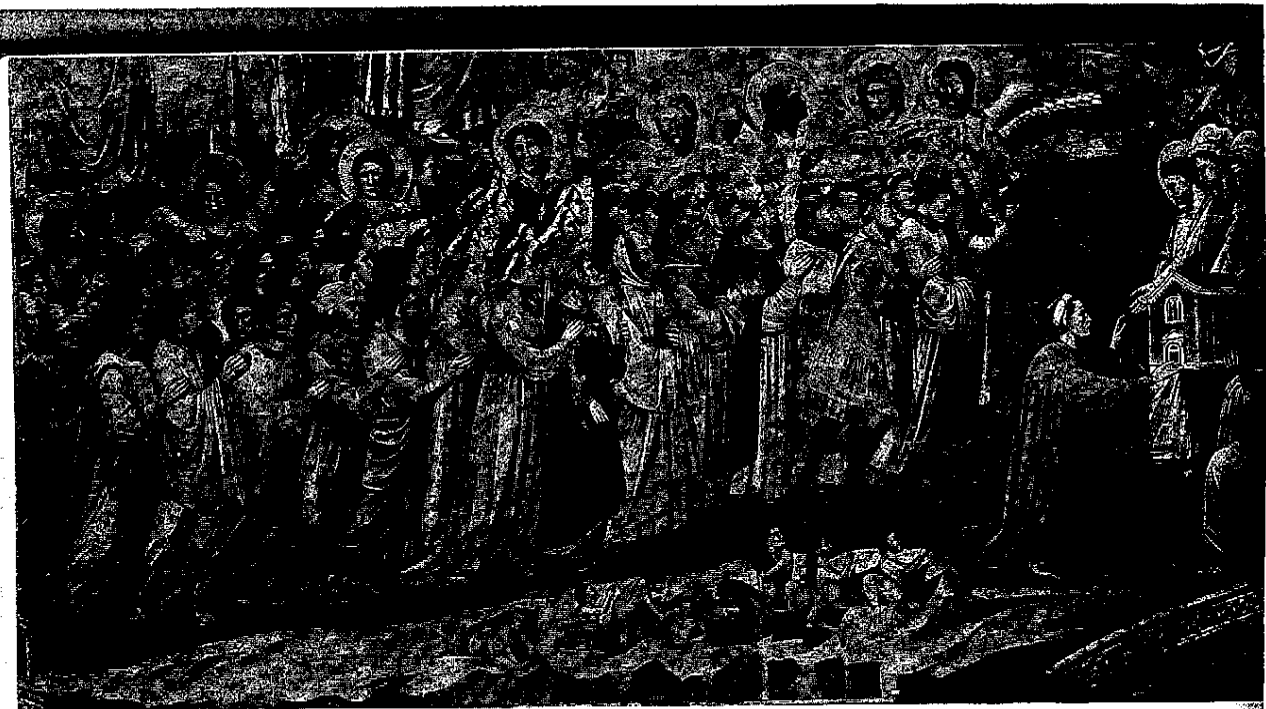
Deceivers burn in flames in the eighth *bolgia*: among them is Ulysses—Dante was firmly on Virgil's Trojan (and Italian) side when it came to the great war, and Ulysses was known for his trickery. In the ninth *bolgia* are the sowers of discord, horribly mutilated by a demon with a sword. Among them is Mohamet the "infidel," a heretic from Dante's point of view. This *bolgia* is twenty-two miles around; the cone is narrowing severely. The tenth and last *bolgia*, where the falsifiers (impersonators, perjurers, counterfeiters, alchemists) lie stricken with horrible diseases, is only eleven miles around and half a mile wide.

In the well at the bottom of the Malebolge construction stand the Giants, each about fifty feet high, Dante's Titans of Tartarus. Here they guard the Pit, their heads and torsos protruding above it. Antaeus lowers the poets in his huge palm to a point about midway down the Ninth Circle.

Three rings around the center of Cocytus, the icebound lake that is the realm of Treason, hold traitors. Caina (named for Cain) holds those who betrayed their families; Antenora, traitors to their countries (Antenor, who supposedly betrayed Troy, was a hero to Homer, but Dante sided with Virgil and the Trojans). Ptolomea is for traitors to guests: Ptolemy was a captain of Jericho who arranged a banquet for his father-in-law, Simon the high priest, and his two sons, then murdered them. In the absolute center—of the Inferno and of the earth—is Judecca (from Judas, of course), for traitors to their lords, and in its center is the greatest traitor to the greatest Lord: Dis (Satan) himself, frozen fast and mindlessly weeping as he devours the shades of Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius. It is up his hairy thigh that the poets must climb to find their exit to clean air and starlight.

Dante's portrait of Dis or Satan is both conventional and original. Vision literature tended to avoid Satan or offer only a quick thrilling glimpse, and even if Dante had read *Tundal*, a centipede-like creature would never have suited him. The figure is grotesque enough. It has three faces, red (Judas) in the middle, black on the left (Brutus), yellow on the right (Cassius), and below each is a pair of wings, which fan the freezing wind of Cocytus.

The three heads were inspired by artists' conceptions. Dante, like most of Florence, must have gone to see the spectacular new Last Judgment mosaic on the cupola of the baptistry of the cathedral of San Giovanni, which was completed in 1300, two years before he was banished. Vasari tells us in *Lives of the Artists* (1550) that Dante was a "dear friend" of Giotto, who was also a Florentine. After banishment, he evidently visited the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, where Giotto completed his famous frescoes around 1307. This chapel was built for Enrico Scrovegni as a penance for the depredations of his father Reginaldo, a blatantly avaricious moneylender who was said to have died screaming for the keys to his strongbox "so that no one can get my money!" Thus, in Heaven (where Giotto also placed himself), the painter shows Enrico respectfully presenting a model of the chapel to the saints. Dante, teasing his friend, retaliated by putting *Papa* Reginaldo in the Seventh Circle of Hell with the usurers; he is the last



Enrico Scrovegni offers his model to the saints. Giotto himself is fifth from the left in the bottom row. Note the dead rising at bottom.

person to whom the poets speak before mounting Geryon to fly to Lower Hell.

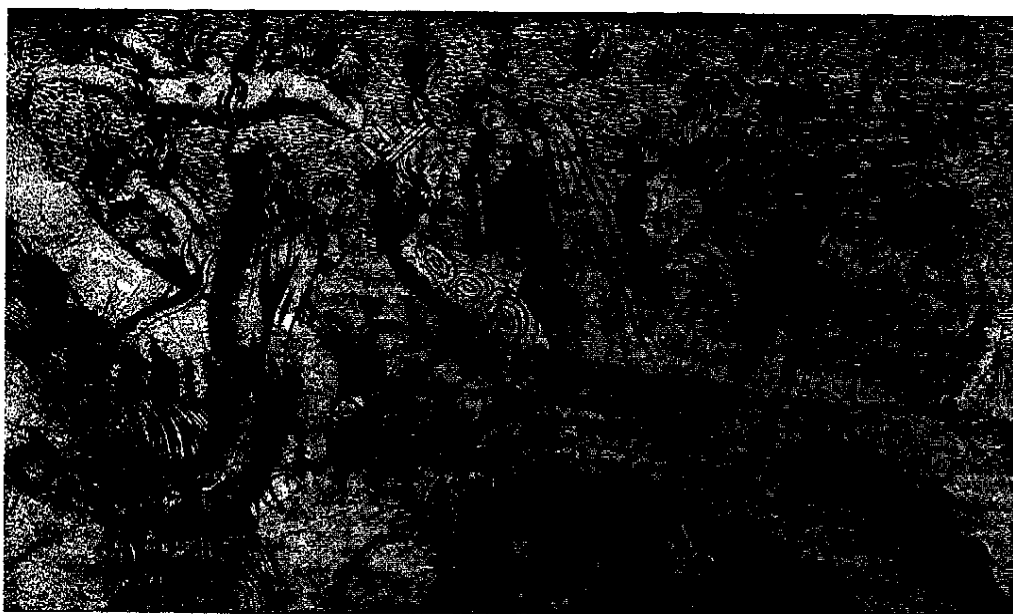
Both of these Last Judgments feature bestial Satans with a pair of sinner-swallowing snakes emerging from where their ears should be. In description, the snakes may have seemed more peculiar than poetic, and Dante rearranged the image to parallel the Trinity. Byzantine Last Judgments with their humanoid devils had soul-eating serpents emerging from Satan's throne, a clever way of bringing the Hellmouth into the composition. Both the Florentine cupola and Giotto used that device too; the subsequent excretion of chewed sinners is implied by the seated position. Satan's hairy body developed from the devil suits in mystery plays, which were covered with hair or feathers, which is easy to see in Botticelli's drawings of Dante's Dis. Illustrators quickly gave up on the complicated sets of wings, which go back to biblical descriptions of seraphs, and most show only one pair.

What was new in Dante's literary portrait, though theologically correct and implied by Giotto's beast figure and, arguably, by some vision literature, was Satan as utterly defeated, a blob of mindlessly chewing, weeping, semi-frozen protoplasm, oblivious to the escape of the poets along his own body. Dante's view of Satan is brief, which was traditional in visions, but also artistically wise. When it comes to monsters, the distance from the impressive to the ridiculous is perilously short.

The *Inferno* was a sensation as soon as it was circulated and made available to copyists. This was about 1314, while Dante was still working on the later sections of the *Comedy*. Illustrated copies began to appear almost immediately, and the *Inferno*'s enormous influence also extended to public art. The fourteenth century was a great time for cathedral building in Italy, and Last Judgments commissioned for them quickly began to reflect Dante's invention. His purgatorial mountain solved the problem of how to portray Purgatory, but it was his Hell that fascinated artists.

With Dante, the history of Hell entered a new stage. He killed off vision literature altogether, and in a sense he helped to kill off Hell itself by making it possible to think about it in fictional or allegorical terms. He abandoned the old pretense of "truth" in vision literature and invited readers to join him and Virgil in a *story*, an artistic creation by an individual writer looking back with an appreciative and critical eye at the work of other writers. Even a simple soul looking at Nardo di Cione's mural in Florence would understand that it illustrated not a literal Hell but Dante's Hell. Though this was certainly not his intention, Dante made it easier for intellectuals of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to reject its reality.

Of the three misers watching as the poets prepare to mount Geryon, Reginaldo Scrovegni, usually identified by the pregnant sow on his coat of arms, is in the middle.



THE HISTORY OF HELL

From this time forward, the journey portrayed by the *Comedy* also served as a durable interior metaphor. In our post-Freudian age of industrious myth mapping, it is all too easy to see that literary journey to the Land of the Dead, or Hell, or its surrogates are allegories of the individual experiencing "the dark night of the soul" before a spiritual reemergence into starlight. In psychoanalysis, "the modern religion," a patient must explore with his "guide" the deep sources of his unhappiness and inability to follow the true path. Then he must endure the painful Purgatory of examining and challenging his behavior before achieving the relative paradise of mental health. A twelve-step program confronting drug abuse or alcoholism would interpret the downward spiral as the slide into addiction and destructive behavior until an individual has "bottomed out," and can turn on Satan's hairy leg to struggle toward the light; Purgatory is, then, the behavior modification necessary to reach the precarious paradise of sobriety. In the "hero journey" which Joseph Campbell, leaning on Jung, found basic to religious myth and quest adventure, the hero must venture into "the belly of the beast" before undergoing "the road of trials" toward apotheosis.

But this entirely comfortable and pervasive method of modern metaphorical thinking might not exist if Dante had never written the *Comedy*. It gave us a new vocabulary and a wonderfully useful way of looking directly at our spiritual lives.