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The Water in Hell and the Heart

Besides the flames, the demons, the darkness, and the endless tortures, there is water in Hell. Despite being necessary for life, this element exists where the dead go to be punished eternally. This contradiction is embraced by Dante, who incorporates water into his *Inferno* both metaphorically and literally. He writes metaphors describing fallen angels embodying the water and souls existing as sea animals to inhabit it. The liquid is figurative for the most part, until it is suddenly tangible and frozen in the ninth circle. Yet these are not the only times water is used in the epic. Before stepping foot in Hell, Dante establishes the existence of a “lake within [his] heart” (1, 20), which creates imagery of his internal state that is similar to his depictions of Hell. This suggests an intimate relationship between Dante and Hell, one that extends farther than being only a visitor. He travels from circle to circle, with the presence of water surrounding but not touching him; nonetheless, there is no disconnect between him and the material. The water imagery used creates a connection between Dante and the inside of Hell that, in the end, teaches him about himself.

The figurative water in Hell is crafted to accumulate and be inhabited in specific ways. Like the rest of the realm, it is fundamentally made of evil. Dante hints at this when he describes the fallen angels outside of Dis as “those who once rained from Heaven” (8, 82). This creates an image of demons descending in a storm. Likened to raindrops, they collectively create puddles and then bodies of water. Since these fallen angels are the antithesis of good, this water is inherently evil. Hell’s waters are also guaranteed to never go dry because demons will always

populate its surfaces. If the water were to disappear, there would be no more punishment for the shades submerged in the liquid. Such souls are fittingly likened to sea animals. The barrators in the eighth circle, trapped inside a boiling pitch, are one example of this comparison. As Dante watches them rise from the water to relieve some of their pain, he remarks, “Just as the dolphins do, when with arched back, they signal to the seamen to prepare for tempest, that their vessel may be spared” (22, 19-21). Comparing a soul in boiling water to a dolphin in the sea is jarring; the kind and helpful nature associated with the dolphin here is definitely not applicable to the shades. Dante clearly views the sufferers at the same level as animals for whom he has no emotional attachment or respect. Viewing these separate metaphors together, Dante has created a distinct identity of the water in *Inferno*, made of dark material and populated by souls. It is a filler material that occupies space in Hell and has the ability to be submerged.

Despite these qualities, Dante himself cannot experience the water while within it. There is never a description of wetness or wading between the circles that clearly materializes the figurative water for Dante himself. However, he meets a monster who seems to go beyond the metaphorical barrier: Geryon. Described as having the face of a human and body of a serpent, along with other animal body parts, he is able to access what humans can and cannot. Geryon’s main purpose is to transport Dante through the seventh circle to the beginning of the eighth circle. Dante is unable to make this journey on foot, and must ride on Geryon’s back. Dante summarizes these two characteristics, Geryon’s versatility and transportation role, in one simile: “As boats will sometimes lie along the shore, with part of them on land and part in water, [...] so did that squalid beast lie on the margin of stone” (17, 19-21). Geryon, already a fictitious monster, is likened to a boat that is pulled to shore. The shore is where Dante stands, and the

water is the parts of Hell where he is unable to travel. Geryon is not trapped within the water, like the shades. He is a mode of transportation fit to travel the surfaces and depths of Hell's waters. Dante's ride on Geryon reveals something new about his relationship with the water: he himself cannot feel it while being submerged. Geryon, on the other hand, can definitely feel it. Dante writes, "Slowly, slowly, swimming, he moves on; he wheels and he descends, but I feel only the wind upon my face and the wind rising" (17, 116-118). Geryon swims through the liquid, but Dante feels no resistance from the material. He can only feel the air surrounding him. He is aware of there being water, and of Geryon reacting to it, but he is incapable of doing the same. This is a barrier he sets up between himself and the rest of Hell. He has no ability to experience the water that fills it, nor to be submerged in it himself. It does not physically exist for him, but it does for the inhabitants of Hell.

Despite the physical disconnect, Dante can still understand its existence because he has the same water in himself. He establishes this as a fact on the twentieth line of the epic. The night before he began journeying with Virgil, while alone and trapped at the bottom of a hill, he experienced intense fear in the dark. He writes, "Through the night of sorrow I had spent, the lake within my heart felt terror present" (1, 21). Inside of Dante, in the organ most clearly associated with the soul and emotions, there is a lake. It is not the heart that interacts with the terror spoken about: it is the "lake" inside of it. While the heart can feel an emotion, the "lake" within Dante's heart can feel the presence of emotions. On the hill, there is darkness and the feeling of sorrow; these two elements, among other forces, equate to terror. This intense emotion is then exposed to and sensed by the "lake" within his heart.

Dante continues to describe his night on the hill with more water imagery: “Just as he who, having escaped from sea to shore, turns back to watch the dangerous waters he has quit, so did my spirit, still a fugitive, turn back to look intently at the pass that never has let any man survive” (1, 22-25). Looking at the hill, after night is over and his fear has passed, is compared to looking back at dangerous waters just escaped. Because the vehicle is his spirit looking at water, his heart’s lake can be connected to the simile as well. If his spirit is located inside of him, it makes sense for it to gaze at what is also within him. The only possible form of water he could see in himself is his heart’s lake. This connection between the “dangerous waters” his spirit sees and his internal “lake” adds another layer to the water within him. If he is afraid of the hill, which is synonymous to fearing the dangerous waters, then he fears the lake within his heart. The lake causes the same terror it detects. If something has the ability to create terror, it is most likely not aligned with good. Dante’s lake is no exception. This could be the root of the separation of the heart and the lake: one stands for good, and the other does not.

Therefore, before entering Hell, Dante was already facing water symbolizing darkness. Just as his “spirit” escapes one area of dangerous waters, his physical form is brought to a scarier place with more. But there may not even be a difference in the water he writes about outside of Hell and within. In fact, it is likely that the water that occupies Hell is the same as the water within his heart. Both are linked to terror, one because it is physically embodied by evil and the other because it can sense the emotion. Dante looks at the waters within him with the same fear as when he looks at Hell; both foster the same emotion of terror. His “lake” is a piece of Hell within him. Both waters are made of the same dark material, and Dante cannot navigate either by himself. Geryon, on the other hand, can swim in both the waters of Hell and Dante’s heart. After

descending down to the eighth circle with Dante, he floats upwards to the surface of the liquid. Dante is left at the bottom, as able to float up as he was able to swim down. Whether it is Hell's waters or his heart's lake, he has no ability to interact with the material.

Suddenly, when Dante reaches the ninth circle, the water becomes tangible for him. He stands on a carefully-specified body of water: a frozen lake. He writes, "I turned and saw in front of me, beneath my feet, a lake that, frozen fast, had lost the look of water and seemed glass" (32, 25). The water in Hell is no longer figurative for him, but it is still insubmersible. It is physically there, but Dante can only stand on top of it. After descending to the final circle of Hell, through waters and by foot, he finds the opposite of what he described inside himself before his journey even began. He encounters a lake again, but this time with a hard, glassy surface. The metaphorical liquid water has abruptly become literal and frozen in place. The ice is both in front of him and beneath him, meaning that it completely surrounds him. Having a glass-like surface around and below him would give off reflections of himself in all directions. Before this point, Dante's spirit may have chosen to look back at "dangerous waters" and travel blissfully without direct contact in his waters. But here, Dante is forced to see what is in front of him, because the same image surrounds him infinitely: himself.

Dante reflects on the glassy lake's surface in the ninth circle, which signifies a deeper, personal reflection as well. After feeling terror outside of Hell, then travelling through the depths of the liquid that detected the emotion, this is his conclusion. He does not necessarily have a grasp of his fears; he is unable to travel through his waters without the help of Geryon. No matter how deeply he explores his own darkness and tries to understand the own depths of his heart, he

will end exactly where he began: alone. And, because it occurs in the final circle, this is the last realization he has with no room for another circle of discovery.

The water in *Inferno* is both intangible and tangible; part of Hell and part of Dante; liquid and frozen; a trapping mechanism and a material to travel through. However, it undeniably represents evil matter. It is as much a part of the fabric of Hell as Dante's inner state. Dante learns about centuries of sins and mistakes in a flow as steady as the water he travels through, but this stream of stories freezes momentarily when his heart's lake does. And, in the reflection of the ice, the only person left to understand is himself.