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Dante++: A Certain Unknown Canto from *Inferno*

As we followed the dreary path into this plane of Hell,

Tenuous white fibers began to spread along the blood-red rock

Until the ground became a spidery mesh.

Two metal arachnids waiting for us on the path ahead.

Their eight legs lay still as their flaming eyes beckoned,

Daring us to step into their saddles' embrace.

My guide motioned for me to mount the left one, explaining,

"These automata were made by the Cypriot Pygmalion

Before he started work on his famous Galatea.[1]

They will guide us through this obscure realm

That will seem so foreign to us

But could have been understood by him

And his creative impulses for machines and creatures."

Virgil lifted me up onto that monster,

And its legs jolted at once into a tour of the strange land.

The Web went everywhere and held many souls:

Their bodies struggled in its firm embrace,

Their faces wrapped completely in its vicious grasp.

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[1] In myth, the sculptor Pygmalion created Galatea, a female statue so accurate that she came to life.

"These are ones who indulge themselves in a world

Of appearances and validation instead of God.

Their base desires are of a future world called Facebook:

It is as mundane as, yet no less sinful than, the world of things."

I saw how billows of fiber descended from the sky of purple storms

Converging at a rock-grim spot off in the distance.

Our mounts scampered towards where the silken ropes

Stretched the legs of a body high into the air,

Its neck sprouted out from the ground,

Its head inhumed underneath it.

Through the mummifying wraps of strong cob webs,

I could just make out his garb, the color of Homer's wine-grey sea.

I had stopped to examine this body,

My verbal pleas to it going unanswered,

When a frail man wandered along my path

His eyes looking vaguely forwards but at nothing in particular.

"Who are you who go freely through this place of sorrow?"

I asked, surprised to find another traveler somewhere so stagnant and empty,

"And who is this one whom I find so unresponsive?"

"Free is the last thing that I am," said the man,

"But I will answer your second question first.

That man was once my leader;

Our task spun this whole Web that you now see;

It trapped all these people without their ever realizing it.

For that is Zuckerburg, the one whose vision

Of connecting the world in a most immaterial harmony

Created this landscape of gravely physical suffering.

For the way that Facebook tears with the minds of humans,

He is torn apart by this Web for eternity.

My goals were different; I aimed to rival God's work.

To reduce the soul to something base and worldly,

To make free will into a matrix of data empirically determined.[2]

I helped teach machines to think like humans;

This caused many among the nations of the world

To forget which thoughts were their own,

And it made the jobs and duties of many obsolete.

 "This is Yann LeCun,"[3] said Virgil, "the head scholar

Creating the artificial intelligence powering Facebook.

For destroying the purpose of men in the world above,

He must eternally wander this wretched plane,

Aimless and *sine pietate*."

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[2] Facebook uses matrix-based models called deep neural networks to model human profiles for advertisement and post preferences.

[3] Director of Artificial Intelligence Research at Facebook and well-known for his theoretical and practical contributions to the field of artificial intelligence.

Analysis of Compositional Choices

In this canto, I aim to explore the position of the digital sphere with Dante's duality of physical and spiritual reality. I focus on two related concepts that are highly relevant within the modern digital world: namely, social media and artificial intelligence.

My canto suggests that, according to the moral framework of *Inferno*, social media overindulgence is inherently as sinful as overindulgence in a material pleasure. While the latter is more physically real, I choose to identify both as sinful because they are both realities other than that of God. For example, the Web is physicalized as an actual spider web spanning this new quarter of hell, and we find unidentifiable social media addicts stuck in it. Thus, the overindulgence of these sinners while alive materializes as physical suffering in the afterlife similarly to how the gluttons of Dante's Third Circle are punished by external existence in a world of rain, sleet, and mud. The allegorical nature of this punishment abounds. Just as these sinners were in some sense trapped by their dependence on social media in the real world, they are physically trapped by it in the afterlife. Since the sinners' faces are obscured in the Web, there is the implication that obsessive curation of a social media identity while alive results in the erasure of one's identity after death. Within the medieval dualism between the physical and allegorical found in Dante, overindulgence in the digital is identified similarly to overindulgence in the material.

Alongside social media, I explore how to connect the new realm of artificial intelligence to the cultural and intellectual world of *Inferno*. Just as *Inferno* synthesized several traditions (i.e. the classical and Christian) in its construction of an afterlife, the beginning of my chapter integrates this novel technology into its world by casting the legendary Pygmalion as an antecedent to artificial

intelligence developers. Allegorically speaking, Pygmalion's mechanical spiders guide Dante and Virgil through this future realm of the afterlife just as the story of Pygmalion might make the anachronistic concept of artificial intelligence more understandable to these classical and medieval characters. Thus, there is a unification of past and present that resembles Aeneas's tour of the underworld in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. In order to build on this parallel, I used historical present tense verbs in Virgil's didactic remarks to Dante in the hope that these words about a future technology would recall Anchises' discussion of Rome's unimaginable future glory in Virgil's own epic. Another example of adapting modern concepts into epic discourse is in Virgil's explanation of Yann LeCun's punishment to Dante. Virgil discusses the job obsolescence that artificial intelligence might create in terms of *pietas* – a notion of duty associated with a leader's responsibility in the *Aeneid*, Christian piety in *Inferno*, and, here, a sense of purpose within an Information Age society.

Dante's Canto XXVI introduces the Eighth Circle of Hell, which is a realm filled with raging flames embodied by the spirits of sinners. The canto starts with a focus on the present by discussing how well represented Florence is in this part of Hell. Later, it shifts its attention to the past when Dante and Virgil find a flame holding the spirits of the Homeric heroes Diomedes and Ulysses. This episode raises two related questions. What sin has Ulysses, who is such a distinguished hero of Greek mythology, committed to warrant a placement so deep in Hell? What connects the sins of Dante's Florentines contemporaries to those of Homeric heroes? The answer to these questions seems to lie in some notion of material theft that is shared by both groups of sinners. The Florence of Dante's time was one of intense mercantile activity, and associated with this came an extreme increase in material wealth for an elite merchant class relative to other city residents. A medieval Catholic worldview might cast such extreme wealth obtained through commerce as theft. Similarly, the text suggests that Ulysses and Diomedes' most damning sin is their robbing of the Palladium – a statue at Troy sacred to Athena. Thus, the notion of theft associated with sinners at the beginning of the canto also seems to determine the punishment of Ulysses: out of Ulysses' many deceptions, the desecration of Troy's Palladium is the sin that places him so deep in Dante's Hell.

In the beginning of Canto XXVI, we get a direct association of the burning souls of the Eighth Circle with thievery and, along with this, a subtler implication that the number of Florentines found within this realm results from the thievery inherent in the commercial culture of Florence. The canto starts with a remark on the general degree of sinfulness of Florence and then elaborates specifically on the number of thieves from the city:

> Be joyous, Florence, you are great indeed,
> for over sea and land you beat your wings,

through every part of hell your name exists!
among the thieves I found five citizens
of yours – and such, that shame has taken me;
with them, you can ascend to no high honor. (XXVI:1-6)

By starting the canto with a discussion of Florence, Dante implicitly connects his home city with theft – the sin particular to this Circle. The phrase "over sea and land" seems to refer to the large commercial network that Florence has until Dante clarifies that he is describing the distribution of Florentine sinners throughout Hell. Thus, this ambiguity constructs an association between commerce and sin. Referring to the potential for wars of conquest by the city state of Prato against Florence, Dante then states, "Were that already come, it would not be / too soon – and let it come, since it must be!" (XXVI:10-11). Dante provocatively calls for a foreign enemy to take over his home city. From his point of view, the sin of theft must be so entrenched in Florence's culture that the only way for it to be cleansed is by foreign military action. Thus, he underscores how inherent material theft is to the sociopolitical climate of Florence in his day. Taken in historical context, we can align this notion of sinful theft in Florence with the rise of very wealthy commercial class in the city during the 13th century, and the role that this new class played in the Florentine civil conflicts of the time.[4] From this point of view, Dante's association of Florence with the Circle of Thieves reflects his condemnation of the city's commercial character as a form of thievery.

In the second half of the canto, Ulysses' punishment can be explained in terms of this same theme of theft. Ulysses' soul is trapped in a flame together with Diomedes, a more obscure hero of the Trojan War. The significance of this pairing should not be overlooked: according to legend, Ulysses and Diomedes together were responsible for stealing a statue of Athena during the sack of Troy. Virgil himself, steeped in knowledge of the Homeric tradition, notes that this incident is

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[4] https://www.museocasadidante.it/en/dante-alighieri/in-florence/

connected with their punishment: "There they regret the guile that makes the dead / Deidamia still lament Achilles; / and there, for the Palladium, they pay" (XXVI:61-62). The first half of Virgil's speech alludes to the fact that Ulysses used deception to bring Achilles away from his beloved Deidamia to fight in Trojan War. While his role in dragging Achilles off to Troy may weigh heavily on Ulysses' conscience, the second half of Virgil's words suggest that the sin he really pays for in his imprisonment is carrying off the Trojan Palladium. This is consistent with Ulysses' pairing with Diomedes and also agrees thematically with the notion of theft imbued in the sinners at the beginning of the chapter. Thus, theft seems to be the common denominator explaining the imprisonment of Florentine merchants alongside Greek heroes in the Eighth Circle of Dante's Hell.

In such a way, the sin that places Ulysses and Diomedes so deep in Hell appears to be the theft of the Palladium. Thus, the connection between the Florentines placed in this Circle and Ulysses is the fact that both of them are thieves in their own ways. In the case of the Florentine sinners, this appears to be a moral judgment on the merchant elite of Florence. For Ulysses, it recalls the theft of the Palladium: a robbery that might be taken to represent the loss of Athena's protection for Troy and the subsequent destruction of Trojan culture. Thus, these two types of theft are qualitatively different in that the first involves the pursuit of material wealth while the second is more allegorical in its significance. Still, according to Dante, the sin of theft necessitates the same punishment: namely, imprisonment in a very low Circle of Hell.