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Foreword

This project, in the simplest description possible, is my attempt at replicating the tone, length, style, and format of the first canto of Dante's *Inferno*: 45 tercets (plus one monostich), written over the course of 11 intense days. From here, all description escapes conciseness.

With this piece, I hoped to explore some of the more obscure sides to Dante. For instance, I was captivated by his conversations, as recorded in *La Vita Nuova*, with the spirit of Love itself. I interpreted them to mean he was predisposed to discussing his work and life with imagined muses. With this established, who's to say he never took Virgil, one of his greatest inspirations, on as one such muse? This train of thought was—and is—the backbone to *Lighting of the Inferno*.

Upon this foundation, several other ideas took shape. My own identity as an author often withdraws into the shadows of self-scrutiny whenever personal circumstances keep me from writing for too long; I used this as reference for how Dante, as a downtrodden creative, may have felt after being exiled from Florence. In contrast, Virgil became a figure resembling my own friends—supportive springboards off of whom I bounce ideas in times of artistic drought.

Aside from the obvious *Comedy* influences, some inspirations for this piece were *La Vita Nuova*, Lord Byron's *The Prophecy of Dante*, and Wendigoon, a YouTuber whose three-part series about Dante's work led me to study it more deeply for myself.

The beautifully historic feel of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's translation of the *Comedy* was another significant inspiration. I find much of today's literature lacking in the elegance and richness so prevalent in the works of centuries past; I'm not one to stop at simply complaining, so I aimed to be the change I sought in the world by shooting for flourish and archaisms above all else.

Now that I've properly introduced it, I'll keep you from my poem no further; I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Lighting of the Inferno

Six years had it been since I was wrenched apart
From that city, my Florence, and longer still
Since my first love left me, she who owned my heart.

Hearth and home passed with her; I had little will
To do much else aside from weeping, and how!
Head in hands, eyes on land, at my windowsill—

Alone? Not I, neither was then nor am now,
Though my companion was nothing but a shade.
He gazed outward beside me with furrowed brow;

I saw it in my mind, Virgil was dismayed,
He knew I could muster hardly a ditty,
Too, he understood why I felt so betrayed.

“Mightn't this be,” spoke he, “about thy city?”
Said I, “Not only, ‘tis a matter of art,
Or lack thereof, in this myself I pity.”

Vergilius, ever wiser, mused, “Just start;
Write one word at a time, line by simple line.
When you’re done, this wound may not so strongly smart.”

“Of what can I write, if these muses of mine
Have been cast down so in the wake of sorrow?”
Asked I, curious about Virgil’s design.

“Look to books of old— thou, forsooth, may borrow
Their verse, their word, their philosophical worth
And conjure an idea by the morrow.

Such works oft do not deal with matters of Earth,
Rather those of good Heaven, or Hellish depth
Or what lies between; this should give thee a berth

To write of these subjects what thou doth percept.”
This point Virgil made, to me, seemed duly sound,
For my thoughts have strayed to that following death,

If only a time or two, rare in rebound.
“Perchance I write of those close to me, now dead,
With joy may I write of my Beatrice crowned!”

In reply to my proposal, Virgil said,
“Too, thou should write, to keep inspiration’s spark,
For every part heav’nly, a second part dread

Or alas, thy need to create may go dark.”
Again, my shade’s wisdom stood beyond my own;
Good without evil makes any story stark.

To indulge myself in writing I was prone,
But this work must go beyond my selfish scope
Should it be great; a lesser fate I bemoan.

“I see; but be it reused theme or old trope,
Florence, for all its worth to me, must appear,
And examples be made of our modern popes!”

So giddy was I that I hardly could hear
Virgil assert that the idea was fine.
I made out: “Examples, yes! For each, a sphere!

“Red-hot, radiant, the choice is wholly thine;
Speak well of their virtue, opposite for vice.
This work: damning for hatred– for love, a shrine!”

His words scarce soothed me, for my thoughts dashed like mice
Free from a trap... yes, a trap would more than do–
“To punish the treacherous, a trap of ice!

How chilled Satan should look, his faces all blue,
His wings a-flutter, but he’ll never get free;
I’ll place Brutus there, no doubt, and Judas too,

Cassius as well; there, that now makes the count three
In that vile band, that hapless, suff’ring troupe.”
“Lo, great Julius Caesar! ‘Tis no place for he

Who you so adore!” Virgil was right: such group
Would ne’er suit the man; I built up a new place
Where he and the nobles of his day would coop.

From then on, Virgil only looked at my face;
 Even in my head, not a thought needed voice,
 Despite all ideas rushing at such pace

That I accepted most that came; little choice
 Had I in who landed in Heaven, who Hell.
 Sat I, at that sill, while we two did rejoice,

For saved was my soul, if my work was done well,
 Though I feared I could not write for some more time—
 As with all good works, it must sit for a spell.

In truth, worried I, I was near past my prime,
 And I may have been dead before it was done,
 Never such, in one day, was writ verse sublime;

Sensing this, Virgil spoke, “Nor was a war won
 By a troop that gave no time for strategy,
 Nor a sprinter hath any marathon run.

To force this poem’s finishing, tragedy
 Would it be; thou could never make it both grand
 And quick—essential make thee its majesty.”

Compliantly, I set myself to expand
 On the lore, domain, and dwellers of each realm,
 The first of which was that most abyssal land.

Crafting every sin a home would overwhelm
 My mind, my meek heart, and most of all, my quill;
 I thought up a list, betrayal at the helm,

Of broader crimes to house on the inverse hill.
 Because Virgil’s shade I cared not to enrage,
 I placed him in Limbo, furthest from the chill

Treachery hath borne, but the faith of his age
 Brought him to Purgatory not; he would guide
 Me halfway through, ‘fore Beatrice took the stage.

As with the brain, into two I did divide
 My path through the afterlife; in one part, sense
 Held more sway, in the other, heart doth preside;

While against base sin, thought is one's best defense,
The active embrace of virtue needs far more
To rightly take in its grace and force immense—

It needs pure love, which Hell's transgressors ignored;
Which turns the Earth; in which God's angels revel;
Which those seeking purification adore.

The closest are of purgation's peak level—
While those furthest down are not denied this light,
Hardest must they fight to escape the devil.

Like brothers mourned the sinners I, heart contrite;
At the same time, Hell built itself in my mind
Dreamlike— I interpreted my thoughts with fright:

On the first plane were desirous in some kind,
The lustful, gluttonous, spendthrifts and savers,
Such victims of mere free will were least maligned.

Sect number two held those quickest to anger,
Alongside heretics and the violent;
Though cruel, these were not who most missed God's favor.

Third of this cast, by their own entitlement
Committed fraud, in any of its ten forms,
Or betrayal, who God showed the ice silent.

Following this vision of Hell and its storms,
I, having none else, turned to Virgil for peace,
Who laughed as he said, "Most of all, this informs

Me of thy code for which this is the mouthpiece,
Especially the sectors where these sins place—
Thy realm is a fine abode for the deceased,

But I wonder, where is Hell? On land? In space?"
Pondered I for a moment, then I surmised
To bring Heaven to Earth would be a disgrace;

Hell, on the contrary, may be naturalized,
If to a forest, or such, its gate was brought
And its nature, 'til further in, were disguised.

Virgil picked up ev'ry thought *as* it was thought,
Gave a thought of his own that couldn't be missed:
“Purgatory should be of both worlds, it ought,

Since it is both holy and right in Hell's midst,”
And thoughtfully heard as I spoke with a start,
“From first “nel” to last “stelle”, I shall persist,

For I am no painter, but I must make art.”