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Illustrated Dante's Inferno

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William Melancon

Honors Thesis Summary and Introduction, Illustrated Dante's Inferno

This honors thesis is a long form illustration and typography project that will attempt to combine the two in a way similar to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, but make use of modern design aesthetics and principles. The project will use the *Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri, as a foundation, displaying the entirety of the written text along with accompanying illustrations that visualize the imagery of the original work. The main focus of the project will be to format the type and imagery so that they complement each other and use design to enhance the experience of the reader. This project will help to encourage the reading of the *Inferno* by modern audiences by creating visual interest and converting the unique imagery of the original work into visual form. The project will highlight the influences and culture surrounding Dante during the creation of the *Inferno* in order to create a better understanding of the background of the work through images. The project will also act as a unique long form graphic design project and a proof of concept for illuminated text in the modern era.

Classical literature suffers from the passage of time in that its language, diction, and setting are foreign to modern readers. This problem is compounded in non-English language works, where it is difficult for translators to convert the work to a readable form while still maintaining the meaning and character of the original text. *The Divine Comedy* has proven to be a particularly challenging example of this because of its poetic nature, meaning that a potential translator must decide whether to translate the text into blank verse, and get the closest to the literal translation, or attempt to retain the meter and tone of the original poetry. All of these factors create a disconnect between modern audiences and classical literature, causing these works to be less widely disseminated than their merit and historical significance deserves. This is especially problematic for students, who often struggle with the classical

language and lack of knowledge of the multitude of cultural references in the inferno. These references, which would have been common knowledge to Dante's contemporaries, are lost on modern readers, leading to the necessity of research, footnotes, or, more commonly, the reader just ignoring the references, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the text.

Several methods have been used to try and circumvent these problems. Different translators may use more contemporary language, which will be easier for modern readers to understand. In addition, most modern translations of the inferno contain copious footnotes and supplementary material, so that readers do not have to seek out separate sources to gain a full understanding of the text. The use of adaptation is also common as a way to make classical works more relevant to modern audiences. This involves placing the plot and themes of the original work into a different setting or set of circumstances, which generally have a greater degree of efficacy for modern audiences. This has become increasingly common with the advent of motion pictures and interactive media, including video games such as *Dante's Inferno*, developed by Visceral Games in 2010.

Another method to gain readership for classic literature is the use of illustration. This has been a common theme in publishing and book makings since ancient times, and can be seen in its modern form in the west as early as the Middle Ages, where monks used illustration and decorative typography to add visual interest to their illuminated manuscripts. The advent of the printing press, and the "mass production" of printed books used illustration almost from the beginning to give a sense of prestige and visual uniqueness to their works. Major book makers, such as the publishing house of Anton Koberger, was creating heavily illustrated books as early as the 1470s, and commissioning pieces from artists as prestigious as Albrecht Durer to create plates for use by the publishing firm. Illustration continues to be a staple in premium book design in the present day. This was specifically helpful to the *Divine Comedy*, for which a series of prints was created by the French artist Gustave Dore in the 1860s. These prints

have become the iconic vision of Dante's afterlife, and have been very effective in helping the *Divine Comedy* to remain interesting and relevant to modern readers.

While there is an extensive canon of illustration surrounding the *Inferno*, the vast majority of the illustrations exist as stand-alone pieces, which can be viewed with or without the accompanying text. The combination of text and images, using the elements of modern graphic design where the two form a single homogenous composition, has not yet been produced for the *Divine Comedy*, and the concept is generally very rare in modern publishing and book design. The primary advantage that this approach has over more traditional illustration is that the viewer is forced to interact with the text while they are looking at the illustration. This fulfills the primary purpose of the illustration in that it increases the exposure of the original text to contemporary audiences. In this capacity it is substantially more effective than traditional illustration, which can be viewed without any association with the accompanying text. This method, when properly implemented, can also enhance the experience of the reader by adding design elements and formatting to the text. This formatting can be used to emphasize certain points, evoke specific feelings, and or affect the experience of the reader by increasing or decreasing the readability of the text.

In addition to encouraging modern readers to look into the *Inferno*, this project will also look into the various cultural and religious influences that acted on Dante while he was creating the *Divine Comedy*. The most overt of these is the Catholic Church, and Christian thought during the Middle Ages. However, more specifically the *Inferno* showcases the thinking of Italian Catholics prior the reformation. This period was dominated by the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas in particular was considered the foremost Christian thinker of the period, and his combination of Christian and Aristotelian thought would have been the most prevalent ideology among scholars and the learned class during Dante's life. The combination of the philosophers of antiquity and the teaching of the Catholic Church was extremely popular during this period, and continued to dominate Christian

scholarship until the reformation. Dante's own Italian lineage, particularly his admiration of Caesar and the values of Ancient Rome, would have meshed well with this line of thinking, and can be seen in the text in his liberal use of Ancient mythology with the Divine Comedy.

A major way that Dante furthered medieval Christian thought was how he described the nature and consequence of sin in the *Inferno*. The nature of the various sins is addressed visually in several places in this work. The most notable of these is the distinction between sins of incontinence in upper hell, and the sins of malice in lower hell. This concept is illustrated by the two boatmen Dante encounters in hell. Incontinence, which comes from the failure of the will, is represented by Charon, who forcibly grabs Dante and lifts him off the ground. Malice is represented by Phlegyas, who holds out a hand to Dante, where Dante must choose to accept the invitation of the boatman. This hierarchy of the severity of sin comes from the writings of St. Augustine, and one of the many tenants of the medieval church included this illustration series.

This Italian heritage can be seen as a major influence on the specifics of the *Inferno*. This allegiance to Rome extends to its supposed predecessor, Troy. This leads Dante to deal out many punishments to Greek mythological figures, especially those that fought against Troy during the Trojan War. Examples of this include Odysseus, who is sentenced to the eighth circle of hell for his role of devising the Trojan horse maneuver. Dante also holds a particularly favorable view of Julius Caesar, and his relation to the idea of Italian unification. With this in mind Dante places the chief assassins of Caesar, Brutus and Cassius, in the lowest portions of hell, along with Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus. However, it's also notable that Dante places Cicero, a major opponent of Caesar, in limbo, living in relative comfort among the virtuous pagans. Virgil is the primary recurring example of Dante's admiration for the Romans. Virgil is illustrated with an olive wreath and toga, showing his high position in Roman society. Virgil is also almost always illustrated in profile. This tradition comes from Roman coinage, and was a popular technique in early renaissance portraiture to denote prestige and regality.

Dante's political inclinations are also important in that he was a Florentine, and a major member White Guelph political faction. Dante's patriotism for his city state went so far as having him fight in the Battle of Campaldino against the Ghibellines, and become a minor politician in Florence under Guelph rule. Although he was eventually exiled and disenchanted with his former allies, the political leanings of the White Guelphs, such as limiting the political influence of the Papacy, and acting in opposition to the Holy Roman Empire, can be seen throughout the inferno. Dante's discussion with Filippo Argenti in the River Styx, and his conversation about Florentine politics in the sixth circle, are heavily influenced by Dante's politics and his experience during the Guelph / Ghibelline conflict in Florence. Dante also demonstrates a lack of deference for the Papacy in that he places several pontiffs in hell, including: Boniface VIII, Clement V, Nicholas III (eighth circle), Anastasius (sixth Circle), and Celestine V (the vestibule). In addition to shedding light on many of the details in the Inferno, this also gives us an idea of Dante's biases, and how his personal grievances and views affected the placement of his ancestors and contemporaries in his vision of the afterlife. This patriotism has been addressed visually in several ways, most notably in Dante's attire, which is that of Italian of the period. Dante's many political conversations are also visually documented, such as Ciaccio in circle three, Argenti in circle five, and Uberti in circle six.

A more hotly debated influence of Dante is Islam. While there is no consensus on the degree to which Islam affected Dante, this illustration series includes several allusions of Islam and Muslim hell. This is most obvious in the judgement of Minos illustration. Minos is suspended above a bridge. In Islamic texts, people must pass over a bridge when they are judged, with sinners finding the bridge too narrow and falling into hell. The angel in this illustration mirrors the description of Malik, the custodian of hell in the Islamic religion. The angel also wears five tassels, symbolizing the five pillars of Islam

The inclusion of text into this project is the primary elements that separates it from pure illustration. Historically, the relationship of text and imagery in publication design is in constant flux, and can vary wildly based on the design prejudices and inclinations of the period, or the geographic location where the work is produced. In modern American design, pictures and text are generally separated, rarely crossing their respective grid boundaries. This is especially common when the writing is body text, or some other iteration of long form typography. While magazines and periodicals will occasionally mesh their text and pictures in a way that breaks the traditional grid structure, these are the exception rather than the rule. Books that combine decorative type and illustration rarely go beyond the headers or initial title. Works such as *Animalia*, by Graeme Base, do a good job of synthesizing text and image, but do not contain enough text to fall into the category of mainstream book production. This project moves beyond traditional American book design to create a fully formatted and designed art piece and combines that text with imagery.

The text is implemented in such a way as to enhance the reader's experience in such a way that cannot be accomplished with images or text alone. Initially, the text alterations are subtle, such as the varied kerning in circle four, or the slowly increasing weight of the font in circle three. The text alternations become increasingly obvious in later circles, culminating in circle eight, which is entirely text. By the eighth circle, the text is almost completely illegible, alluding the increasing severity of the sins encountered later in the poem. The text is also used to add an increased level of interactivity to the work, such as the last page of the ninth circle, where the reader must flip the book to finish reading. This mirrors Dante's and Virgil's passage through the center of the earth, and the subsequent change in the direction of gravity. This use of the text in a non-traditional manner allows the type to become a part of the composition, rather than simple body text included for the sake of necessity.