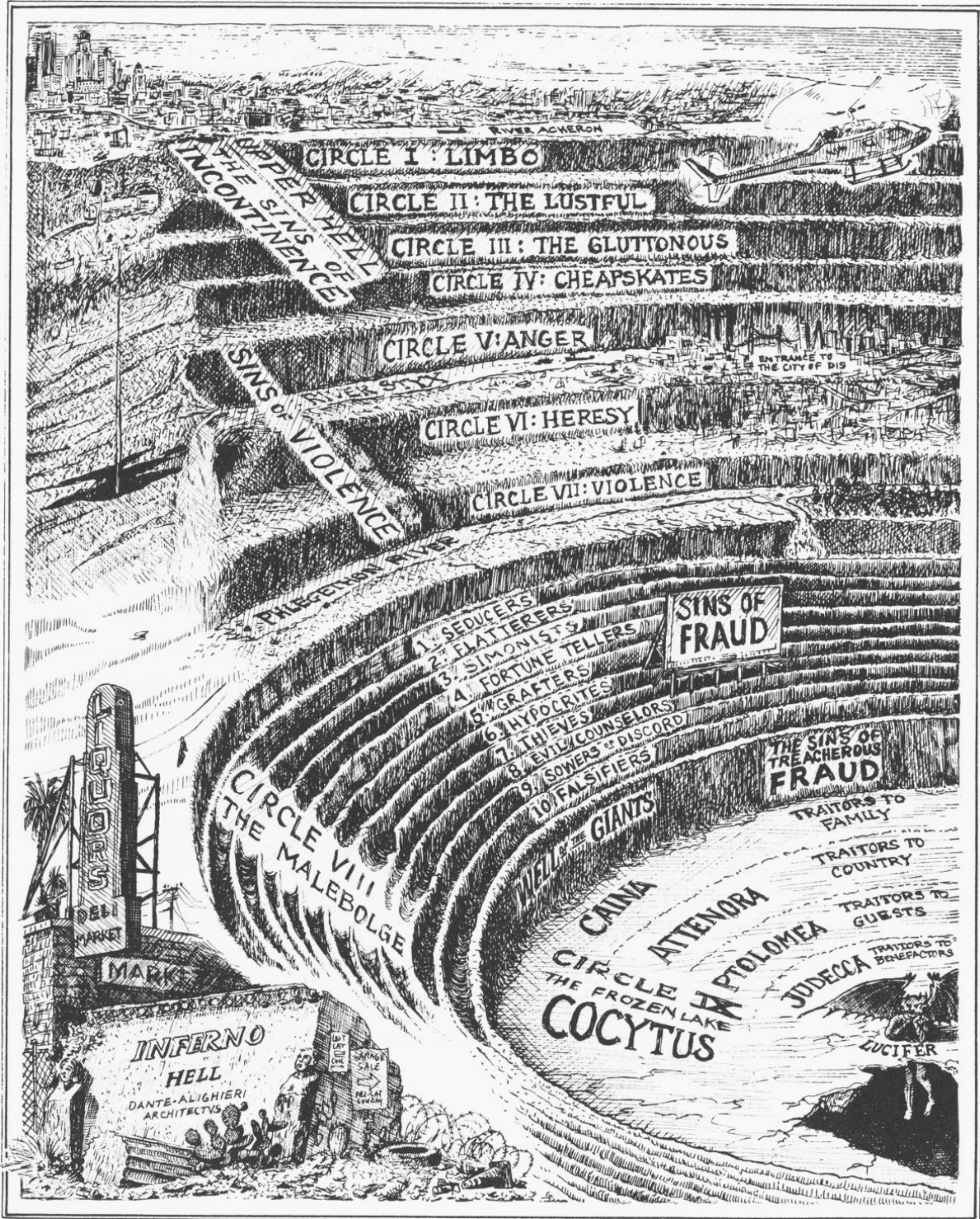


DANTE'S INFERNO

Translated by Robert Hollander & Jean Hollander

Illustrated by Gustave Doré & Sandow Birk



FRONTISPIECE: A MAP OF DANTE'S HELL

Turn to pages xx-xxi of *The Inferno* translated by Robert and Jean Hollander (2000) for a more detailed explanation of the different circles of Hell as well as an outline of how the cantos align with the circles and which monsters reside within their circumferences. These maps should come in handy as we attempt to navigate the infernal regions. Try not to lose them!



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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Who was Dante Alighieri, and how did he combine aspects of his own life with characters and locations from classical Roman mythology to create Italy's great epic, the *Divine Comedy*?

Who was Virgil, and why did Dante choose him as the person to guide us through Hell?

Is reading the *Divine Comedy* as an allegory necessary to understand the poem? What is an allegory?

How does Dante's rigid view of good and evil fare with modern sensibilities?

What is the difference between a motif and a theme? What are some of the more prominent motifs and themes found in *The Inferno*?



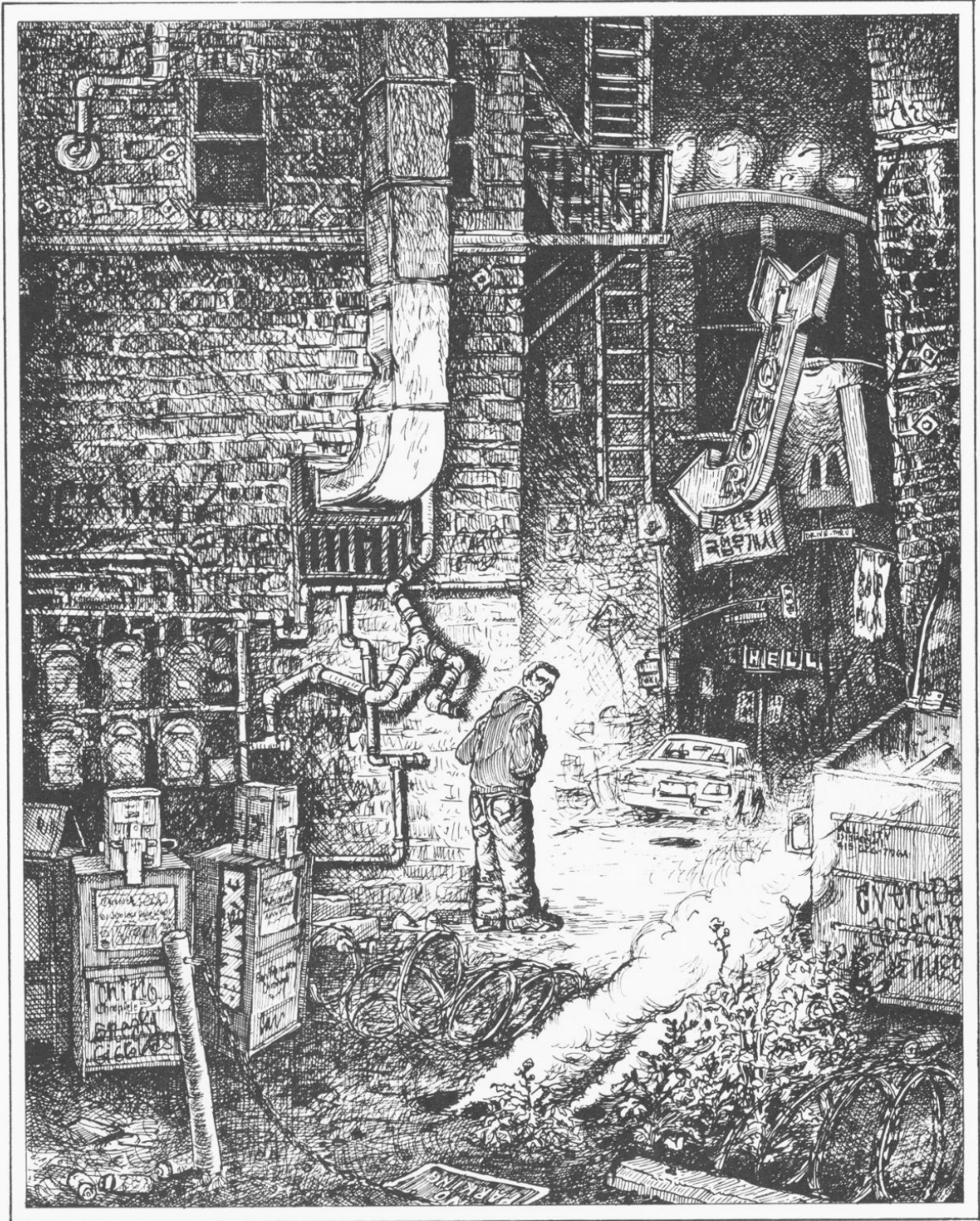
CANTO I, 1-3: DANTE IN THE DARK WOOD:

*Midway in the journey of our life
I came to myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.*

VOCABULARY

These words which appear in Robert and Jean Hollander's translation of *The Inferno* have been identified as words or derivatives of words that have appeared on past SAT and ACT tests. The words are listed in the order in which they appear in the epic.

1. Forsake – *verb* abandon; renounce or give up.
2. Distress – *noun* extreme anxiety, sorrow, or pain.
3. Perilous – *adjective* full of danger or risk.
4. Impede – *verb* delay or prevent (someone or something) by obstructing them; hinder.
5. Gaudy – *adjective* extravagantly bright or showy, typically so as to be tasteless.
6. Lament – *noun* a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.
7. Faint – *adjective* barely perceptible.
8. Vast – *adjective* of very great extent or quantity; immense.
9. Sage – *noun* a profoundly wise man, especially one who features in ancient history or legend.
10. Malign – *adjective* evil in nature or effect; malevolent.
11. Arduous – *adjective* involving or requiring strenuous effort; difficult and tiring.
12. Inception – *noun* the establishment or starting point of an institution or activity.
13. Assail – *verb* make a concerted or violent attack on.
14. Implore – *verb* beg someone earnestly or desperately to do something.
15. Affliction – *noun* something that causes pain or suffering.
16. Venerable – *adjective* accorded a great deal of respect, especially because of age, wisdom, or character.
17. Resolute – *adjective* admirably purposeful, determined, and unwavering.
18. Tumult – *noun* a loud, confused noise, especially one caused by a large mass of people.
19. Loath – *adjective* reluctant; unwilling.
20. Grievous – *adjective* (of something bad) very severe or serious.
21. Jowl – *noun* the lower part of a person or animal's cheek, especially when it is fleshy or drooping.
22. Livid – *adjective* dark bluish gray in color.
23. Vermilion – *noun* a brilliant red color.
24. Pallor – *noun* an unhealthy pale appearance.
25. Covert – *adjective* not openly acknowledged or displayed.
26. Discern – *verb* distinguish (someone or something) with difficulty by sight or with the other senses.
27. Visage – *noun* a person's face, with reference to the form or proportions of the features.
28. Exult – *verb* show or feel elation or jubilation, especially as the result of a success.
29. Ascribe – *verb* attribute something to.
30. Goad – *verb* provoke or annoy (someone) so as to stimulate some action or reaction.
31. Bellow – *verb* emit a deep loud roar, typically in pain or anger.
32. Tempest – *noun* a violent windy storm.
33. Carnal – *adjective* relating to physical, especially sexual, needs and activities.



CANTO I, 1-3: DANTE IN THE DARK WOOD:

*Midway in the journey of our life
I came to myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.*

THE JOURNEY OF OUR LIFE

Dante's grammatical solecism which begins his *Divine Comedy*: "Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood," mixes the plural "our" and singular first-person "myself" (I.1-2). These first lines establish the poet's desire to make his reader grasp the relation between the individual and the universal, between Dante and all humankind. His voyage is meant to be understood as ours as well. Perhaps it is for this reason that so many writers and artists have seen fit to make Dante's work their own over the years. Take for example the beginning of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic short story "Young Goodman Brown" (1835):

Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset, into the street of Salem village, but put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife. And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap, while she called to Goodman Brown.

"Dearest heart," whispered she, softly and rather sadly, when her lips were close to his ear, "pr'y thee, put off your journey until sunrise, and sleep in your own bed to-night. A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts, that she's afraid of herself, sometimes. Pray, tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year!"

"My love and my Faith," replied young Goodman Brown, "of all nights in the year, this one night must I tarry away from thee. My journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done 'twixt now and sunrise. What, my sweet, pretty wife, dost thou doubt me already, and we but three months married!"

"Then God bless you!" said Faith, with the pink ribbons, "and may you find all well, when you come back."

"Amen!" cried Goodman Brown. "Say thy prayers, dear Faith, and go to bed at dusk, and no harm will come to thee."

So they parted; and the young man pursued his way, until, being about to turn the corner by the meeting-house, he looked back and saw the head of Faith still peeping after him, with a melancholy air, in spite of her pink ribbons.

"Poor little Faith!" thought he, for his heart smote him. "What a wretch am I, to leave her on such an errand! She talks of dreams, too. Methought, as she spoke, there was trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done to-night. But, no, no! 'twould kill her to think it. Well; she's a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night, I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to Heaven."

With this excellent resolve for the future, Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose. He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind. It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveller knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that, with lonely footsteps, he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude.

"There may be a devilish Indian behind every tree," said Goodman Brown to himself; and he glanced fearfully behind him, as he added, "What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!"

His head being turned back, he passed a crook of the road, and looking forward again, beheld the figure of a man, in grave and decent attire, seated at the foot of an old tree. He arose, at Goodman Brown's approach, and walked onward, side by side with him.

"You are late, Goodman Brown," said he. "The clock of the Old South was striking, as I came through Boston; and that is full fifteen minutes ago."

"Faith kept me back awhile," replied the young man, with a tremor in his voice, caused by the sudden appearance of his companion, though not wholly unexpected.

It was now deep dusk in the forest, and deepest in that part of it where these two were journeying. As nearly as could be discerned, the second traveller was about fifty years old, apparently in the same rank of life as Goodman Brown, and bearing a considerable resemblance to him, though perhaps more in expression than features. Still, they might have been taken for father and son. And yet, though the elder person was as simply clad as the younger, and as simple in manner too, he had an indescribable air of one who knew the world, and would not have felt abashed at the governor's dinner-table, or in King William's court, were it possible that his affairs should call him thither. But the only thing about him, that could be fixed upon as remarkable, was his staff, which bore the likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrought, that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent. This, of course, must have been an ocular deception, assisted by the uncertain light.

"Come, Goodman Brown!" cried his fellow-traveller, "this is a dull pace for the beginning of a journey. Take my staff, if you are so soon weary." [. . .]

How does the beginning of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" mirror Dante's introduction to the *Divine Comedy*? How do both authors use allegoric language to tell their stories?

In the spring of 2000, postmodern author Mark Z. Danielewski unleashed his 700-page novel, *House of Leaves*, on an unexpecting public. The book rapidly clawed its way to the top of the bestsellers lists and was being taught in college classrooms by the fall, terrifying readers and becoming an instant classic. The foundation of Danielewski's book is built on Dante's *Inferno*. In one of the novel's three interconnected narratives, a Pulitzer-prize winning photojournalist named Will Navidson leaves behind his dangerous career travelling to war-torn parts of the world only to find that his new countryside home in Virginia poses the greatest threat to his physical and mental well-being. The documentary footage he shoots of the house will either make or break his career—if he can survive the filming process. In Part III of *House of Leaves*, the narrator asks the question: why did Will Navidson move into that house?

Why Navidson? Why not someone else?

When the great Florentine howls, "Ma io perchè venirvi? o chi 'l concede? / Io non Paulo sono,"¹ Homer's rival calls him a coward and orders him to get moving because the powers above have taken a personal interest in his salvation.

¹ Dante again. Again translated by Sinclair. Canto II; lines 31-32: But I, why should I go there, and who grants it? I am not Aeneas; I am not Paul."

For hell's cartographer, the answer is mildly satisfying. For Navidson, however, there is no answer at all. During "Exploration #4" he even asks aloud, "How the fuck did I end up here?" The house responds with resounding silence. No divine attention. Not even an amaurotic guide.

Some have suggested that the horrors Navidson encountered in that house were merely manifestations of his own troubled psyche. Dr. Iben Van Pollit in his book *The Incident* claims the entire house is a physical incarnation of Navidson's psychological pain: "I often wonder how things might have turned out if Will Navidson had, how shall we say, done a little bit of house cleaning."

While Pollit is not alone in asserting that Navidson's psychology profoundly influenced the nature of those rooms and hallways, few believe it conjured up that place. The reason is simple: Navidson was not the first to live in the house and encounter its peril. As the Navidsons' real estate agent Alicia Rosenbaum eventually revealed, the house on Ash Tree Lane has had more than a few occupants, approximately .37 owners every year, most of whom were traumatized in some way. Considering the house was supposedly built back in 1720, quite a few people have slept and suffered within those walls. If the house were indeed the product of psychological agonies, it would have to be the collective product of every inhabitant's agonies.

It is no great coincidence then that eventually someone with a camera and a zest for the dangerous would show up at this Mead Hall and confront the terror at the door. Fortunately for audiences everywhere, that someone possessed extraordinary visual talents. [. . .]

Therefore to revisit our first two questions:

Why Navidson?

Considering the practically preadamite history of the house, it was inevitable someone *like* Navidson would eventually enter those rooms.

Why not someone else?

Considering his own history, talent and emotional background, only Navidson could have gone as deep as he did and still have successfully brought that vision back.

How does Danielewski combine modern concerns and sensibilities with imagery from classic works of literature to tell his new take on Dante's descent into Hell?

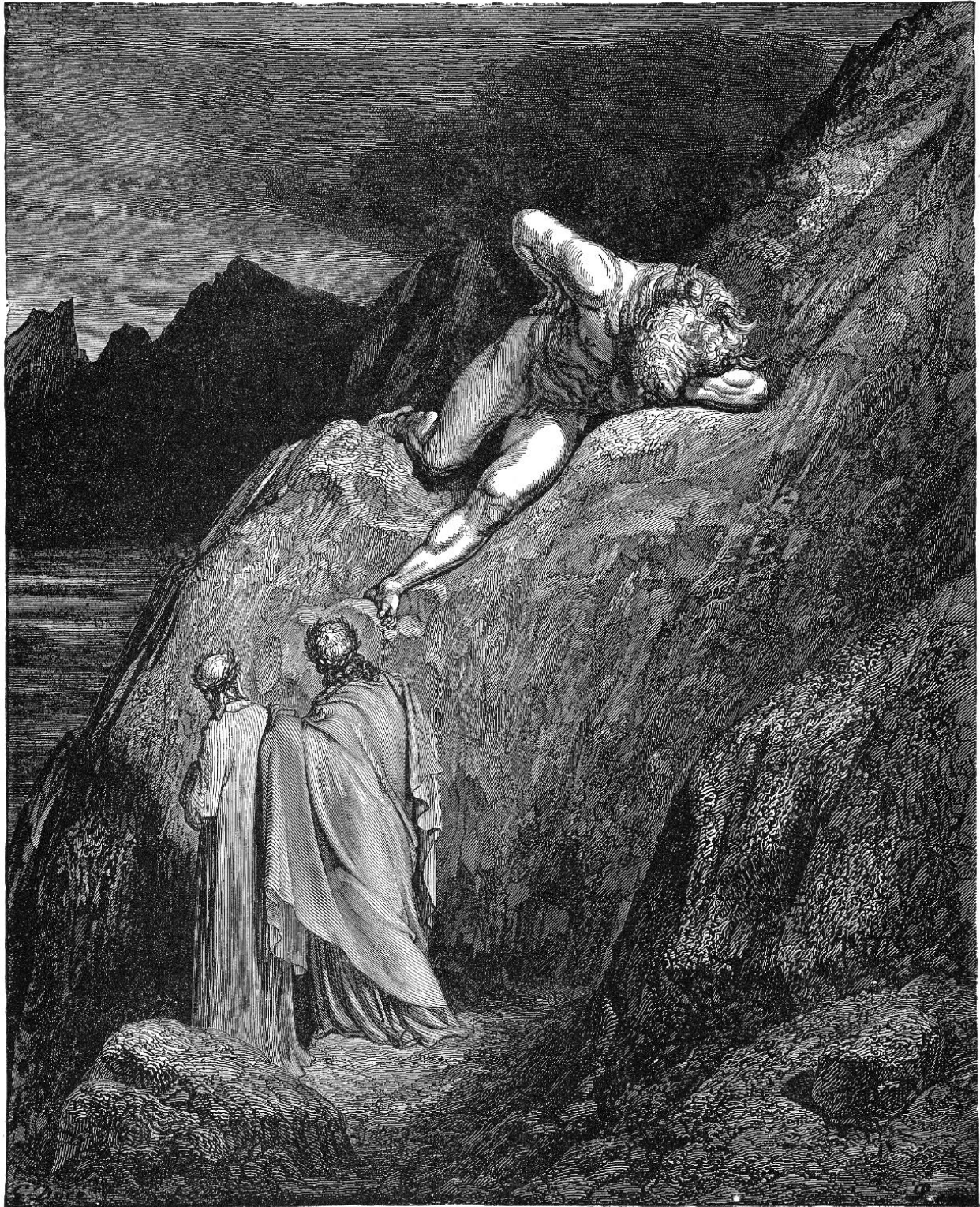
In 2004, Marcus Sanders wrote a contemporary adaptation of the *Divine Comedy* which begins,

About halfway through the course of my pathetic life,
I woke up and found myself in a stupor in some dark place.
I'm not sure how I ended up there; I guess I had taken a few wrong turns.
I can't really describe what the place was like.
It was dark and strange, and just thinking
about it now gives me the chills. It was so bleak
and depressing. I remember thinking I'd rather be
dead than stuck there. But before I get too far off track,

I should tell you about the other stuff that happened,
because, in the end, everything came out alright.

How does Sanders's beginning compare to Dante's? Are Sanders and Dante still telling the same story?

Following in the footsteps of Dante and Virgil, rewrite the first canto of *The Inferno*. You can try your hand at writing tercets or just write in prose. You can set the beginning of your story in Italy during the 1300s or in the present day and anywhere in the world. While the time period and location are entirely up to you, some of the aspects of Dante's introduction you should include in your story are: a guide for your journey; universal language, symbols, and themes; a similar tone of dread and despair; and the basic plot structure of being lost in life and embarking on a journey to find your way.



CANTO XII, 11-13: THE MINOTAUR ON THE SHATTER:

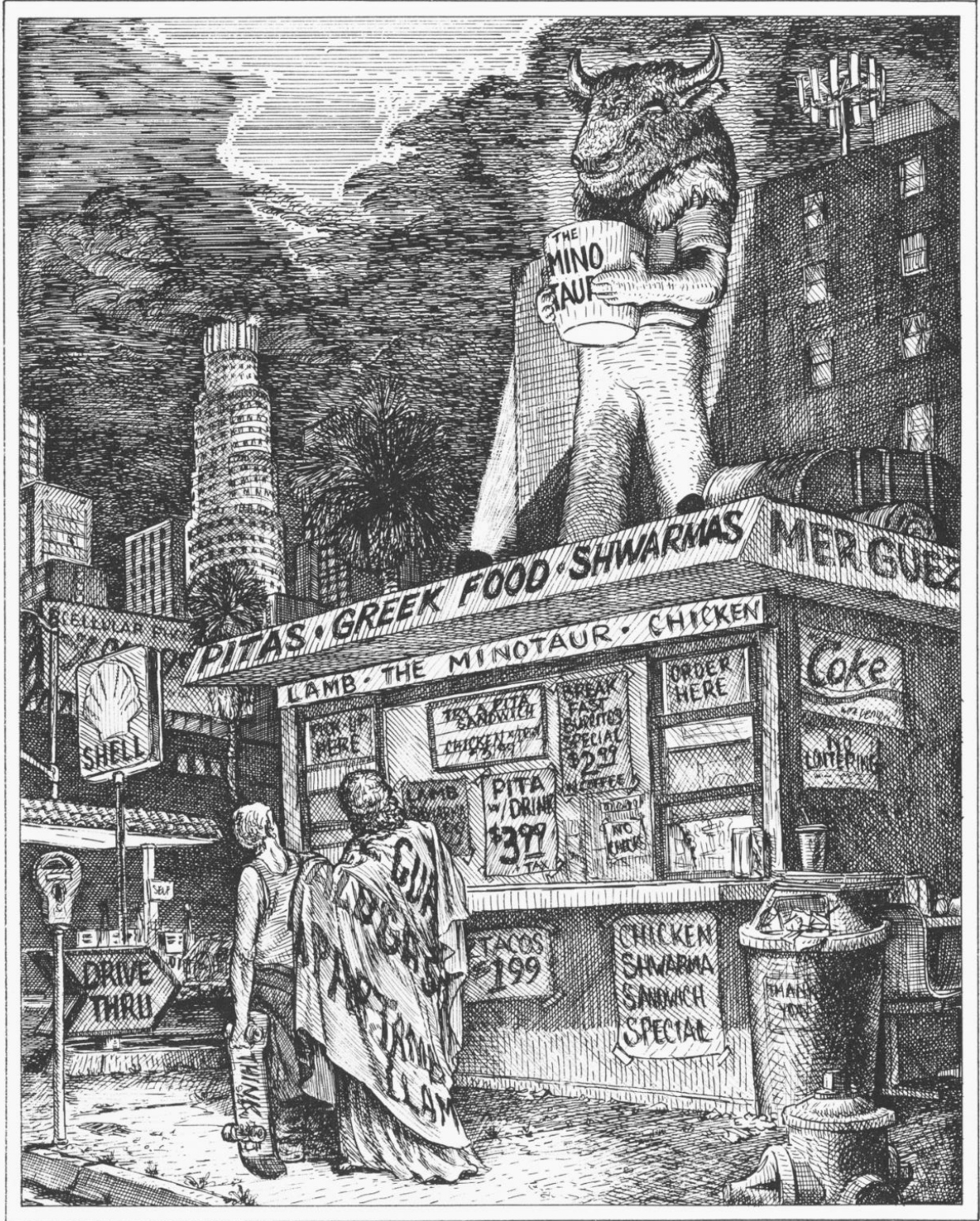
*And at the chasm's jagged edge
was sprawled the infamy of Crete,
conceived in that false cow.*

INVENTION OF PUNISHMENTS

For Dante, all punishments in *The Inferno* obey the law of *contapasso*, which translates to “fit punishment” or “retribution,” for according to the Scholastic philosophers, who had derived the concept from Aristotle, one must pay for a transgression with a punishment of the same nature as the transgression itself. In reality, Dante invents the various punishments by following a simple rule: he takes common metaphors and translates them into concrete, visual events, even to the point of extracting some of those metaphors from the etymology of words: the lustful, who forgot all the duties and let themselves be carried away by the tempest of the senses, are placed inside a real storm; the gluttons who made pigs of themselves, lie in the mire; those who spilled the blood of others are submerged in rivers of boiling blood; the soothsayers are condemned to look backward, and so forth. Hell has a general cathartic function for both the protagonist and humankind in general.

First find three of Dante’s especially cruel punishments or scenes of torture from anywhere in *The Inferno*. Write the tercet with the line numbers, and then explain how the punishment follows the law of *contapasso* as outlined above.

Next, create three of your own sadistic punishments for sinners in your Hell—the crueler the better. If necessary, explain the process in detail as to how your punishment is retribution for a sin committed on Earth.



CANTO XII, 11-13: THE MINOTAUR ON THE SHATTER:

*And at the chasm's jagged edge
was sprawled the infamy of Crete,
conceived in that false cow.*

Name _____

Date _____

PICTURES WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Dante’s divine poem has been widely illustrated since it was published nearly seven hundred years ago, and Sandow Birk joins a who’s who of artists who have illuminated its text and thereby kept it alive on the visual level. Some readers will recognize in Birk’s illustrations the influence of the noted French engraver Gustave Doré. By borrowing elements from an earlier artist, Birk, in a very contemporary manner, recaptures the spirit of the medieval practice of *translatio studii*—the translation of knowledge and culture from one age to another—thus linking the past with the present by means of harmonizing and integrating newer forms with the old. While many other energies are at work in his *Divine Comedy*, it is clear that Dante shared in this intellectual and cultural practice as well. Choose one of the scenes from *The Inferno* that both Doré and Birk illustrated, and describe their pictures with words. On what aspects of Dante’s poetry did they choose to focus? How are the pictures alike, and how are they different? How do you account for the artists’ different interpretations of the same lines of poetry?





CANTO XXXIV, 28-30: SATAN IN THE FROZEN FLOOR OF HELL:

*The emperor of the woeful kingdom
rose from the ice below his breast,
and I in size am closer to a giant.*

