

Marcello Vial

Professor Tremblay-McGaw

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Etchings of Struggle and Hope

No poet is more cherished by the Italian people than Dante Alighieri, whose *Divine Comedy* is largely regarded as his finest work. Completed in 1320, and split into three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, the *Divine Comedy* depicts the journey of a man's soul to God. As a whole, the work is noted for its employment of the Tuscan vernacular, which partly due to its use by Dante became the official language of Italy, its development of "contrapasso," in which punishment manifests as an inverse for what it punishes, and for its embodiment of 14th century medieval church values. The *Divine Comedy* is also recognized for its accounts of Florentine politics and society, as well as commentary on historical figures and events. These accounts paint a picture of the struggles and conflicts present in Dante's time, as well as highlighting those people whom Dante considered especially reprehensible or reputable. Of the three parts, *Inferno* is most scathing of the society and politics of Dante's time, portraying those whom Dante considered earthly sinners as sufferers within the nine circles of Hell. To us students, this epic poem may not appear to house any meaning for our lives on its surface. However, the *Divine Comedy* offers a lens by which to examine the sociopolitical and religious climate of the 14th century and consider how such factors have changed in the present day. It also offers insight into the Italian language and the philosophical concepts of justice and ethics. Either as an alternative to or supplement for reading *Inferno*, the de Saisset's exhibit of Michael Mazur's *L'Inferno Di Dante* ambitiously encapsulates the themes and significance of *Inferno* in

its etchings in the first-person perspective and panels with text from the poem, one for each canto. The exhibit is on display until June 16 of 2018.

Every piece in the exhibit is presented in the same fashion. An etching is hung on the wall, and hanging under the black and white etching is its corresponding excerpt of text from the canto it portrays, written both in the original Tuscan dialect and in English. Having read *Inferno* in the past, I was very interested to see how Mazur imagined Dante's version of hell, and was delighted to find an interpretation that was at times surreal, at times horrific, at times depressing, but always hauntingly beautiful. Mazur's genius lies in his manipulation of first-person perspective, thrusting us into Dante's journey through hell. Rather than experiencing the exhibit as passive onlookers, gazing at scenes from the outside, Mazur forces his audience into active participation with the story of *Inferno*. As though they were truly standing before each circle and instance of hell, the audience's emotions are stirred by the exhibits palpability.

The first etching that drew my attention was Mazur's representation of canto 13, known as *La Selva Dei Suicidi*, or, *The Wood Of The Suicides*. At this point in *Inferno*, Dante and his guide Virgil have come to the seventh circle of Hell, which holds those who in life were violent, and is split into three rings. Within Dante's circle of violence, the second ring, known as the wood of suicides, contains those who were violent against themselves. To depict this scene, Mazur offers a withered tree partially obscured by a thick fog, on which hangs the many formless bodies of those who in life took their own. Perhaps Mazur intended to reflect the 14th century religious and social view that suicide was an insult to the body, and as such those who committed such an insult would remain formless in the afterlife, hung and withered to reflect the sterility that such a rejection of life would create. In the image lies the somber horror Dante wove into his poem, embodied by lifeless shells hung on trees. Within the trees reside the tortured

souls of those who took their own lives, souls who are only able to speak or scream if broken or gorged upon by harpies, and otherwise stand silently, eerily. Mazur's manipulation of blacks and greys further emphasizes the hapless sterility of his subjects, forbidden to have "what [they have] robbed [themselves] of" (Dante Canto XIII, Line 99). The subject of suicide today is far more complex and impactful than it was in the 14th century. Most of us students have dealt with the concept of suicide. The amount of devastation, both internal and external, that suicide causes in young adults is far too commonplace and often misunderstood. Mazur's interpretation of *La Selva Dei Suicidi* as well as his other etchings drag his audience deep within the bowels of suffering and sin, evoking our dismay or disillusionment with such corruptions of the human condition.

Mazur's etching of the final canto, known as *A Riveder Le Stelle*, or, *Once More The Stars*, ends with the viewers rising, like Dante, out of hell towards hope. Having maneuvered past Lucifer himself, Dante and Virgil find a hidden path out of Hell and into Purgatory, ending *Inferno* and setting up *Purgatorio*. To depict this scene, Mazur incorporates color for the first and only time throughout the exhibit, portraying the distant mountain of Purgatory with shades of blue interrupted only by white stars. This scene is framed by the hole through which Dante and Virgil leave Hell, which contains the usual black and whites Mazur used in his other etchings. Mazur deliberately juxtaposes this final etching with all of his previous ones. While his other etchings were dreary and claustrophobic, this etching seems relieving and expansive. Having felt overwhelmed and weighed down while progressing through the exhibit, I found myself able to breathe again when faced with this final scene. The isolation and fear elicited by the etchings melted away. Despite the constancy of corruption and sin found in both 14th century

and current society, Mazur, like Dante, finishes his version of *Inferno* not by looking back at the horrors, but by looking forward to “the stars” (Dante Canto XXIV, Line 140).

Mazur’s collection of etchings sheds light upon the turbulence and pestilence of 14th century society through his interpretation of Dante’s *Inferno*. While the poem itself may be too time consuming for a busy college student to read through, this exhibition of Mazur’s work certainly conveys the same themes and messages as the work which inspired it. *The Wood Of The Suicides* delves into the disturbing details of suffering in Hell, suffering built to reflect a person’s actions against their immortal soul. *Once More The Stars* balances such depictions of suffering, offering hope at the end of a cornucopia of misery and torment. Such a collection offers a lot to college students looking to expand their minds, but also provides comfort in times of tribulation. In an interesting reversal of “contrapasso”, my emotional struggle through *L’Inferno Di Dante* yielded an equally potent pleasure at its conclusion, for I realized Dante’s message in *Inferno*, delivered expertly by Mazur. Only in delving into the darkness of Mazur’s first 40 etchings and the suffering they encompass can the color and stillness of the final etching have such an affect. Similarly, for us students that may feel engulfed in the horrors found in the earthly world, we need only to look up and around us for hope. Perhaps it is when we retreat into ourselves that we may feel trapped, surrounded by the shocks in the media and stresses in our studies. However, if we look outside of our personal infernos, at least at Santa Clara, we will find people and places filled with support and compassion, as many as there are stars in the sky.