

Hell

Beginning of the poem

I

‘ABANDON HERE ALL HOPE!’ –
Dante once wrote
over Hell’s gate.

Dante was *andante*
– unpicking wise, prophetic threads
from world history, all of it, ancient and modern.
Dante was *andante*:
terror and fear *sans* hope.

We are *presto*.
A gallop.
One jump ahead
of the second
(a wretched
salto mortale
of every sin
spirit and flesh
cut
cruelly
with poison).
We are born in Hell
– already –
there.
Unlike Dante we’ve not come
from outside in a dream -
our life entire
is there:
brimstone and fire.

Nine spirals
– circle on circle –
nine circles
of grief,
torment,
bondage,
– every day –
endlessly turn
in a nine-fold gyre:
and dazed
we reel
– shot from God’s bow –
there, where we’re born:
in Hell.

My pen, wavering,
waned
powerless
pained
before what now I must relate –
the eternal infernal horror of Hell.
Come to my aid!
Guide
Virgil.

II

(But Virgil's not breathed in years.
Virgil's toothless slot
smirks in a classical skull
a thousand or so years old.)
Put
in your bag a loaf of black bread
and with no righteous, polished tercets
go on alone,
oh soul!
Through the circles of Hell
– darkness, fire.

Alas!
Virgil's
a lie!

III

Dark powers,
deep powers –
there:
force;
moral powers,
mortal powers –
flare:
maw.
Curses, muttering
and through the torment gleams
a righteous faith in peace.

A gnashing of teeth
the howls, the grief,
wrath and hope unceasing.

Oh!
Hell has no sinners:
there the righteous
suffer alone:

r
r
r
– *chote* –
smash –

IV First circle:

Our feet
bare
in blood
– torn
– nailed
in raging ice
– Look at us, poet!

With sharp
frozen
evil

spikes
– hoar frost:
:one moment freezing,
one moment burning;
every hour
eyes pricking
– we see neither
ahead
– nor
behind
– Look at us, poet!

God, you!
Winter sun
– grinning executioner,
ceaselessly struck
by bitter insomnia -
flaying
our skin
– Looks at us, poet!
– brother!

Our empty bellies
– taut skin of old drums,
drums during unbridled battle –
beat, drums
with a dead
sound,

menace
wild
and rage:
Hunger!
Hunger!
Hunger!

Hunger
unexpected
Hunger
unmourned
Hunger
our fate

Hunger!
Hunger!
Hunger!

The boulevard before us
the whole city
– wealth bound to corruption –
thrumming
with half-naked girls,
proud
lords,
sated
bankers,
captains,
nobles,
other brutes.
– Ah!

“Ladies
and gentlemen –
please
bootlaces
shoe polish
matches!”

– before them formed in squalid ranks
in the midst of the tumult
us
we of the big city
– *urbi et orbi* –
: before the whole world
the great city:

Hunger

Hunger
Hunger –

Behind us flows
an endless stream

of cars
100 horsepower,
motorcycles
coaches
carriages
cabriolets
– and in them
fearless, proud,
those who
know us
acknowledge
and can't forget
 (us
poor beggars
frail relics
skin and bone –
across the whole city formed in squalid ranks).

Above us flicker
ceaselessly
gleaming storeys
balconies applauding
golden banks chime
starving
cathedrals
at noon
burst into song,
and above the wide road
gape
crimson
furnaces
glutted –
and the fields of the world
drench us in their rich smells.

And below
beneath thick layers of fog
the Thames darkly flows –
coursing from far off
and hauling in, drawing in
the mud of the world
from every land and sea –
black universal misery:
Germans, Italians,
Mongols, Negroes,
Czechs, Poles,
all races,
peoples and nations –
kin-less nomads
guttersnipes

haggard
from hunger
drawn here to the great city
– the lumpenproletariat –
weeds, smoke, foam:
all roads lead to Rome. –

Golden banks chime
above us
starving
cathedrals
at noon
burst into song
gape
crimson
furnaces
gutted –
and the fields of the world
drench us in their rich smells.
Long live the great hunger!

(Another eight circles of sorrow follow – seven deadly sins and eight shameless crimes of today's world. Hell is the first part of the trilogy *The Divine Comedy: Hell – Purgatory – Paradise.*)

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Translated from Bulgarian by Tom Phillips with Angel Igov and Bozhil Hristov