

# A Hell of One's Own: Combat Trauma in Dante's *Inferno*

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Must you have battle in your heart forever?

—*Odyssey* 12:132

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**D**ante Alighieri was twenty-four years old in 1289 when he saw combat in the Battle of Campaldino as a “feditore”, a cavalry soldier from Florence.<sup>1</sup> From what we know of the battle,<sup>2</sup> Dante’s unit would have been one of the first to be engaged by the oncoming Aretine cavalry, and for the first several minutes of the battle, Dante would have faced the prospect of imminent death when he saw the men and horses of his unit dying as their resistance crumbled before the Aretine’s charge. The historian Herbert Oerter notes that the catastrophe of this initial attack actually saved the Florentine forces, and likely Dante with them, because it caused Corso Donati, the flamboyant commander of the Florentine reserves, to disregard his orders and commit to the battle immediately. His orders, on pain of death, were to wait for a signal from one of the senior officers, Guillaume de Durfort. But Guillaume was dying—bleeding out on the plain—and would never give the signal. As it happened, Corso’s reserve position was in defilade to the attacking Aretine’s northern flank. When Corso attacked, his cavalry pierced the unexpected and unprotected flank of the Aretine force, causing massive chaos and an almost immediate disintegration of the Aretine attack. The battle was over in a few

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<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *Inferno* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 88.

<sup>2</sup> See Phillip H. Wicksteed, *The Early Lives of Dante* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907), 117-119 and Herbert L. Oerter, “Campaldino, 1289.” *Speculum* 43.3 (July 1968), 448-450.

minutes with Dante's Florentines holding the field. Campaldino's casualties—over three thousand dead in less than an hour—bled into the rivulets and streams that crisscrossed the battlefield and ran into the Arno River that bordered it to the South. In the aftermath of the fight, Dante watched the Arno turn red with blood as the engorged streams emptied into the river.

About twenty years later, in an instance of dystopic *deja vu*, Dante records in the *Inferno* "approaching the river of blood" (XII.46-47) as he and Virgil descend to the circle of hell containing those who "harm others with violence" (XII.48).<sup>3</sup> This is Dante the pilgrim, of course, the literary creation of the historical Dante, the poet who fought in the Battle of Campaldino and wrote the famous epic of the afterlife, the *Commedia*, or the *Divine Comedy*. That the historical Dante, twenty years after the battle, returns to his experience of a river turned red with blood in composing his epic gives us an important key to understanding his infernal creation. Dante's experience of combat at Campaldino and elsewhere, and the inherent trauma of combat, much more than simply providing a ready vocabulary with which to describe hell, becomes a theme of its own within the *Inferno*. That is to say, the trauma of combat is fundamental to Dante's understanding of hell, and that in some cases, the *Inferno* helps to elucidate the nature of combat trauma itself.

A great deal of the commentary on the *Inferno* makes note of hell's martial structure but stops short of accounting for the way in which it pervades the text's representation of hell, or of proposing a reason why it does. That Dante's language and imagery for hell is predictably blood-drenched and violent—we might ask how else would one depict hell—should not distract us by its obviousness from what is clearly a dominant military idiom. Robert Hollander notes that "epic,

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<sup>3</sup> These lines are taken from the Durling and Martinez, *Inferno*. Unless noted otherwise additional quotes from the *Inferno* are from Jean and Robert Hollander's *Inferno*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

and especially martial epic, has more of Dante's attention in the *Inferno* than we have perhaps hitherto understood."<sup>4</sup> In Hollander's reading, the presence of swords (the symbol of martial epic), Betran de Born, (a modern proponent of martial epic), not to mention recurring references to the Theban cycle, which David Quint refers to as "the archetypal myth of civil warfare,"<sup>5</sup> show Dante "rais[ing] the ghost of martial epic for our consideration...not to praise the genre, but to bury it."<sup>6</sup> But then, if one is writing about hell, what better form to employ than one that Hollander calls "essentially unworthy of a long poem devoted to Christian values?"<sup>7</sup> Even more than the form of the martial epic, the martial milieu, as it were, of the *Inferno* is the perfect way to describe hell; perfect because it *is* wrong or "unworthy," and perfect because for Dante, experienced in warfare himself, it was an inevitable idiom for hell.

That Dante's hell is a massive militarized zone is clear. Just past Limbo, the first circle of hell, we begin to encounter sentries: Minos guards the entrance to hell at the second circle, and Cerberus is on watch at the third circle. In the fourth circle Virgil puts the sentry Plutus in his place by reminding him of his military defeat and humiliation at the hand of St Michael. As Dante and Virgil approach the river Styx they arrive at the foot of a tower built on the edge of the river. Looking up at the top of the tower they see "two small flames...and another replying from so far away that the eye could hardly seize it"(VIII.4-6).<sup>8</sup> Whether this is a routine signal, or one prompted by a lookout spying two out of place souls, the signaling mechanism is effective and yields prompt results. After a few moments the boatman Phlegyas speeds up in his skiff as if to

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Hollander, "Dante and the Martial Epic," in *Mediaevalia* 12 (1989 for 1986), 78.

<sup>5</sup> David Quint, "Epic Tradition and *Inferno* IX," in *Dante Studies* 93 (1975), 205-206.

<sup>6</sup> Hollander, "Dante and the Martial Epic," 78.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Durling and Martinez, *Inferno*.

apprehend Dante and Virgil only to be trumped once again by Virgil's divine mandate. In our attention to the novelty of being in hell and meeting Virgil it is easy to miss that in these first eight cantos alone we can identify the mechanism of an operational military establishment.

The gates with sentries, the operational signaling procedures, and a responsive interior guard culminate in canto eight with the fortified city of Dis into which a host of over 1000 fallen angels withdraw and barricade themselves upon contact with Dante and Virgil. In their commentary on this canto Durling and Martinez note that "the devils consider themselves still in a state of war, driven back into their city walls, with outposts like this tower in the surrounding countryside."<sup>9</sup> It is significant to recall that these fallen angels have already been at war—a war with heaven that they lost decisively. The battle for the heavens is mentioned in the Bible's Book of Isaiah and the Apocalypse of John, when Satan led a contingent of angels in rebellion against God and was countered by St Michael and the faithful angels.<sup>10</sup> The fallen angels' current home is where they landed after their expulsion from heaven, and when Dante arrives at the gates of the city Dis it is clear that these angels have not been idle since their fall but have been fortifying their terrain for the next battle.

In fact, we come to learn as we progress deeper into hell that there has been another battle. In canto twelve as Dante makes his way "down the steep landslide / on scree that often shifted / under my feet,"(XII.28-30) Virgil tells him that the terrain was not always this devastated. Hell itself was invaded when Christ crucified spent three days wreaking havoc in the underworld in what is known as the harrowing of hell, and "at that moment" Virgil tells him, "this ancient rock, / here and elsewhere, fell broken into pieces"(XII.43-44). This is a picture of a war-torn landscape

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<sup>9</sup> Durling and Martinez, *Inferno*, 134.

<sup>10</sup> See Revelation 12:7-9, and Isaiah 14:12-17.

with its infrastructure bludgeoned to pieces. In canto twenty-three we learn, in an almost comical caricature of the military environment, that the bridges spanning a network of valleys called the *Malebolge*, are all down. And of course they are down—bridges are always down in combat.

That hell is a sort of rubble-strewn aftermath of supernatural combat makes sense, but what about the behavior of the fallen angels? How, after their decisive losses, can these fallen angels still consider themselves in a state of war? The answer might have to do with hell's ability to cohere in spite of its crew of miscreants and what we might imagine as their systemic problems with good order and discipline. Blood and violence in human experience are inextricably linked to warfare and as the critic Jeremy Tambling demonstrates they are the vernacular in hell and serve as a unifying principle. "The power of hatred, rather than dividing, solders differences into a single identity," he writes, and "Violence...keeps opposites in tension with each other, forming a unity of a kind."<sup>11</sup> Hell needs war and what Homer called its "cords of mighty strife (erida krateren etanyssse)" in order to cohere despite the fact that at least theologically, the war is over and has been for a long time.<sup>12</sup> While Dante's portrayal of Hell is in some ways syncretic, the theology that informs his vision is decidedly orthodox and leaves little room for a dualistic universe in which heaven and hell are in fact still at war, implying as that would some equivalence of power between the two.<sup>13</sup> But as Durling and Martinez point out, hell's angels certainly act as if a war is on and are organized accordingly.

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<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Tambling, "Monstrous Tyranny, Men of Blood: Dante and 'Inferno' XII," in *The Modern Language Review* 98.4 (Oct, 2003), 888.

<sup>12</sup> For an explication of Homer's "cords of mighty strife (erida krateren etanyssse)" see Jessica Wolfe, "Spenser, Homer, and the Mythography of Strife," in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Winter 2005), 1222.

<sup>13</sup> See Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), especially chapter 4 "Medieval Multiculturalism and Dante's Theology of Hell," p102.

Then in canto twenty-one Dante and Virgil encounter the most psychologized representation of warfare yet. A *decina*, an organizational term derived from a Roman Legion referring to a ten man squad, led by a devil named Malacoda emerges from a position of concealment below a bridge to interdict the pilgrims. These devils are a hilarious caricature of junior-ranking troops complete with the boredom, bad ideas, dirty jokes, and a general lack of discipline that are the hallmarks of every military. Armed with grappling hooks this *decina* is responsible for securing its terrain and keeping the lost souls immersed in the thick boiling pitch running throughout it. Virgil negotiates with Malacoda for safe passage through their territory, and Malacoda responds with apparent submission: "I'm sending some men of mine along that way / to see if anyone is out to take the air. / Go with them— they won't hurt you"(XXI.115-117). In his instructions to his men Malacoda directs "keep these two safe as far as the next crag"(XXI.125). These apparently cooperative orders conceal another intention entirely. Virgil learns later, after a narrow escape, that Malacoda's instructions to keep them safe were coded to indicate the place at which his troops were to ambush the pilgrims. Perhaps this should come as no surprise since the pilgrims have been encountering dissemblers all throughout hell. After all, Satan is the prince of lies. But this experience of false assurance, deception, and confusion, where the pilgrims themselves are dragged into the maneuver and doubletalk, is a decisive lesson in the disintegration of trust that is correlated to the experience of warfare and makes it clear that in hell as in war, no one and no thing is quite what it seems.

Jonathan Shay is a psychologist who has worked with veterans for decades and describes this disintegration of trust in his study titled *Achilles in Vietnam*.

Combat trauma destroys the *capacity* for social trust....Lies and euphemisms by the soldier's own military superiors and civilian leaders of course undermine social

trust by destroying confidence in language....The enemy [strikes] not only at the body but also at the most basic functions of the soldier's mind, attacking his perceptions by concealment; his cognitions by camouflage and deception; his intentions by surprise, anticipation, and ambush. These mind games have been part of war since time immemorial.<sup>14</sup>

But trust destruction is only one of many symptoms of combat trauma that animate Dante's hell. If warfare binds hell's angels together in the false pretense of an already concluded war, then, as Dante knew from personal experience, it does the same to survivors of war on earth, binding them to the action and trauma of the wars in which they fought. When the war is over, it is common for traumatized participants to relive it in a temporally suspended immersion in the very characteristics of war that Dante inscribes in hell—ubiquitous violence, incapacity for trust and social participation, and an inability to leave the war behind. The traumatic nature of combat and its effects tend to color every subsequent experience. As Shay writes, "survivors of prolonged combat may mentally become lifelong prisoners of war, psychologically missing in action."<sup>15</sup> For Dante, his experiences at Campaldino and the 1289 siege of Caprona<sup>16</sup> saturate the *Inferno* overtly in the many specific references to them, but also, I propose, through the combat traumatized psychologizing of the hellscape.

In this reading, hell's final scenes are exemplary in combining a martial posture with a psychological subtext. Approaching the nerve center of hell in canto thirty-one, Dante reaches a final barricade consisting of a ring of giants, and hears "a horn blast that would have made / the

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, (New York: Touchstone, 1995) 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 153.

<sup>16</sup> Hollander, *Inferno*, 396.

loudest thunderclap seem faint"(XXXI.12/13). He compares the blast to one from *The Song of Roland* in which Roland's pride causes him to delay sounding his horn for help. Finally realizing that the battle is over and that he has lost, Roland blows his horn, but it is far too late for reinforcements to arrive in time to save Roland and his men. The horn, like the flaming towers in canto eight, is another military signal, and like the towers is probably heralding the intruding pilgrims' approach to Satan's command center. But by connecting this infernal trumpet to Roland's tardy blast Dante emphasizes the sad misconception of war under which hell operates—the war is over; the horn blast is too late.

Past the giants, Dante and Virgil finally arrive at the lowest and coldest point of hell in which Satan, "the emperor of the woeful kingdom / rose from the ice"(XXXIV.28/9). Satan is trapped in ice, beating his wings and thereby generating the wind that freezes him in place—he is a picture of self-defeat. He beats his wings, gnaws the bodies of three traitors, and is otherwise immobile. Dante's Satan resembles the aftermath of what Jonathan Shay describes as the berserk state in combat. Although frequently glamorized in pop-culture, the berserk state is an all too real psychological phenomenon in combat in which the berserker feels uncontrollable rage and a complete disregard for personal safety that results in a generally short lived aura of invincibility and usually terminates in death. When Jonathan Shay describes the three hallmarks of combat related post traumatic stress disorder stemming from the berserk state, they read like a psychological analysis of Satan in hell. "If a soldier survives the berserk state, it imparts emotional deadness and vulnerability to explosive rage to his psychology and a permanent hyperarousal to his physiology."<sup>17</sup> We have already seen that all of hell is in a state of hyperarousal. That the

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<sup>17</sup> Shay, 98.

lowest point of hell is marked by cold rather than heat and immobility rather than movement typifies the descent into a kind of emotional paralysis or deadness that Shay describes. As for chewing, the pilgrims have reached a point at which no movement is possible other than chewing—an apt metaphor for the way in which the traumatic event dominates the consciousness of the veteran and becomes a central, defining, consuming idea—one that is chewed constantly, but is never itself consumed. Satan, the original, archetypal combatant, much more than a moral exemplum of the evils of war, provides us, in himself and the kingdom that is an extension of him, a psychography of the combat traumatized.

If taking the *Inferno* as a guide to the psychological state of the combat traumatized sounds irremediably fatalistic, we should note that Dante, at least, does not stay in hell. A narrow passage through the rock and ice gripping Satan's body ends in a portal to purgatory, the subject of the next *cantica* in Dante's *Commedia*, and a place in which the tortuous journey of confronting one's sins leads to redemption. There is a suggestion here, I think, of a method by which to confront trauma. Whether purgatory is even possible for the combat traumatized is beyond the scope of this paper, but it holds some hope that the historical Dante, a combat veteran himself, was able to imagine some final state other than Satan's.

"After the final no there comes a yes  
and on that yes the future world depends."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," in *Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, (New York: The Library of America, 1997) 224.

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