

2017

Medieval and Futuristic Hells: The Influence of Dante on Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream"

Jeremy Withers

Iowa State University, withers@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs

 Part of the [Medieval Studies Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs/203. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Medieval and Futuristic Hells: The Influence of Dante on Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream"

Abstract

Even though some scholars have identified important precursors to science fiction (hereafter abbreviated as sf) in premodern genres such as epic, the fantastic voyage, and utopia, pre-Enlightenment eras are mostly absent in many critical discussions of the origins of – and the important influences on – recent sf. Additionally, many sf scholars and authors often emphasize the futurity of the genre, not its orientation and links to the past. For example, Harlan Ellison (whose story is a main focus of this essay) once defined sf as: “Anything that deals in even the smallest extrapolative manner with the future of man and his societies, with the future of science and/or its effects on us.”

However, earlier time periods such as the Middle Ages have indeed been quite fruitful for contemporary sf. This essay explores the many ways in which one of the most well-known works of medieval literature – Dante Alighieri's early fourteenth-century poem *Inferno* – served as a powerful influence on one of the more famous texts to come out of the 1960s New Wave movement in sf: Harlan Ellison's fascinating and disturbing 1967 short story “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.” With its violent imagery, frank sexuality, unconventional metaphors, and experimental form, Ellison's story is a quintessentially New Wave text. Many writers and scholars also associate the New Wave with a conscious attempt by the authors of that era to stop looking only to previous sf authors for inspiration, and to instead begin drawing upon avant-garde artists like the Surrealist painter Salvador Dalí and the Beat novelist William S. Burroughs. This new iconoclastic attitude toward previous sf is well represented by the New Wave author J. G. Ballard's quip that “[g]reat author though he was, I'm convinced that H. G. Wells has had a disastrous influence on the subsequent course of science fiction.” But even though in a preface for the story “I Have No Mouth” Ellison declares that he “had to go into the future to write the story,” what he actually had to do was go into the medieval past to write it.

Disciplines

Medieval Studies | Modern Literature | Other English Language and Literature

Comments

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published as “Medieval and Futuristic Hells: The Influence of Dante on Ellison's ‘I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream,’” *Studies in Medievalism* 26 (2017): 117-130. Posted with permission.

Medieval and Futuristic Hells: The Influence of Dante on Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream"

Even though some scholars have identified important precursors to science fiction (hereafter abbreviated as sf) in premodern genres such as epic, the fantastic voyage, and utopia, pre-Enlightenment eras are mostly absent in many critical discussions of the origins of – and the important influences on – recent sf.¹ Additionally, many sf scholars and authors often emphasize the futurity of the genre, not its orientation and links to the past. For example, Harlan Ellison (whose story is a main focus of this essay) once defined sf as: “Anything that deals in even the smallest extrapolative manner with the *future* of man and his societies, with the *future* of science and/or its effects on us.”²

However, earlier time periods such as the Middle Ages have indeed been quite fruitful for contemporary sf.³ This essay explores the many ways in which one of the

¹ On premodern predecessors to sf, see *The Road to Science Fiction: From Gilgamesh to Wells*, ed. James Gunn (New York: Mentor, 1977); Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2005), 21-31.

² Ellison's definition appears in the entry “Science Fiction” in Gary K. Wolfe's *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 108-111 (110), emphasis added.

³ One obvious example of the medieval influence on sf is Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s celebrated *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, a 1960 post-apocalyptic novel depicting a nuclear war that causes society to revert back to something akin to the Christian Middle Ages where monastic orders again flourish and help preserve civilization's knowledge.

most well-known works of medieval literature – Dante Alighieri’s early-14th century poem *Inferno* – served as a powerful influence on one of the more famous texts to come out of the 1960s New Wave movement in sf: Harlan Ellison’s fascinating and disturbing 1967 short story “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.” With its violent imagery, frank sexuality, unconventional metaphors, and experimental form, Ellison’s story is a quintessentially New Wave text.⁴ Many writers and scholars also associate the New Wave with a conscious attempt by the authors of that era to stop looking only to previous sf authors for inspiration, and to instead begin drawing upon avant-garde artists like the Surrealist painter Salvador Dali and the Beat novelist William S. Burroughs.⁵ This new iconoclastic attitude towards previous sf is well represented by the New Wave author J. G. Ballard’s quip that “[g]reat author though he was, I’m convinced that H. G. Wells has

⁴ Adam Roberts sums up the New Wave as “a loose affiliation of writers from the 1960s and 1970s who, one way or another, reacted against the conventions of traditional SF to produce avant-garde, radical or fractured science fictions,” and then goes on to quote Damien Broderick as defining the New Wave as “a reaction against genre exhaustion.” Roberts, *History*, 230-231.

⁵ On the influence of Dali and Burroughs on key New Wave figures like J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock, see the following: the essays “The Coming of the Unconscious” and “Myth Maker of the Twentieth Century,” both in J. G. Ballard, *User’s Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Picador, 1996); “‘To Write for the Space Age’: Interview with Michael Moorcock by Mark P. Williams,” Reality Studio, December 8, 2008, <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/michael-moorcock-on-william-s-burroughs> (accessed November 2015).

had a disastrous influence on the subsequent course of science fiction.”⁶ But even though in a preface for the story “I Have No Mouth” Ellison declares that he “had to go into the future to write the story,” what he actually had to do was go into the medieval past to write it.⁷ Thus, even though the Middle Ages might be perceived by many to be nowhere near as fertile of ground for inspiring experimental works of sf as Dali or Burroughs, for Ellison (as this essay will show) a medieval masterpiece like Dante’s *Inferno* indeed provides ample inspiration when crafting bold new sf works.⁸ And it is Ellison’s repeated invocations of *Inferno* (at the same time that he rejects all of that poem’s underlying sense of divine order and possibility for redemption) that helps make “I Have No Mouth”

⁶ J. G. Ballard, “Which Way to Inner Space?,” in *A User’s Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Picador, 1996), 195-198 (197).

⁷ Harlan Ellison, “Forward: How Science Fiction Saved Me From a Life of Crime,” in *I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream* (New York: Edgeworks Abbey, 2009), 6.

⁸ In a short chapter from his history of science fiction titled “Interlude: 400-1600,” Roberts argues that the overt religiosity and the emphasis on non-material worlds of much literature written in the Middle Ages (including Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which Roberts specifically discusses) renders such works void when it comes to precursors to science fiction. See Roberts, *History*, 32-35. However, at least one scholar has suggested there is indeed something proto-sf about Dante’s *Inferno*. Merritt Abrash argues that Dante’s Hell serves as a precursor for the fully mechanized environments that eventually become standard fare in much sf. See Merritt Abrash, “Dante’s Hell as an Ideal Mechanical Environment,” in *Clockwork Worlds: Mechanized Environments in SF*, ed. Richard D. Erlich and Thomas P. Dunn (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 21-25.

as chilling and memorable of a story as it is.

As many readers have been quick to realize, Ellison's "I Have No Mouth" is a richly inter-textual work. For example, the story is quite blatant about its borrowing from world literature through such images as a gigantic bird conjured from Norse mythology, as well as through its inclusion of Descartes' famous dictum "cogito ergo sum" within the computer "talk-fields" that periodically rupture the text. Several aspects of its plot – like the long journey in search of food and the captivity in the belly of a beast – are clearly lifted from biblical sources such as *The Book of Exodus* and *The Book of Jonah*. Furthermore, scholars like Joseph Francavilla perceive in "I Have No Mouth" a borrowing from the Prometheus myth, and Darren Harris-Fain argues that readers might note additional literary echoes in Ellison's story ranging from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Hesiod's *Theogony*, and from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to H. G. Wells's short story "The Country of the Blind."⁹

However, one text strikingly absent from in-depth discussions of intertextuality in Ellison's story about a supercomputer named AM who becomes sentient, then destroys most all of humanity except five people it preserves to torment for eternity, is *Inferno*, Dante's canonical poem about justice and torment. There are, of course, significant divergences between Dante and Ellison's texts, not the least of which is Ellison's own

⁹ Joseph Francavilla, "Mythic Hells in Harlan Ellison's Science Fiction," in *Phoenix From the Ashes: Literature of the Remade World*, ed. Carl B. Yoke (New York: Greenwood, 1987), 157-164; Darren Harris-Fain, "Created in the Image of God: The Narrator and the Computer in Harlan Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,'" *Extrapolation* 32:2 (1991): 143-155.

insistence that (unlike Dante's devout text) his own story is not interested in God *per se*, but rather with "the dichotomous nature of the human race," a nature which "includes the demon in us."¹⁰ But as this article argues, there are multiple interesting and illuminating overlaps between these two texts' depictions of a hellish underworld. Put simply, something strikingly Dantesque permeates the story, as Ellison himself acknowledges when in a preface he describes the story as about "five poor bastards living in a kind of Dante's *Inferno* inside the belly of a computer."¹¹ Particularly, it is in significant aspects of the story such as the way in which AM metes out its punishment to the five surviving humans and in certain details of the story's climactic ending set within an ice cavern that betray an intentional invocation of *Inferno* on the part of Ellison.

However, the only explicit references to Dante in scholarly analyses of Ellison's "I Have No Mouth" that I have found are the following two brief, overly general references. First, John B. Ower states that the "similarity [between AM and Satan] is emphasized by...the infernal imagery which makes Ellison's story reminiscent of Dante or Hieronymus Bosch."¹² Secondly, Ellen Weil and Gary K. Wolfe observe: "Although AM falls short of the godlike power to resurrect the dead, part of his Dantesque punishment consists of altering his victims' minds and bodies."¹³ Neither of these two

¹⁰ Harlan Ellison, "Memoir: I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," *Starship* 39 (Summer 1980): 6-13 (10).

¹¹ Ellison, "Forward," 6.

¹² John B. Ower, "Manacle-Forged Minds: Two Images of the Computer in Science-Fiction," *Diogenes* 85 (1974): 47-61 (58).

¹³ Ellen Weil and Gary K. Wolfe, *Harlan Ellison: The Edge of Forever* (Columbus: Ohio

studies, however, mentions nor analyzes in any detail the deep borrowings Ellison makes from Dante in his famous story.

Yet, Ellison's *oeuvre* betrays a career-long fascination with depicting infernal underworlds, both literal and metaphorical.¹⁴ Philip M. Rubens argues that Ellison, ever the eclectic and wide-ranging reader, demonstrates throughout his writings (but particularly in a collection like *Deathbird Stories*) "a set of circumstances, a group of characters, and a specific landscape that echo many of the traditional journeys to hell - from patristic literature to Norse myth."¹⁵ Although Rubens doesn't go into any detail with pointing out specifically Dantean influences on Ellison, he affirms that when

State University Press, 2002), 143-144.

¹⁴ Regarding the metaphorical variety, we can mention here *Memos from Purgatory*, a book Ellison describes in his prologue as telling "of two periods in my life: ten weeks in purgatory...and 24 hours in hell." The former describes his stint in a youth gang while researching his first novel; the latter describes a brief experience he had with incarceration for firearm possession in Manhattan's infamous jail known colloquially as "the Tombs." Harlan Ellison, *Memos from Purgatory* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1975), 26.

¹⁵ Philip M. Rubens, "Descents into Private Hells: Harlan Ellison's 'Psy-Fi,'" *Extrapolation* 20:4 (1979): 378-385 (378). In a surprising omission, Rubens refrains from discussing "I Have No Mouth" in relationship to Ellison's overall interest in hellish landscapes, choosing instead to focus on the stories "Delusion for a Dragon Slayer," "Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans," "The Place with No Name," and "The Deathbird."

describing hellish worlds “one can hardly ignore the epic descents that pervade Western literature from the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries to Dante’s *Inferno*.”¹⁶ Furthermore, Ellison’s himself specifically references Dante’s epic poem elsewhere in his oeuvre. For example, in *Watching*, a 1989 compilation of his film essays and film reviews, Ellison describes a memory from his youth in which a woman working a movie theater ticket booth was so attractive “that merely laying down a dime for a ducat became an act of sexual congress intense enough to send the Rev. Jimmy Swaggart to the eighth and innermost circle of Dante’s inferno.”¹⁷ Such a reference suggests a familiarity with *Inferno* that goes beyond a shallow, popular culture understanding of the medieval work. In short, for anyone like Ellison who is interested in contributing to the cultural history of representing hell, Dante clearly towers as an unavoidable influence.¹⁸

¹⁶ Rubens, “Descents into Private Hells,” 379.

¹⁷ Harlan Ellison, *Watching* (Los Angeles: Underwood-Miller, 1989), vii. In a further possible connection between Dante and Ellison, Weil and Wolfe suggest that the onyx mountain that rises “out of hell” in Ellison’s story “The Deathbird” is influenced by the mountain in Dante’s *Purgatory*. See Weil and Wolfe, *Harlan Ellison*, 176.

¹⁸ One other text demonstrating that people have often noted a continuity between Dante and Ellison is an anthology titled *Dante’s Disciples* that includes a story by Ellison called “Chatting with Anubis.” The book’s introduction states that the genesis of this anthology was the book’s editors asking a group of sf, fantasy, and horror writers to “write stories inspired by Dante’s ‘Inferno,’ in other words, to use Dante as a muse in this waning, sputtering, terrifying century of ours” (vi). Ellison’s particular contribution, however, makes no direct references to Dante or *Inferno*, and is instead about a brief encounter two

Moving into the story itself, let us first examine the similarities between God's logic of punishment as depicted in the Dante's *Inferno*, and the logic of punishment discernible in AM's methods in "I Have No Mouth." In Dante's vision of Hell, the retributive logic works according to the principle of *contrapasso*, that is, by means of a punishment that is often either analogous to or resembles the sin committed, or that is the direct antithesis of the sin committed.¹⁹ The word *contrapasso* itself only occurs in Canto XXVIII of *Inferno*, when the renowned Troubadour poet Bertran de Born declares: "In me you see the perfect *contrapasso*!" (line 142).²⁰ Earlier in this canto, the pilgrim Dante and his guide Virgil have discovered Bertran in a state of eternal decapitation and carrying around his own head, a punishment meted out for his sin of "cut[ting] the bonds of those joined," that is, because Bertran sowed discord between such people as Prince Henry and his father, King Henry II of England. Bertran's punishment neatly parallels the crime: just as he severed the natural bond that should exist between father and son, and between prince and king, his head is now unnaturally and ghoulishly severed forever

people have with the Egyptian god Anubis during an underground archeological expedition. See *Dante's Disciples*, ed. Peter Crowther and Edward E. Kramer (Clarkson, GA: White Wolf Publishing, 1995).

¹⁹ For further discussions of *contrapasso*, see *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (NY: Garland Publishing, 2000), 219-222; Peter Armour, "Dante's *Contrapasso*: Contexts and Texts," *Italian Studies* 55 (2000): 1-20.

²⁰ Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Inferno: The Indiana Critical Edition*, translated and edited by Mark Musa (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995). All quotations from *Inferno* are from this edition.

from his body. For an example of antithetical punishment with the *contrapasso*, we might recall the depiction of the sorcerers and soothsayers in Canto XX, who due to their sin of claiming to have a God-like ability to see ahead into the future, must now suffer eternally the torment and indignity of having “their faces [look] down on their backs /...the tears their eyes [shed] / stream[ing] down to wet their buttocks at the cleft” (lines 13, 23-24). Arrogantly claiming an ability to look ahead in time, the soothsayers must now forever look grotesquely behind in space.

As with the sprawling population of sufferers in *Inferno*, the torment inflicted upon Ellison’s five main characters in “I Have No Mouth” follows a retributive logic similar to Dante’s *contrapasso*. Put another way, the punishment that the characters in “I Have No Mouth” receive from AM is not inscrutable and random. However, the one clear difference that we need to point out is that Dante clearly depicts his sinners as being punished for sins they have directly committed themselves. God, enacting His strict form of divine justice, punishes the denizens of hell for having broken His laws and commandments. But as Harris-Fain points out, a biblical misquotation by the narrator Ted in “I Have No Mouth” alludes to the Old Testament notion of a wrathful God willing to “[visit] the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation,” a harsher view of justice that ignores direct personal culpability and with which Dante obviously doesn’t sympathize.²¹ Rather than alluding to specific sins each character trapped in AM’s “belly” has committed, Ellison instead depicts AM as

²¹ The biblical quotation is from Exodus 20:5. Harris-Fain discusses Ted’s oblique reference to this biblical passage, and the implications it has for summoning forth an image of AM as a jealous God-figure in his article “Created in the Image of God.”

subjecting his five survivors to Dantesque torments despite any direct, personal involvement in what we would (theologically speaking) perceive as sin. In fact, the demented God-figure AM appears to be tormenting the humans under its²² control because of the “sins of their fathers,” that is, because the five survivors are paying the horrible price for previous human beings having created the individual supercomputers that eventually linked up to form AM, and hence they are paying the price for other people having created the sentience that AM so abhors.

However, even though Ellison does not depict punishments as directly caused by personal guilt, the punishments he does depict still follow a certain logic of the *contrapasso* in that the characters are subjected to a punishment that, most often, perversely inverts that person’s personality or defining characteristic in some way. For example, Benny, a character about whom we are told was in the past a brilliant, handsome scientist, has been reduced by AM’s incessant torture into a drooling lunatic. That is, like the soothsayers in Dante who claim to see far forward but are now reduced to looking backward, Benny has been changed into his antithesis: AM reduces this once-eloquent and beautiful genius into a slobbering fool. Furthermore, we are told in the story that Benny is homosexual, but that he has been changed by AM into an ape-like creature “big in the privates” (470) who must constantly service the only female in the group, Ellen.²³ AM, apparently insane with jealousy over the sexuality it can never possess,

²² Even though the story’s narrator Ted often uses the masculine pronoun “he” when referring to AM, I find it makes more sense to use “it” throughout this article since AM is a computer (albeit one that has achieved sentience).

²³ Harlan Ellison, “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream,” originally published in *IF*:

torments this homosexual character by making him forever engage in a form of sexuality to which he is fundamentally averse.

Ellen, if we can take her at her word, claims at one point to the other survivors to have been sexually inexperienced and mostly chaste in her life before AM's torture began. As with Benny, AM metes out an antithetical form of *contrapasso* punishment to her: she is forced to now have sex with all the men trapped in AM. The formerly modest woman has been altered into the harlot. Again, due to AM's ungovernable jealousy over human sexuality and human forms of closeness that it can never possess, the ruthless supercomputer perhaps punishes Ellen for her "sin" of not embracing the privilege of human sexuality enough.²⁴ As a result, AM sentences her to endure the degradation of endless promiscuity.

The character of Garrister, we are told, was at one time a conscientious objector and antiwar activist. He was a person who stood up passionately for the causes he believed in. As with Ellen and Benny, AM transforms Garrister into his antithesis. In "I Have No Mouth," we glimpse him now only as a "shoulder shrugger" (474). In fact, this punishment of Garrister appears to have found its inspiration in a direct inversion of a scene from Canto III of Dante's *Inferno*, a scene set in the vestibule that leads to Hell

Worlds of Science Fiction (March 1967), reprinted in *Science Fiction: An Historical Anthology*, ed. Eric Rabkin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), 467-483. All quotations are from this reprinted version of the text.

²⁴ Ower argues that "AM's degradation of the sexual lives of his subjects reveals his jealousy of the physical pleasure and the spiritual fulfillment of human love." See Ower, "Manacle-Forged Minds," 59-60.

proper. Here, the pilgrim-character Dante and his guide Virgil encounter the place for people who lived a life “with no blame and with no praise” (line 36) and a life “neither faithful nor unfaithful to their God” (line 38). In other words, they lived as constant fence-sitters and non-committers, or in the words of Ellison when describing his character Garrister, as perpetual “shoulder shruggers.” As punishment, Dante’s God commands that his shoulder shruggers chase, in perpetuity, a banner “rushing ahead, whirling with aimless speed” (line 53). In Garrister, therefore, Ellison gives us an inversion of Dante’s scenario that is itself an inversion.

What we see, then, as the significant difference between Dante and Ellison’s use of the *contrapasso* form of punishment is that, for Dante, God exists and provides a sense of divine order behind the many forms of punishment that Virgil and the pilgrim witness. Furthermore, the vengeance embodied by *Inferno* is counter-balanced by the mercy, divine love, and redemption found in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, the next two parts of the tripartite *Commedia*. Thus, as Valerie Allen has written of another noteworthy modern retelling of *Inferno*, David Fincher’s 1995 film *Seven* (sometimes written as *Se7en*): “Dante’s theme is redemption, a quality Fincher’s movie noticeably lacks.”²⁵ Ellison’s story too, like Fincher’s film, lacks redemption (with the possible exception of Ted’s final action in the story, discussed below). His story depicts a world in which humanity is made to pay the horrible price for putting too much faith in their technology and for giving themselves over too much to their violent tendencies when they started the world war that ultimately led to the creation of AM. What Allen has written of *Seven* can apply

²⁵ Valerie Allen, “*Se7en*: Medieval Justice, Modern Justice,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43:6 (2010): 1150-1172 (1154).

equally to “I Have No Mouth.” Allen writes of Fincher’s film, “[r]etribution replaces mercy.”²⁶ Likewise, the harsh, retaliatory justice meted out by AM for the crime for which the five human survivors are not even personally responsible (i.e. the creation of AM) bespeaks a grim world indeed, one in which no real sense of purpose or mercy lies behind the violent, perverse punishments.

Despite a key difference between Ellison’s and Dante’s punishments discussed above, one additional similarity between the forms of punishment meted out in *Inferno* and in AM’s “belly” is that both possess a tendency to eradicate the identity and individuality of the sufferer. For example, in Canto XVII Dante the pilgrim encounters the usurers who are recognizable only by means of a pouch “around each sinner’s neck.../ [and] each of a different color, with [their family’s] coat of arms” (lines 55-56). As Mark Musa explains in a footnote to lines 55-56: “Apparently the usurers are unrecognizable through facial characteristics because their total concern with their material goods has caused them to lose their individuality.” Even when Dante meets fellow Florentines in hell and some people that he personally knew before their death, he often cannot recognize them immediately, for their punishment has so distorted their appearance. As a further instance of this, we might recall how in Third Circle of hell, the circle of the gluttons, the pilgrim encounters the Florentine Ciaccio. But Dante does not recognize his fellow countryman, and says to him: “The pain you suffer here perhaps / disfigures you beyond all recognition: / I can’t remember seeing you before” (Canto VI, lines 43-45).

Whereas God decrees that Dante’s sufferers lose their individuality as a form of *contrapasso* punishment for the unchecked willfulness and individualism that led them to

²⁶ Allen, “*Se7en*,” 1157.

sin in the first place, AM in “I Have No Mouth” takes away individuality and identity out of a misplaced and perverse vengeance against the humans for the “crimes of their fathers.” Noteworthy examples of AM’s desire to efface the identity of his captured humans include the above-mentioned alteration of Benny’s face to become more simian, as well as AM’s curious fondness for giving bizarre new names to people, such as when AM gives one character the name of Nimdock, a “name the machine had forced him to use, because AM amused itself with strange sounds” (468). We never learn this character’s former name; hence, his real identity has been thoroughly expunged by AM.

But the most salient example of Ellison’s depiction of torment that obliterates the person’s former identity in a Dantesque way is surely Ted’s chilling alteration at the end of story due to his role in killing the other humans, an action that robbed AM of its “toys.” More so than any of Dante’s sufferers, Ted becomes a thoroughly inhuman thing, for he is transformed by AM into “a great soft jelly thing” with “no mouth,” “rubbery appendages,” “legless humps” and “white holes filled by fog” (482) where his eyes once were. In fact, Ted’s gruesome punishment here at the end of the story appears to carry a *contrapasso* logic of its own, for Ted throughout the narrative suffers from a paranoid narcissism of sorts, as evidenced by his conviction that the other survivors are constantly thinking about and plotting against him. As Ellison himself claims, Ted’s killing of Ellen and the others in the ice cave is intended to represent “an act of transcendent heroism,”²⁷ a sort of redemptive moment for humanity, but to AM such a heroic and redemptive act by Ted surely constitutes an unpardonable act of individualism and self-autonomy. As punishment for this act, Ted “has lost his distinctive ‘differences’ and identification with

²⁷ Ellison, “Memoir: I Have No Mouth,” 9.

humanity and has regressed into an undifferentiated blob inside the belly of AM.”²⁸ Put simply, it is altogether fitting, in a *contrapasso* kind of way, that in retribution for Ted’s individualistic and defiant killing of the others AM erases so thoroughly Ted’s cherished sense of self and individuality.

It is also significant and noteworthy that for both Ellison and Dante their respective visions of hell overlap by being distinctively multi-sensory in their visions of the persecution of the damned. That is, the horrific place each author imagines offends and assails as many of the senses as possible. For characters who function mainly as observers, such as Dante’s pilgrim and occasionally Ellison’s five survivors, it is most often visual forms of torment that distress and chasten them, such as in the opening scene of “I Have No Mouth” when four of the survivors stumble upon the disturbing illusion created by AM of Gorrister’s body. This harrowing visual tableau depicts the body hanging upside down, drained of its blood by “a precise incision made from ear to ear under the lantern jaw” (467). Dante’s *Inferno* brims too with strikingly visual forms of torment that the pilgrim must bear witness to, such as the sight of people being eternally boiled in hot pitch (Canto XXII). Of course, from the perspective of the damned who are actually submerged in this boiling pitch, this torment represents not a visual one but a tactile one. Such tactile forms of punishment are found in abundance in both texts, such as when AM scorches Benny’s eyes into “two soft, moist pools of pus-like jelly,” leaving him “crying piteously” (471), or when fierce winds batter people in Canto V of *Inferno*.

²⁸ Joseph Francavilla, “The Concept of the Divided Self in Harlan Ellison’s ‘I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream’ and ‘Shatterday,’” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 6:2-3 (1994): 107-25 (118).

It should be noted that this latter form of tactile and visualized torment – people being buffeted by fierce winds – finds a direct counterpart in “I Have No Mouth.” In *Inferno*’s Canto V, powerful winds constantly sweep up the lustful – Dido, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy – in a manner that resembles how such people gave over their lives and their volition to sexual passion. In such a way “all those who sin in lust have been condemned,” Dante writes, “those who make reason slave to appetite” (38-39). Similarly, Ted describes how the captives in Ellison’s tale are hit by a hurricane “with the force of a glacier thundering into the sea” and by winds “that tore at us, flinging us back the way we had come, down the twisting, computer-lined corridors of the darkway” (475).

Interestingly, this punishing maelstrom singles out the character of Ellen for affliction, for the winds lift her up, toss her around, bloody her face, and eventually separate her from the others. This buffeting of Ellen (and the others) by the hurricane is a significant moment of Dantean allusion in the story, yet ultimately an ambiguous one. For if in Dante the winds lashed the lustful, AM’s meting out of this punishment most severely to Ellen lends some credence to Ted’s suggestion that Ellen is being dishonest when she insists “she had been a virgin only twice removed before AM grabbed her and brought her down here” (474). On the other hand, perhaps AM is just once again displaying its perversity and the lack of any order beneath its punishments by penalizing Ellen for being something it has turned her into, that is, for becoming “more of a slut than she had ever been” (474) after she is forced to be the last living female amid four male survivors.

In addition to the above visual and tactile torments, Dante and Ellison both portray their respective hells as assaulting additional senses as well. Rank and offensive

smells also waft through their underworlds. For example, in *Inferno* when Dante and Virgil are continuing on into the Sixth Circle, they must actually pause at one point in order to “grow accustomed to [the] vile fumes,” fumes described a few lines earlier as a “disgusting overflow of stench / the deep abyss was vomiting” forth (Canto XI, lines 4-12). Similarly, as Joann P. Cobb has recognized, Ellison’s futuristic hell is also strikingly olfactory, for its smells include “the stench of matted wet fur, charred wood...rotting orchids, sour milk, sulphur, rancid butter” and so forth.²⁹ Furthermore, Dante and Ellison’s underworlds both share horrific auditory elements, as glimpsed by Ellison’s references to sounds like “the shriek of babies being ground beneath blue-hot rollers” and “the lunatic laugh of a fat woman,” or to AM’s disturbingly juvenile snicker as it voyeuristically spies on sexual acts between the surviving humans. As a complement to its visual and olfactory repugnance, Dante’s hell also includes references to “[w]eird shrieks of lamentation pierc[ing] through [the pilgrim] / like arrow-shafts whose tips are barbed with pity” (Canto XXIX, lines 43-44), as well as to the mighty blasts of the giant Nimrod’s horn, a sound “which would have made a thunder-clap sound dim” (Canto XXXI, line 13).

Ellison even appears to be trying to one-up Dante. This attempt to out-Dante Dante is performed by depicting torment via abhorrent tastes as well, such as when AM sends down manna to the five survivors that tastes “like boiled boar urine” and when the humans, near the point of starvation, are forced to consume “[t]hick, ropey” worms in

²⁹ Joann P. Cobb, “Medium and Message in Ellison’s ‘I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,’” in *The Intersection of Science Fiction and Philosophy: Critical Studies*, ed. Robert E. Meyers (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 159-167 (163).

order to avoid starvation. In sum, both Dante and Ellison's hells constitute an all-out attack on the senses of their denizens, visitors, and readers, with Ellison's attack going a bit further through the inclusion of repulsive tastes as well.

Yet one of the most striking parallels between Dante and Ellison's texts is their ghoulish and memorable depiction of cannibalism occurring in their respective underworlds. In Dante, as the pilgrim approaches the end of his journey through the nine circles of hell, he finds himself on the frozen lake of Cocytus, a region in which the traitors are punished. There, as described in Cantos XXXII and XXXIII of the poem, Dante encounters Count Ugolino, a figure who the pilgrim and Virgil witness viciously attacking another person, having "sunk his teeth / into the other's neck, just beneath the skull," like "a man with hungry teeth tears into bread" (XXXII, 127-129). Archbishop Ruggieri, the victim being consumed by Ugolino, incurs the latter's wrath due to having betrayed Ugolino and then subsequently imprisoning him in a tower along with his sons and grandsons.

Count Ugolino often engraves himself upon the minds of the readers of *Inferno*, for his gruesome gnawing upon his enemy has served as an unforgettable image of a man who, albeit depicted in the act of consuming, is himself utterly consumed by his own wrath and lust for vengeance. As William Franke has argued, what is especially ironic and tragic about Ugolino is how the story of his imprisonment and death includes a reference to how his own sons selflessly (and in a symbolically sacramental fashion) offered themselves up as food to their starving father. Franke asserts, however, that Ugolino reveals himself to be a person "unable to respond with any genuine human emotion to his sons' deeply moving offer" and remains instead "forever blinded by hatred

and vengefulness.”³⁰ As soon as Ugolino concludes the short narration of his life, imprisonment, and death to the pilgrim and to Virgil, and immediately after referencing how his sons selflessly offered up their bodies as nourishment, Ugolino “glar[es] down in rage, / attack[ing] again the wretched skull [of Archbishop Ruggieri] with his teeth / sharp as a dog’s, and as fit for grinding bones” (XXXIII, lines 76-78).

Ellison too depicts a similar instance of cannibalism near the end of the journey of his “pilgrims,” a journey that was long and exhausting yet undertaken in the hopes of finding a rumored cache of food hidden in some ice caves. It turns out that food does indeed reside in these caves in the form of a stack of canned goods; however, AM, in its typically creative and cruel way, has left the humans no tool with which to open the cans. As a result, Benny goes “completely mad with rage” (480), and begins “eating Gorrister’s face...his hands locked around Gorrister’s head like a nutcracker, and his mouth ripping at the tender skin of Gorrister’s cheek” (481). Although we might initially expect Benny’s bestial act to have been brought on by the maddening effects of hunger, in his reference to Benny becoming “mad with rage” Ellison appears to have something more Dantesque in mind. That is, a compulsion for vengeance (similar to Ugolino’s) appears to be the catalyst for Benny’s actions here, and since AM exists as essentially impervious to human attack, Benny unleashes his fury and rage upon whatever target he can. Gorrister, unfortunately, was simply standing too close by and in the wrong place at the wrong time.

³⁰ William Franke, “The Death and Damnation of Poetry in *Inferno* XXXI-XXXIV: Ugolino and Narrative as an Instrument of Revenge,” *Romance Studies* 28:1 (2010): 27-35 (32, 33).

As many scholars have pointed out, AM's own penchant for cruelty and vengeance appears to be merely an extension of the cruelty and vengeance humans initially created their supercomputers to mete out on a global scale.³¹ As "I Have No Mouth" informs us, the individual supercomputers that eventually linked up by themselves and became sentient (thereby creating AM) were initially created by people to carry out "a big war, a very complex war" (472) that had grown too vast and complicated for humans themselves to oversee. Thus, engendered by humans working in a spirit of utmost malice and vengeance, AM (unsurprisingly) functions only in a similarly malicious and vengeful spirit. It is altogether fitting, therefore, that with a sly wink to the informed reader, Ellison references here Dante's image *par excellence* of uncontrollable, unmitigated retaliation and anger: Ugolino's eternally cannibalistic eating of his despised enemy, Archbishop Ruggieri. Such a revelation of Benny's deeper self showcases the violence and the thirst for vengeance at all costs lurking at humanity's core and which led to the expanding world war that tragically led to AM's eventual creation.

Another parallel between the endings of Dante's poem and Ellison's story is that both texts culminate in a forbidding icy landscape: as mentioned above, *Inferno* ends on the frozen lake of Cocytus, and "I Have No Mouth" concludes in the ice caverns, a desolate setting consisting of "[h]orizonless thousands of miles in which the ice had

³¹ For example, this is a point H. Bruce Franklin makes when he observes that "instead of mechanically carrying out its orders to exterminate the human race, AM develops an emotion appropriate to its purpose: it infinitely *hates* its human creators." H. Bruce Franklin, *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 210 (emphasis in the original).

formed in blue and silver flashes” (480). For Dante’s readers, arriving at hell’s lowest and deepest point only to discover ice, instead of the burning sulphur and fire of the popular tradition of hell, might come as something of a surprise. But here, in the prison-house of traitors whose crimes Dante finds the most abominable and most retrograde to the essence of humanity, these sinners are “as far from the warmth of divine love as [they] can get,”³² and therefore the icy setting is altogether appropriate. In addition to Count Ugolino and his gruesome meal, the pilgrim and his guide encounter here on the ice of Cocytus sufferers who are deprived of the ability to find emotional release for their grief in crying, for it is so frigid that their tears freeze into icicles upon their eyes.

The frosty setting functions appropriately for the climax of Ellison’s tale as well. Here, we see the five human survivors at their most exhausted, enraged, and desperate in the story. Like Dante’s traitors wedged into the lowest depths of hell, the five humans in “I Have No Mouth” appear now as utterly hopeless and forsaken. Salvation of any kind seems far away indeed for Ellison’s characters, thereby increasing the parallelism with Dante’s poem. In other words, Dante and Ellison’s frozen settings complement one another due to both of these frigid landscapes symbolizing an utterly loveless, Godless, unredemptive place.

Interestingly, however, the ice caverns exist not just as Godless for the suffering *humans*, for it is here that AM too experiences an absence of God, by which I mean that it is here in the ice caves that AM learns it is not God (as much as it might pretend otherwise). After Ted and Ellen complete their swift mercy-killings via improvised “huge ice-spear[s]” of the other three characters, Ted muses: “Three of them were dead, could

³² Robert J. Di Pietro, “*Inferno XXXIII*,” *Lectura Dantis* 6 (1990): 419-427 (419).

not be revived. [AM] could keep us alive...but he was *not* God. He could not bring them back” (481). Just as Dante’s Cocytus represents a state as far removed from God as possible, surely at this moment after AM’s “toys have been taken from him” (481) by Ted (with Ellen’s help) and AM experiences its own lack of power to revive the dead, the malevolent supercomputer - like Dante’s frozen-eyed sufferers - is forced to confront its own painful distance from God.

The 1960s New Wave movement with which Ellison’s name is often associated earned much of its notoriety for its boasts of reinventing sf and of performing something wholly new within the genre. Spokesmen for the New Wave such as J. G. Ballard, writing at the dawn of the movement, envision a new type of sf that will “jettison [sf’s] present narrative forms and plots.”³³ Similarly, the influential New Wave editor and writer Michael Moorcock expressed hope in the early 1960s that authors will begin submitting manuscripts to sf magazines that do not “imitate slavishly what has gone before.”³⁴ But when some sf movements (and arguably all artistic movements) proclaim they are doing something radically new, they often are not.³⁵ The New Wave writer

³³ Ballard, “Which Way to Inner Space?,” 197.

³⁴ Michael Moorcock, “Play With Feeling,” *New Worlds Science Fiction* 43, no. 129 (April 1963): 2-3, 123-127 (124).

³⁵ For a discussion of how 1980s cyberpunk, despite its claims similar to the New Wave’s regarding its newness and originality, also borrows deeply from its predecessors, see Gary Westfahl, “‘The Gernsback Continuum’: William Gibson in the Context of Science Fiction” in *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative*, ed. George Slusser and Tom Shippey (Athens, GA: U. of Georgia Press, 1992), 88-108.

Ellison, despite the shocking newness of a story like “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” walks a well-worn literary path and participates in a long artistic tradition of depicting hellish underworlds when he borrows so heavily from a medieval predecessor like Dante. Like the soothsayers of *Inferno* discussed above, Ellison might claim to be looking into the future, but his story reveals him destined to look backwards, backwards into the medieval past for guidance, insight, and inspiration.