

## Dante's Inferno – A few thoughts

The Inferno is not an infinite realm, Dante is very clear about its geographical limits. Yet it is eternal, going around and around, producing, and sustaining its own energies, its fires and winds, its regions of boiling heat and freezing cold. The punishments themselves are based on eternal repetition. There is no peace, no hope, no rest.

The Inferno has no exterior, no source of light apart from the burning of its many fires. What do we see in their flickering warmth? The green pastures of Limbo, the rivers, rocky paths, figures in the swirling winds, the deep red of boiling blood, the bright yellow of burning sand, a dark, dense wood, and the high walls of the City of Dis. Below Dis are torch-lit trenches, presided over by demon guardians, and finally, the cold tones of Lake Cocytus, the 'river of mourning'.

Dante brings all these regions to life inside a vast, downward pointing, conical pit of ten decreasing Circles. Its tip lies exactly at the centre of the earth. Crimes are categorised within these Circles, which are then organised into larger Regions. As we descend, punishments become increasingly refined and torturous, as crimes become more complex and malicious. The Inferno's architecture creates a perfect duality of narrative and structure.

The great City of Dis is the Fifth Circle of Inferno, marking the halfway point. Above Dis, is the region of punishments for crimes reflecting the weakness of human nature to resist our desires, impulses, and powerful emotions. Then, just below the city, is the region of punishments for rage producing crimes of violence, reflecting a much darker side of our bestial natures.

Then we arrive at the Eighth Circle, the *Malbowges*, roughly translated as, *the evil trenches* or *pouches*. This is yet another world, of punishments for fraud and betrayal, premeditated acts against others for personal satisfaction or gain. These trenches form an independent network, like a war zone, within the overall logic of the Inferno.

I was inspired by this region to create *Pandemonium: The Evil Pouches*, a place run by demons, who administer the punishments directly. It was exciting to attempt to realise visually a structure like the Eighth Circle. It evolved into a kind of golden bowl in the painting.

The Lake of Cocytus, the Tenth and final Circle of Inferno, where Satan resides, is the region reserved for traitors. The beating of Satan's vast wings whips up the wild winds which freeze the water, leaving him trapped in the ice, a frozen prison of his own making. This lake fills the tip of the cone, the bottom of the pit. It is not just the centre of the earth, but of the entire Medieval Universe.

In my painting, *The Ice Lake*, Satan has his back turned, the focus being on his great wings and his significant position at the centre of the lake. The contrast of this region with all the others in Inferno; an ice cavern in all its profound stillness; gives it a wondrous quality. I wanted to experience this sense of wonder if I could, through painting it.





Inferno, oil on canvas, 260 x 180 cm, 2009





Pandemonium, the Evil Pouches, oil on canvas, 180 x 220 cm, 2009





The Ice Lake, oil on canvas, 180 x 220 cm, 2009





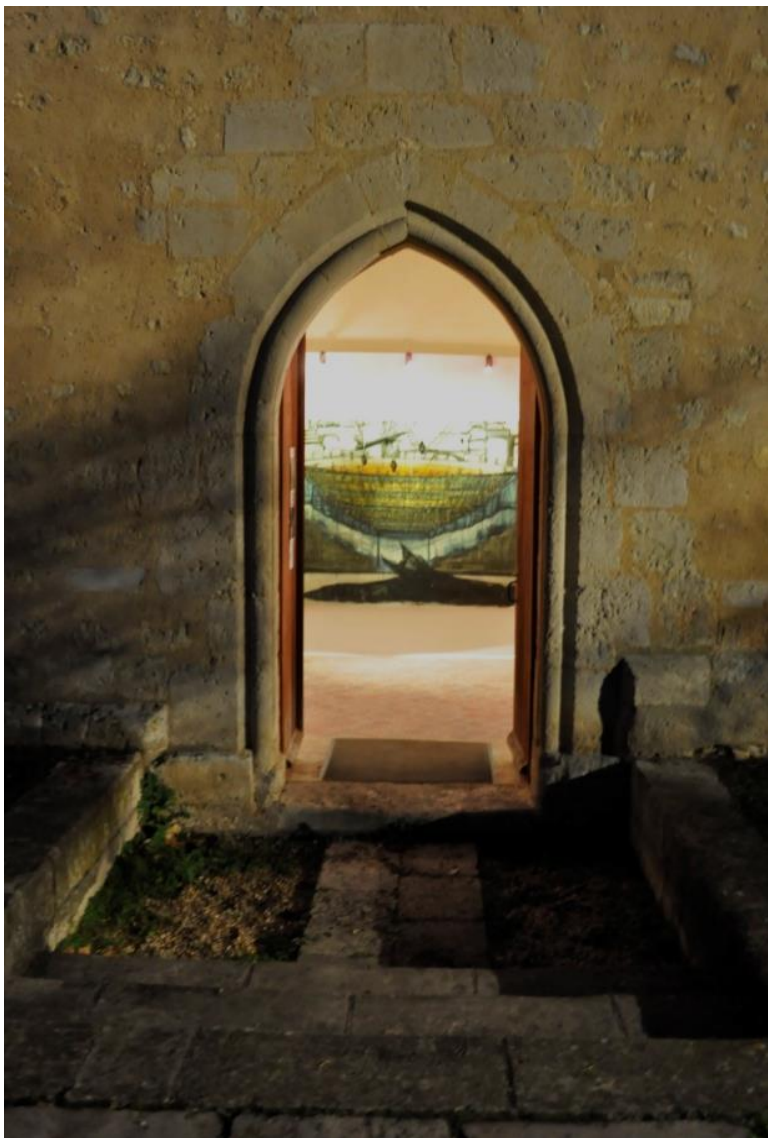
Inferno series 1 and 2 of 5, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm, 2018





Inferno series 3 and 4 of 5, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm, 2018





Top: Inferno series 5 of 5, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm, 2018

Bottom: Exhibition, Our Lost Kingdoms, La Chapelle Saint-Loup, Saint Loubès, 2017