

AND THIS DID DANTE DO

by Ray Bradbury

When science fiction is mentioned, to the non-addict, nine times out of ten the response will be something like, "You mean the kind of stuff Ray Bradbury writes." Yet the kind of stuff the un-repinning Mr. Bradbury now writes includes motion pictures, plays, articles, poetry—and scarcely enough science fiction stories. But he has done a science fiction poem that it is a pleasure to present here, all about the great Dante and his Marvelous Invention. A wickedly satisfying poem.

The truth is this:

That long ago in times

Before the birth of Ligh,

Old Dante Alighieri prowled this way

On continent unknown to mad Columbus;

Made landfall here by sneaking, sly Machine,

Invention of his candle-flickered soul

Which, wafted upon storms,

Brought him in harmful mission down.

So, landed upon wilderness of dust

Where buffalos stamped forth

A panic of immense heartbeat,

Dante scanned round and stamped *his* foot,

And hooped the trembling flints

And named a Ring of Hell.

With parchment clenched in tremorous fist,

He inked out battlements of grime

And arcs of grinding coggeries which, struck,

Snowed down a dreadful cereal of rust

Long years before such iron soots were dreamt
Or made, or flown,
Long long before such avenues of steel in sky were sought.
So, in a guise like Piranesi lost amidst-among
His terrible proud Prisons,
The Poet sketched a vaster, higher, darker Pent-up Place
A living demon-clouded sulphur-spread of Deep.
From tenement to tenement of clapboard dinge
He rinsed a sky with coal-sack burning,
Hung clouds with charcoal flags
Of nightgowns flapping like strange bats
Shocked down from melancholy steam-purged locomotive caves.
Then through it all put scream of metal flesh,
Great dinosaur machines charged forth by night,
All stomaching of insucked souls
Pent up in windowed cells.
Delivered into concrete river-shallow streets,
Men fled themselves from spindrift shade
Of blown black chimney sifts and blinds of smoking ghosts.
And on the brows of all pale citizens therein
Stamped looks of purest terror,
Club-foot panic and despair,
A rank, a raveling dismay that spread in floods
To drain off in a lake long since gone sour
With discharged outpouring of slime.

So drawn, so put to parchment, so laid down
In raw detail, this Ring of Hell (No mind what Number!)
Was Dante's greatest Inventory counting-up
Of Souls in dread Purgation.
He stood a moment longer in the dust.
He let the frightened drumpound heart of buffalo tread
Please to excite his blood.
Then, desecration-proud, happy at the great Black Toy
He'd printed, builded, wound, and set to run
In fouled self circlings,
Old Dante hoisted up his heels,
Left low the continental lake-shore cloven-stamped,
And hied him home to Florence and his bed,
And laid him down still dreaming with a smile,
And in his sleep spoke centuries before its birth
The Name of this Abyss, the Pit, the Ring of Hell
He had machinery-made:

CHICAGO!

Then slept,
And forgot his child.