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DIRETTA DA D'ARCO S. AVALLE, FRANCESCO BRANCIFORTI, GIANFRANCO
FOLENA, FRANCESCO SABATINI, CESARE SEGRE, ALBERTO VARVARO

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Virgil and Dante as Mind-Readers (*Inferno* XXI and XXIII)

Dante's experience of the sin of barratry, punished in the fifth of the *Malebolge*, at first seems to be limited to a single incident (*If* XXI 4-57) and to a single exemplary sinner (the unnamed elder of Lucca, first identified as Martino Bottario by Guido da Pisa 1327: 409). This episode comes to an apparent point of closure in the memorable pseudo-simile which compares the tormented sinner to meat being pushed down into a boiling pot the better to be cooked (55-7). Yet immediately thereafter begins the most lengthy episode of all *Inferno*. The ensuing violent yet comic scene (XXI 58 - XXIII 57, some 290 verses) includes the following narrative details:

XXI 58-87: Virgil, protecting the hidden Dante, confronts Malacoda, the leader of this army of demons, and comes to terms with him.

XXI 88-105: Dante, called from his hiding place by Virgil, is eyed by two demons who would like to hook him; they must be restrained by Malacoda.

XXI 106-17: Malacoda lies successfully to Virgil, insisting that the travellers cannot cross over the sixth bolgia at this point because of the broken bridge, but may, under truce, accompany a band of his troops to the next crossing.

XXI 118-26: Malacoda appoints a squad of ten demons, with Barbariccia to serve as decurion; they are to allow Dante and Virgil to enjoy safe conduct only until they reach this (nonexistent) unbroken *scoglio* («costor sian salvi infino...»).

XXI 127-35: Dante wishes to proceed without such escort; Virgil attempts to soothe his fear.

XXI 136-9: The squad of demons makes its oral response to Barbariccia's anal signal.

XXII 1-12: The first of Dante's lengthy canto-opening similes¹ binds

¹ See also *If* XXIV 1-18; xxx 1-27; xxxi 1-6; *Pg* vi 1-12; xvii 1-12; *Pd* iv 1-9; xvii 1-6; xxiii 1-12; xxix 1-9; xxxi 1-15. That more than one-tenth of Dante's cantos begin in simile underlines the importance which he attached to the figure. Margherita Frankel is preparing a major study of the pervasive presence and of the function of simile in the *Commedia*. For a current discussion, with bibliography, see Antonino Pagliaro, «similitudine», *ED* v, pp. 253-259; see also Richard H. Lansing, *From Image to Idea: A Study of the Simile in Dante's «Commedia»*, Ravenna 1977.

the two canti: Barbariccia's anal command is compared to the *cennamella* which signals the start of battle.

XXII 13-75: The squad treats cruelly the unnamed Navarrese (one Gian Paolo, or «Ciampolo», according to Lana 1324 and other early commentators).

XXII 76-96: At Virgil's behest Ciampolo speaks of two others hidden in the pitch.

XXII 97-108: Ciampolo's stratagem, by which he hopes to escape the clutches of the *Malebranche*, is seen through by Cagnazzo.

XXII 109-17: Alichino is taken in, nonetheless, and consents to Ciampolo's conditions.

XXII 118-51: Ciampolo escapes; Alichino fails to catch him; Calabrina uses Alichino's custodial failure as an excuse to attack *him*; they both fall into the pitch, whence the remaining eight make haste to hook them out.

XXIII 1-33: Dante and Virgil, now without escort (as Dante had originally hoped they would be), proceed along the ridge; Dante fears that the *Malebranche*, enraged because they were tricked on the traveller's account, must now be in pursuit; Virgil believes his concern justified.

XXIII 34-57: The *Malebranche* indeed are upon them; Virgil, compared to a mother escaping from a burning house with her babe, slides down into the sixth *bolgia* carrying Dante in his arms, thus effecting their escape.

The immediate relevance of all this activity to one who has been exiled from his *patria* on a trumped-up charge of barratry has occasioned a debate in the discussion of *If* XXI and XXIII². Whatever autobiographical resonance Dante incorporated in the lengthy farcical interlude³, and even should it be without such resonance, what has received considerably less attention than it might have occasioned is the deft manipulation of the two major characters' differing responses to what transpires⁴. If we

² For discussion, with bibliography, of the debate over the political allegory discovered in the episode by Rosetti (1826: II, 158-163) and to some degree accepted by such as Torraca (1905), see Mazzoni (1972: 423-424, 425-426): see also Bosco & Reggio (1979: 312-313).

³ See, again, Mazzoni (1972: 423-426), and Bosco & Reggio (1979: 311-314), for discussions of the debate over the precise nature of the comedic element in the two cantos, with bibliography; the most recent discussants of the canto (Conrieri 1981: 35-43), De Robertis (1981), and Ryan (1982) naturally enough advert to this question, as well as to that concerning the autobiographical nature of the episode (see previous note). For a discussion which goes beyond the limits of this rather arbitrary attempt at a definition in order to explore the wider significance of the «ludic» proclivities displayed by Dante in XXI and XXII, see Sarolli (1971).

⁴ Upon finishing the first draft of this article I discovered that many of

have previously had to acknowledge that Virgil is a less capable guide than we might like to imagine or than he is pleased to admit (see, for example, *If* VIII 112 - IX 33; XIV 43-5), we are in this instance for the first time forced to perceive that he is simply and utterly wrong⁵.

1. *Teeth as Text and Virgil's Insufficient Gloss (xxi, 127-39).*

«Omè, maestro, che è quel ch'i' veggio?»,
diss'io, «deh, senza scorta andianci soli,
se tu sa' ir; ch'i' per me non la chaggio.

Se tu se' sì accorto come suoli,
non vedi tu ch'e' digrignan li denti
e con le ciglia ne minaccian duoli?».

Ed elli a me: «Non vo' che tu paventi;
lasciali digrignar pur a loro senno,
ch'e' fanno ciò per li lessi dolenti».

Per l'argine sinistro volta dienno;
ma prima avea ciascun la lingua stretta
coi denti, verso lor duca, per cenno;
ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta.

its observations had already been made — and made very well — by Guyler (1972). Thus much of what I maintain, while not dependent upon his work, is in fact only a latter-day formulation of some of his precise and bold thoughts about this material. Several indications of the closeness of our judgments will be found below. (With only an exception or two, I have not bothered to indicate some less important points upon which we do not agree.)

⁵ Umberto Bosco, after rejecting two more usual opinions (i.e., Virgil does not suspect Malacoda's treachery because of his high-mindedness — see, for examples, Cesari 1824 and Andreoli 1856; if he is taken in, the reader is also and thus Virgil is not to be blamed in any way for his failure to understand the devil's plot — see Parodi 1909: 169), analyzes the drama of the scene as follows: «Comunque, il fatto che la beffa sia avvertita da Dante e dal lettore fa che la luce del racconto sia proiettata sull'ingenuità di Virgilio, e sottolineata anche dalla sicurezza impervia di lui sino all'ultimo» (citing XXI, 61-2). See Bosco & Reggio (1979: 309); see also Bosco (1975: 33). Bosco is one of the very few to perceive how thoroughly Dante discredits his guide in this scene. (Now see also Conrieri 1981: 33-35). A similar view, especially as it concerns the relation of this scene to the previous challenge to Virgil's authority found in *If* VIII, is offered by Bacchelli (1954) and by Conrieri (1981: 22-23). Ryan (1982) begins his interesting essay on Virgil's shortcomings as Dante's guide with a similar discussion of the two *loci* (: 1-6), apparently without being aware of Bacchelli's study. I have seen no notice of Trucchi's (1936) interesting attempt to grasp the meaning of this surprising reproof of Virgil in his gloss of vv. 127-132: «Dante nella sua paura, illuminata dalla sua conoscenza della natura diabolica, vede giusto; ma Virgilio che si lascia guidar dalla ragione, non potendo di per sé comprendere l'inganno di Malacoda, perché l'altra volta che era stato quaggiù il terremoto non era ancor avvenuto la dà vinta all'astuzia del diavolo».

The first six verses, spoken by the protagonist, doubly impugn Virgil's competence as guide. If he knows how they should proceed, as he has indicated he does at verses 62-3, then why does he want another guide to lead them? As we will discover at XXIII 133-8, not only does he *not* know that all the bridges over the sixth bolgia have been destroyed by the earthquake which occurred at the Crucifixion (another indication that Virgil does not know all that he thinks he does, despite the fact that he has been in the depths of hell before—see *If* IX 22-30), but he must swallow a bitter pill when he must subsequently admit that he has been tricked by Malacoda (XXIII 139-48). He is so chagrined by this recognition that he walks away from Dante, momentarily abandoning his necessary role as guide⁶. The later scene should be in our minds as we examine this text, which is extraordinary. For the first and only time in the *Commedia* Virgil is explicitly (rather than tacitly) shown to have made a mistake in judgment⁷. Virgil, then, does not «sa ire» as well as he thinks he does⁸. Further, and more disturbingly, the «altissimo poeta» turns out to

⁶ See Margherita Frankel, «Dante's Anti-Virgilian villanello» (which will appear in *DS* [1984 or 1985] and which I have read in typescript with admiration), for a convincing reading of the relation of this scene to the following simile, *If* xxiv 1-18, a particular also touched on by Guylér (1972: 38).

⁷ If it accomplished nothing more, the passage might have finally removed the desire, present since the first commentators, to treat the figure of Virgil in Dante's poem as though he were the personification of 'Reason'. If that is what he represents, how could he make a mistake that even the protagonist, errant though he be, does not make? Vellutello's (1544) intervention is of a certain interest. After offering what I believe is the first sure recognition that Virgil is fooled by the demons («...ingannandosi egli ancora non solamente in questo ['digrignar'], ma nel creder a Malacoda dhaver a trovar lo scoglio intero sopra de la sesta bolgia...»), he then goes on to argue that «...la ragione non sia possente a poterlo difendere, ma perche essa ragione sa... chel divino aiuto suplisce sempre in quello che lhuomo per se stesso non puo fare... cerca di confortarlo, e di rimoverli il timore». He thus blunts his keen literal reading with a poorly matched allegorical one.

⁸ We may speculate that he is put off his guard by his previous success in commanding Malacoda's obeisance (xxi 79-84). Virgil's injunction, ordering the infernal centurion to allow them to pass, recapitulating, as it does, such earlier injunctions of defending demons as are found at *If* III 94-96; v 22-24; vii 8-12; XII 88-93 (as is noted by Casini & Barbi 1921), is (apparently) met with amazed consternation and consent: Malacoda drops his *uncino* and orders the others not to attack (85-87). Guylér (1972: 34) appreciates the ironic control that lies behind the gesture, a control that is made manifest by subsequent events. His apparent total success evidently blinds Virgil to the possibility that, since he and Dante have now entered the realm of fraud, demons here may conceal their evil intentions behind the façade of defeat before the power of the Lord.

be a rather poor reader of another sort of text, the gnashing of teeth. Our poet's insistence on the verb *digrignare* is a clear signal to us, his readers. Dante (correctly) perceives that the *Malebranche's* grinding is directly menacing to the two travellers (131); yet Virgil opines that the gesture only reveals that they threaten the boiling barrators (134)⁹. In the following canto Ciampolo shows that he knows how to read such texts: «Omè, vedete l'altro che digrigna» (xxii 91), he shouts, correctly inferring from Farfarello's oral gesture that the demon intends to attack him (De Robertis 1981: 3 has noted the parallels between Dante and Ciampolo in this regard), as is confirmed by Barbariccia's restraining command (96). The verb *digrignare* occurs only three times in all of Dante's work. Its purpose here, in these three *loci*, is plainly to show that Virgil has totally failed in his interpretation of the demons' dental behavior. And that fact is underlined in the ensuing action, in which Barbariccia gives the covert signal for their eventual surprise attack to his cohort, all of whom show by their teeth that they understand his order (136-139). This piece of poetic business is deft and sure; we should not be fooled by its scabrous nature — rehearsing a demonic fart — into overlooking the importance of the communicating done among the demons and Virgil's total failure to understand what is occurring before his eyes and ears. Benvenuto's (1373) reading of the demons' gestures remains the most convincing one: «tenebant linguam dispositam et paratam ad trulizandum», that is, the nine of them prepared to acknowledge their leader's signal by so positioning their tongues against their teeth that, once they gave vent to their thoughts, the result would be an oral imitation of the sound of his fart. (See Landino's 1481 similar gloss: «“Strignere la lingua tra denti” significa fare tale strepito con bocca quale fa el vento quando esce per le parti posteriori: el che fanno gl'imprudenti buffoni quando scherniscono alcuno». It is probably best to see that the signal and the response are both a token

⁹ The comment of Scartazzini (1874) is instructive: «Dante si è accorto della malizia de' demoni. Senza dubbio Virgilio se ne è pure accorto, ma teme meno e vuol render sicuro il suo allievo». This charitable view, which is shared by Poletto (1894), perhaps indicates a generosity of spirit in the observer, but avoids the clear and pointed purpose of Virgil's misinterpretation. See Bacchelli (1954: 26) for a better reading: «Riluttanza cristiana, e perciò *toto coelo* superiore e più prudente e meglio ispirata di tutta la filosofica sapienza e sicurezza della mente virgiliana».

of understanding among the malefactors and a sign of their derision for Virgil's self-confident misreading of their intentions). Everything here is backwards; Barbariccia turns his anus into a mouth-like-orifice; his squad turn their mouths into producers of anus-like noise¹⁰. The unrecorded sound which they make (we see their preparation — as Benvenuto noted — but do not hear their performance) in answer to their leader's trumpet solo not only is the sign of their agreement to do evil deeds, but is a brutally unkind cut at Virgil as interpreter, since he has just declared that their hostility is aimed elsewhere. With the possible exception of the moving, even excruciating, exploration of Virgil's failure as man, poet, and thinker, presented *seriatim* in *Pg* III-VI, this must be the high (or the low?) point in Dante's excursions into anti-Virgilian polemic in a poem which seems at first to be centrally dedicated to the pagan poet's restoration in a Christian *poiesis*.

2. *The Missing Link: Dante's Aesopic Second Thought* (XXIII, 1-33). Let us examine the text in two stages:

Taciti, soli, senza compagnia
 n'andavam l'un dinanzi e l'altro dopo,
 come frati minor vanno per via.
 Vòlt'era in su la favola d'Isopo
 lo mio pensier per la presente rissa,
 dov'el parlò de la rana e del topo;
 ché più non si pareggia "mo" e "issa"
 che l'un con l'altro fa, se ben s'accoppia
 principio e fine con la mente fissa.
 E come l'un pensier de l'altro scoppia,
 così nacque di quello un altro poi,
 che la prima paura mi fé doppia.

(XXIII 1-12)

The Anonimo Fiorentino (1400) reminds us that, in such Franciscan mendicant pairs as the first *terzina* recalls, the one of greater authority proceeds the other (« . . . andare l'uno innanzi, quello di più autorità»), a detail that has its ironic overtone when we con-

¹⁰ For a keen appreciation of the musical inversions of this scene in relation to a continuing theme of the *Commedia* see Sarolli (1971).

sider the fact that the conclusion of this canto will reveal Virgil's distress at the way in which his authority has been undermined by Malacoda's lies—lies which he has accepted as truths (139-48); we may also choose to consider the fact that it is Dante, the follower, who in the matter of the reliability of Malacoda and his rout is in fact correct, while his guide and master has been taken in (see Ryan 1982²: 21-2 for a similar appreciation). And it is Dante, not Virgil, who first comes to grips with the threat still offered by the momentarily detained *Malebranche*. He does so by recalling 'Aesop's' fable of the mouse and the frog¹¹. In its various versions, the story is essentially the same: Needing to cross a stream, a mouse seeks the aid of a frog; the latter attaches a string to one of his own legs and one of the mouse's. His intent is malicious; mid-way across the water he dives in order to drown the mouse. The struggles of the rodent to stay afloat draw the attention of an overflying kite, who seizes the mouse and, with him, the frog, caught in his own trap. To be sure, Dante's first sense of the relevance of the fable is retrospective. The «presente rissa» of verse 5 is the nasty encounter between Alichino and Calcabrina, in which the relations among the three participants are as follows: Ciampolo = mouse, Alichino = frog, Calcabrina = kite¹². Yet there are at least apparent problems with this formulation. For Ciampolo, unlike the mouse in the fable, is not 'innocent'—not in either sense of the word; further, he does not wish to cross a body of water, but to hide in a lake of pitch. And as for Calcabrina, unlike the kite, he is not eventually victorious, but himself a victim. The *rissa* and the fable,

¹¹ For a brief discussion of Dante's probable actual source(s) see Kraus (1970). The fable is not in fact Aesop's, but is likely derived from one of two medieval collections circulating under his name. Guyler (1972) offers the fullest discussion (but see also Mandruzzato 1955) and gives convincing arguments for Dante's reliance on the poetic version of the *Liber Esopi* by Walter of England (: 29-31), reviewing the previous discussions of Pietro di Dante (1340), McKenzie (1900), Larkin (1962 and 1966), and Padoan (1965).

¹² Singleton (1970), however, in his lengthy discussion of this passage (which is indebted to Paget Toynbee, «Esopo», in his *A Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante*, revised by Singleton, Oxford 1968 [1st edn. 1898], pp. 250-251), argues that the version of the fable found in Marie de France (III 79-82, in *Die Fabeln der Marie de France*, ed. K. Warnke, Halle 1898), in which the mouse is eventually set at liberty, is closer to the incident in *If* XXII, in which Ciampolo escapes. While there are attractive aspects to this hypothesis, the fact that Dante would expect his reader to be familiar with one of the more available «tragic» versions argues strongly against it, as does, in my opinion, the context, for Ciampolo's «escape» is hardly a return to life.

Dante says, are alike as «mo» and «issa»¹³. But he qualifies the resemblance: «se ben s'accoppia | principio e fine con la mente fissa». In other words the fable and the *rissa* have identical beginnings and endings only if we consider these carefully, that is, they may not seem to do so. But when we do examine them with care, we note that Ciampolo has indeed been compared to a mouse («sorco» at xxii 58; Guyler 1972: 32 also notes the reference) fallen among mischievous cats; and if his desire is not so much to cross a stream by agency of a 'frog' as it is to get another creature to help him to return to a relative greater degree of comfort in the pitch, the beginning of the fable may be understood to fit his plight. And the end, in which the suddenly frog-like Ciampolo, who had «lacciuoli [reminiscent of the *filum* of the fable?] a gran divizia» (xxii 109)¹⁴, escapes from the clutches of a 'kite', Alichino, who is in fact compared to still other birds of prey, «falcon» (xxii 131) and «sparvier grifagno» (139), concludes with Calcabrina as the eventual 'kite', clawing Alichino-frog and falling with him into the pitch (137-8). Thus all three of the characters in the fable find their counterparts in *If* xxii 97-151, if their roles shift as the scene develops. At least the beginning, Ciampolo's mouse-like request for assistance, and the end, which brings unhappiness to the scheming middle-man, are similar¹⁵.

¹³ Pietro di Dante (1340) identifies the words as being, respectively, Lombard and Lucchese dialect for «now»; Guido da Pisa (1327) and Castelvetro (1570) resort to a more «humanistic» set of equivalences: Latin *modo* and *nunc*.

¹⁴ I note in passing Castelvetro's (1570) observation that Boccaccio borrowed the phrase at *Decameron* VIII 7, 146.

¹⁵ What probably should be a matter of common consent is that Dante would be unlikely to develop his parallel incident(s) without being certain that we would be able to identify three participants, each of whom takes on the role of one of the creatures in the fable. Yet, from the early days of the commentary tradition, discussions of the passage have given rise to impressively divergent views. I shall attempt to summarize briefly.

That Benvenuto (1373) was correct to call the passage a «fortis ... passus» is evidenced by the following table, which does not claim to have achieved completeness, but does hope to have included the major variations on our theme.

- (1) Ciampolo = mouse; Alichino = frog; Calcabrina = kite: Guido da Pisa (1327); Castelvetro (1570 — but see n. 19, below); Wolff (1969).
- (2) Alichino = mouse; Calcabrina = frog: Ottimo (1333); Vellutello (1544); Scartazzini (1874); Oelsner (1900); Gmelin (1954).
- (3) Alichino = mouse; Calcabrina = frog; the pitch = kite: Benvenuto (1373); Guiniforto (1440); Venturi (1732); Lombardi (1791); McKenzie (1900); Scartazzini (1900); Casini & Barbi (1921); Momigliano (1946); Mattalia (1960);

It has for some time been a puzzle to this reader that Dante should have chosen words that mean 'now' as the instruments of his comparison¹⁶. Any other pair of like-signifying yet differing terms would have served as well. It now seems to me that his choice was not a casual one. Having considered the relevance of the fable to preterite action, Dante turns his attention to the present: «E come l'un pensier de l'altro scoppia, | così nacque di quello un altro poi, | che la prima paura mi fé doppia». It is as though, while rehearsing the fable and the *rissa*, he unconsciously insisted on the relevance of both matters to what is to happen in the immediate future. And what is indeed transpiring, just out of sight, is the frantic effort of the squad of ten demons to turn Dante into their mouse:

Già mi sentia tutti arricciar li peli
de la paura e stava in dietro intento,
quand'io dissi: «Maestro, se non celi
te e me tostamente, i' ho pavento
d'i Malebranche. Noi li avem già dietro;
io li 'magino sì, che già li sento».

(XXIII 19-24)

Chimenz (1962); Giacalone (1968). (This is by far the most popular set of equivalences and is found in at least 15 other 19th- and 20th-century commentators).

- (4) Alichino = frog; Calcabrina = kite: Buti (1385).
- (5) Ciampolo = frog; demons = mouse: Anonimo Fiorentino (1400).
- (6) Alichino = mouse; Calcabrina = frog; Barbariccia = kite: Serravalle (1416); Grandgent (1909).
- (7) Ciampolo = mouse; [demons = frog?]: Mandruzzato (1955); Fallani (1965).
- (8) Dante & Virgil = mouse; demons = frog: Larkin (1962 & 1966). (Andreoli [1856] was the first to suggest this equation, adding the implausible third term, Ciampolo = kite).
- (9) Ciampolo = frog (at beginning); Calcabrina = frog (at end): Padoan (1965); Bosco & Reggio (1979).
- (10) Alichino & Dante = mouse; Calcabrina & Virgil = frog; *Malebranche* (twice) = kite: Guyler (1972).

My own formulation, as will become clear, combines (1) and (10):

- (11) Ciampolo & Dante = mouse; Alichino & Virgil = frog; Calcabrina & the entire squad = kite.

This debate in the commentaries has come to resemble not only the action which it seeks to analyze, but also the pseudo-Homeric *Batrachomyomachia* which, if unknown to Dante, was the first in a long procession of similar games (see McKenzie 1900: 11).

¹⁶ Both will be used again, «mo» in this canto at verse 28, «issa» at *Pg* xxiv 55; and see Guido da Montefeltro's speech at *If* xxvii 20-21, where «mo» and «istra» also signify 'now'.

The protagonist, whatever his shortcomings, seems to be more expert than his guide in understanding the devious behavior of such as Malacoda and his demons (a Florentine political background makes even a poet 'streetwise', we may infer). «Noi li avem già dietro; | io li 'magino sì, che già li sento». The double utterance of «già» parallels the two previous uses of words for 'now'. And indeed, at verse 35 we learn that the demons are upon them.

Thus it seems to me that 'Aesop's' fable has not only a pret-erite reference, but a present (or immediately future) one as well, and in that particular a far more pressing point, both for Dante and for the reader. «If we do not get away from here at once, I am lost» is what Dante (correctly) intuitively feels. It is interesting that while Virgil accepts this intuition (25-33), it is Dante who causes him to act in a helpful matter, thus reversing his usual role as protector and guide. For here he functions rather as aide than guide. And if such is the case, then the reference of the fable is doubly focussed and makes some curious suggestions about the interrelationships among the participants in the action¹⁷. As Larkin (1962: 99; 1966: 87-8) argues, the «principio» of verse 9 refers precisely to the beginning of the episode, where Dante and Virgil, the «mice» according to him, are trying to enlist Malacoda's aid to make their way across a 'river', i.e., over the sixth bolgia. What Dante, with his Aesopic second thought, perceives, is that the 'kite' of the fable is about to reappear in the most threatening way. For if two of the *Malebranche* have temporarily become disabled playing out their roles in their own version of 'frog' and 'kite', once they are hauled from the pitch they will become part of a still more highly motivated tenfold 'kite'.

¹⁷ And one such curiosity, as Pietro di Dante (1340) was the first and perhaps only previous commentator to suggest, regards the *Aeneid*; xxiii 19 («Già mi sentia tutti arricciar li peli | de la paura . . .») may ask us to remember *Aen.* II 774, describing Aeneas, during the fall of Troy, before the ghost of his dead Creusa: «obstipui, steteruntque comae . . .». And the second part of Dante's speech may recall another moment in that terror-filled narrative: «"Maestro, se non celi | te e me tostamente, i' ho pavento | d'i Melebranche. Noi li avem già dietro . . ."» (II 733). If these are in fact echoes of the scene describing the fall of Troy — and I offer the citations tentatively — then the terrified, claustrophobic atmosphere of Virgil's Second Book informs the terror felt by the protagonist in *If* xxiii. And in that case we surely expect the sage recorder of the fall of Troy to offer better advice to his pupil than he does here.

Mus, rana, milvus. Is it possible that the equivalences are more disturbingly appropriate than has heretofore been appreciated? In XXI Virgil intercedes on behalf of his 'mouse' in order to get him across what seems an unfordable 'stream'. But this 'mouse' objects to his choice of 'frog', Barbariccia's band, because, unlike the mouse in the fable, he perceives that the promised aid is proffered fraudulently. Virgil would reassure him that such is not the case, that the demons are in fact trustworthy 'frogs'¹⁸. Now that two of the demons have played out their parts in the Aesopic drama precisely in the roles of frog and kite, it is only Dante's receptiveness to a better reading, as he reads their minds, as it were, that allows him to perceive that the *Malebranche* have their own ending for the narrative in mind and are, at the very moment, hastening hence to enforce it on Dante and Virgil. And in this renewed awareness of the aptness of the fable, Dante understands that for the demons he himself is the mouse, while Virgil plays the unwitting frog to their kite (we see their outspread wings from — just barely — a safe distance at XXIII 35). In Dante's afterthought Virgil has become a frog, no matter how good his intentions. Having tied himself to his guide, he has put himself absolutely at risk beneath the vicious birds of prey¹⁹. Dante would not be 'crossing' (or actually *not* crossing) in this manner had it not been for Virgil's bad advice.

As though to make amends for his previous lack of intelli-

¹⁸ This *principio* of the extended scene is probably mirrored in XXII 97-117: in XXI Dante sees through Malacoda's feigned offer of aid while Virgil convinces himself that all is well; in XXII Cagnazzo sees through Ciampolo's stratagem (97-108) while Alichino convinces himself that the Navarrese may be trusted. The effect of the resulting parallelism between these brief episodes also works against Virgil's authority.

¹⁹ Castelvetro (1570), who offers a typically annoyed rejection of what he takes to be Dante's purpose in the Aesopic analogy («...non vedere cose che abbiano meno da fare insieme»), goes on to suggest that Dante's *arrière pensée* «...dipendeva dall'esser essi [Dante e Virgilio] tratti come fu il topo e la rana dal nibbio». Whatever his intention, he at least implicitly compares Dante to the mouse and Virgil to the frog. Guylér (1972: 37-9) is more outspoken in his firmly stated interpretation that Virgil is forced to take on the role of the frog. One of my few disagreements with him involves his sense that Virgil has been hypocritical in his dealings with Dante during this extended scene. To be sure, he himself hedges this position, both in the title of his essay («Virgil the Hypocrite — Almost»), and in the following observation: «Of course Virgil proves through the act of saving Dante that he was not guilty of hypocrisy, but only of overconfidence in his authority» (: 39), a formulation with which I concur — as does Ryan (1982: 19-20).

gence or common sense, Virgil is (finally) galvanized to take the action which Dante might have hoped he would take two *canti* earlier — he leaves the terrain of the *Malebranche* as quickly as he can, holding Dante in his arms as a mother, fleeing a burning house, takes up her babe. And, perhaps to remind us of the earlier 'Aesopics', Virgil's slide into the next bolgia is described in aquatic terms by the simile which compares the descent to the rush of a sluice at a mill (46-51). Virgil has finally realized how to perform the frog's role benevolently and efficaciously. The *Commedia* may continue, even if Virgil's anger at having been deceived will temporarily interrupt its forward progress at the end of this canto and the beginning of the next²⁰.

This elaborately developed chain of incidents, which would put Virgil in a difficult light even had Dante not intended to do so, is probably better understood as the culminating moment in a series of devaluations of Virgil. Guyler concludes his study as follows: «As a poet, Dante, with a snicker, has subtly pointed out the superiority of his own Christian poem to that of its pagan model» (1972: 40). Those of us who would see such poetic behavior behind the apparent unstinting praise of Virgil must be careful lest we, beguiled by our new vision of Dante's strange behavior toward Virgil, fail to represent adequately the undoubtedly genuine and unquestionably enormous debt of gratitude and affection which Dante does in fact feel toward his *maestro e autore*. Why Dante should have nonetheless wanted to treat him as cruelly as he does is not a question that is readily answered. Before we can attempt it, we need to appreciate how frequently and how intensely he in fact holds Virgil and his work up to probing and antagonistic analysis, while at other moments lavishing the most enthused *encomia* upon them²¹. Praised and damned, Dante's Virgil is perhaps the only truly liminal figure in a poem that loves its own highly defined and strikingly definite symmetries and judgments. In all the *Commedia* it is the figure

²⁰ See my treatment in «*Inferno* xxiv, 1-18: Dante's 'Georgic'» (forthcoming).

²¹ For my own attempt to put this problem into a wider perspective see *Il Virgilio dantesco: tragedia nella «Commedia»*, Firenze 1983. Ryan (1982: 10-25) offers an extended and like-minded treatment of Dante's recondite assault upon Virgilian values in *Pg xxx* which parallels my own series of observations on that scene (pp. 131-134, 141-145). See also Albert Rossi, «"A l'ultimo suo": *Paradiso xxx* and its Virgilian Context», *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, iv (1981): 64-66. And see Ball (1981: 75-76).

of Virgil who probably offers us our fullest perception of whatever was unresolved in its author. In that poem which more than any other has come to represent total synthesis for our civilization, Dante's Virgil, liminal and torn, one foot in Eden, the other in Limbo, places a fruitful strain upon our ability to accept the synthesis without a pained awareness of its difficulty and fragility.

ROBERT HOLLANDER
Princeton University

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