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Dante's Virgils

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The questions brought to a text define the reading of it, questions both invited by the author and assumed by the reader. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* opens with a remarkable ambiguity that calls for an investigation of the questions being brought to the poem:

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
For I had wandered off from the straight path. *(Inf. 1.1-3)*

The first person description of wandering from the path invites a different reading than the more inclusive reference to “the journey of our life,” which implies an Everyman approach to the narrative. Which protagonist will the reader imagine as the poem continues, or does the *Comedy* take the form of a double journey, which encompasses both personal and general experience? Dante clearly intends not to resolve the imaginative difficulty, and the story continues. Failing in his attempt to climb the hill out of the dark valley in which he finds himself, Dante’s pilgrim encounters a figure that further complicates the question of representation. Virgil, the esteemed Roman poet and author of the *Aeneid*, thirteen centuries before the birth of Dante, makes his appearance, and the reader seems faced with a new question: what does Virgil represent?

Thus, readings of Virgil have typically centered on specific aspects of his character as they surface in the *Comedy*, and scholars have combed the poem for the clues to interpret Virgil and support their own readings. He remains an intensely

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1 I will be drawing all direct quotes from Mark Musa’s 1984 translation of the complete *Divine Comedy*. Robert Pinsky’s 1998 translation of the *Inferno* captures a feel of the original’s rhyme scheme, but I found Robert Hollander’s *Inferno* (2000) to be the most eminently readable, not to mention his extensive and helpful commentary. The reader should probably also consider Dorothy Sayers’ 1949 translation.
interesting figure precisely because the *Comedy* supports such a broad range of interpretations. A cross-section of Dante’s Virgil reveals that Dante combines three strains—the historical Virgil, the clearly allegorical figure, and the textual Virgil, or the character drawn from Dante’s interaction with the *Aeneid*. Dante’s combination of these three figures successfully animates the character of Virgil, and his development swiftly becomes a focus of the narrative.

Virgil’s sudden disappearance at the end of *Purgatory* disrupts the *Comedy* in several ways. When Dante the pilgrim reaches the pinnacle of the mountain of Purgatory and catches a glimpse of the beautiful Beatrice, the woman who consumed his thoughts in the ten years since he had seen her, Virgil leaves him. The pilgrim turns but “Virgil was not there. We found ourselves/ without Virgil, sweet father” (*Purg.* 30.49-50). The abrupt departure of his paternal pathfinder leaves their relationship inconclusive, painfully curtailed by the justice that demands Virgil’s return to Limbo. The pilgrim’s predicament mirrors that of the reader, who senses a similar interruption of the opportunity to understand the character in the wake of his suspension from the narrative. Such frustration serves an important function in reading the *Comedy*. Dante’s programmatic irresolution of the interpretive issue invites the reader of the *Comedy* to assume a distinctly creative role in act of imagining Virgil.

Like the illustrator who tackles a visual depiction of a scene from the *Comedy*, the reader brings much to fill the creative space left by Dante, an act that is not without precedence. The initial act of inviting Virgil into his poem and his subsequent portrayal of the famous poet through metaphor reveal Dante’s dual role as reader and author and the degree to which Dante has himself invented Virgil. Thus, the reader of the *Comedy*
observes a dramatic twist in the fundamental question brought to the poem. Rather than conducting an investigation of what Virgil represents, we are invited to a subtly distinct and ultimately revealing examination of what represents Virgil—or how Dante has invented him.

The question of invention certainly confronted the first readers of the Comedy as they encountered a tale of a fantastic journey full of mythical creatures told with the utmost sincerity, as though Dante meant the poem as an account of actual experience. According to Robert Hollander, the text favors an interpretation of the trip through the afterlife as a true story—much as the medieval reader would have read a story from the Old Testament (Introduction xxv). Dante’s invocation of the Muses takes the form of a plea to his memory to aid his account: “O memory that wrote down what I saw, / here your true excellence shall be revealed!” (Inf. 2.8-9) By the fourth canto, his memory seems to have too much for him to set down, and he must leave some out for “the length of my theme so drives me on/ that often the telling comes short of the fact” (Inf. 4.146-7). The narrator goes so far as to “swear by my Commedia’s lines” (Inf. 16.109-10).

For those understandably not convinced of the poem’s literal veracity, an allegorical understanding of Virgil has long been favored. Commentators described Virgil as the image of Human Wisdom, Reason in its greatest earthly manifestation, a reading encouraged by his words to the pilgrim as they near the top of the mountain of Purgatory: “I can explain to you/ as much as reason sees; for the rest, wait/ for Beatrice—it is the work of faith” (Purg. 18.46-8). Virgil, a figure of hopelessness, seems unable to transcend the limitations of reason, resulting in his ultimate return to Limbo (Putnam 288). A medieval study of the multiple Virgils that circulated the few hundred years
before Dante would have mostly consisted of various exemplary stories and allegorical commentary, a large focus of which would have been the supposed prophecy of the birth of Christ in Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue (Burrow 80). More recently, Dorothy Sayers, in the preface to her 1949 Penguin translation, calls the poem not only a religious and political allegory, but also an “allegory of a rather special kind... the interpretation of experience by means of images.” She proceeds to interpret the “symbolic personages” which appear to the poet (9-11). Indeed, in most current commentaries on the Comedy, the name Virgil is accompanied by a few words in parentheses—(reason or human understanding).

The emphasis on a historically grounded Virgil, the Roman poet, has recently surfaced. According to Ronald Macdonald, Virgil’s introduction displays Dante’s “fundamental concern for history and the historical” (62). As a strictly allegorical figure, Virgil was open to much creative modification, considering the fundamental truth transmitted by the figure remained intact. The medieval tradition surrounding Virgil had transformed him into a kind of wondrous magician who could “fly, make himself invisible, suspend natural law, and foretell the future” (Macdonald 67). Dante’s Comedy rejects this fantastic figure in an attempt to reinsert Virgil back into the “stream of earthly life” by historically situating the poet.

Indeed, Robin Kirkpatrick argues that the entrance of Virgil may signify the abandonment of allegory; Virgil is important to the protagonist because “he actually is a presence, to whom an appeal can be made and from whom definite and practical answers can be expected” (17). The companionship that Dante develops with Virgil suggests the exchange of real human feeling, and Virgil’s words of regret haunt the reader: “Not what I did, but what I did not do/ cost me the sight of that high Sun you seek/ whose meaning
was revealed to me too late" (*Purg.* 7.25-7). The pathos of his situation, damned by his too early position on the timeline, raises questions for some commentators as to whether or not he is in fact condemned to eternal exile. Is it possible that the Eternal Judgment of God is open to change through some kind of human action? (Allan 203) The reader cannot easily escape the discomforting nature of the fate of Dante’s historical Virgil, and Robert Hollander accuses traditional and simplistic allegorical readings of “flattening out the problematic presence of Virgil into a one-for-one simplistic equation.” Such a reading, argues Hollander, only serves to rid readers of “the need to encounter a complex and disturbing issue”—those moments when Virgil is neither wise nor rational (“Dante’s Virgil” 2). Is the allegory momentarily suspended when the demons of Dis confound the poet or the Malebranche play with him like a child?

As a response, many critics propose a reading that competently juggles the allegorical and historical modes of interpretation. The solution as offered by Uberto Limentani involves an appreciation of “different layers of meaning in the *Comedy*” yet “not all the time, not always all of them at once.” Marguerite Chiarenza chooses a method that does more to synthesize these layers of meaning, describing Dante’s fusion of the symbolic and the material. Arguing that “the relationship of the poem’s literal level to its allegory is analogous to that of reality to its meaning,” Chiarenza cites Charles Singleton’s contention that Dante’s allegory is not one of “this for that,” but one of “this *and* that” (13).

But whether one chooses to alternately suspend and utilize particular modes of interpretation or attempts to successfully synthesize them, the reading of Virgil remains focused on the question of what Virgil represents. This process simply seems to shuffle
the various Virgils within a predetermined framework of meaning, whether the reader brings standard academic knowledge of Virgil or expectations regarding the function of allegory. Dante anticipates the question of what Virgil represents and delivers a fairly straightforward response in the first canto of the _Inferno_, in which three distinct voices offers interpretations of the character of Virgil.

The first reference to Virgil occurs midway through the canto, immediately following the pilgrim’s attempt to climb the hill and his harassment by the leopard, lion, and lean wolf, three clearly symbolic beasts. Virgil’s appearance in the context of allegory initially invites the reader to look for allegorical clues of meaning. Dante observes that the approaching figure is “one grown faint,” not from hunger or heat but “perhaps from too much silence” (1.63). Seeing this figure, Dante asks for pity on his soul, “whichever you are, shade or living man!”

Virgil quickly identifies himself as a shade, the spirit of a person who had passed on to the next world. His own introduction of himself serves to establish his historical position and lends the canto an air of verisimilitude. According to Virgil, he is no longer a living man, but he once was. He describes his parents, birthplace, and time of birth—“I was a poet and sang of that just man, son of Anchises” (1.73-4). However, Virgil’s self-evaluation has its limitations as it fails to explain his purpose in appearing before Dante the pilgrim; he provides no reason for his sudden appearance in the poem. “Why not climb up this blissful mountain here?” he asks Dante, who ignores this query in his own interpretation of the figure’s significance.

Dante’s response immediately moves Virgil into the present: “Are you then Virgil, are you then that fount/ from which pours forth so rich a stream of words?” It
seems that Dante has already met Virgil—not in person, but in the form of a text that he encountered in his own extensive reading. The pilgrim’s Virgil is essentially the *Aeneid*. He identifies Virgil with the *Aeneid* by using a metaphor in which the source (the fountain) and the words gushing forth become indistinguishable. Thus, the pilgrim transforms the encounter into interaction with a text, and the next stanza introduces a new metaphor: "Oh light and honor of the other poets" (1.82). Dante describes the deep love with which he searched the verses of this teacher and "first of all my authors."

The third voice, Dante the poet, emerges as the interaction between the two is placed back into an allegorical context. Having delivered his words of tribute, the pilgrim immediately lays out the problem at hand, the beast which threatens him and forces him to retreat. This beast is presumably the last one he encountered in his attempt to ascend the hill, a lean she-wolf that is "racked with every kind of greediness" (1.50). The allegorical nature of this beast is made clear with the narrator's parenthetical comment—“(how many people she has brought to grief)” (1.50). Thus, when the pilgrim pleads with Virgil to "save me from her, I beg you, famous sage", the request is for an allegorical counter, a function that Virgil is quick to fulfill. He describes the day the "greyhound" will come and cause the beast "die in anguish." Virgil’s autobiographical account and the pilgrim’s response to it provide the “when,” “where,” and “who” but not the “why” of his presence, a responsibility left to the poet of the *Comedy*.

The three Virgils converge in the primary purpose of the shade’s appearance: "I shall be your guide/ and lead you out through an eternal place" (1.113-14). As he moves on, Dante follows him, beginning a journey that will take him through heaven and hell, as Virgil aids him in mental, spiritual, and physical ways. As a result, Dante admits an
ambiguity of interpretation rather than providing an authoritative voice. A fourth voice has already joined the interpretive conversation—that of the reader, whose function it is to sort the options proffered by the opening canto and determine which voice will be favored.

The reader’s judgments in considering and favoring particular facets of Virgil is perhaps best reflected in the creative acts involved in illustrations of the Comedy. Given no specific indications as to Virgil’s physical appearance, the illustrator nonetheless creates images and asks one primary question: what does Virgil look like? As the poem progresses, the reader notes that Dante gives no real indication as to Virgil’s physical appearance. As a shade and not a man, does Virgil possess no distinguishing features? It seems that he does because Dante occasionally describes the expression on Virgil’s face. Denied access through the gates of Dis, Virgil loses self-assurance and doubt darkens his features (Inf. 8.118-20). Later, as Virgil observes a former pope crucified on the ground, an expression of wonder crosses his face (Inf. 23.125-6). In the same canto, he hears of the smashed arch denying access to the next level and walks off with his face revealing traces of anger before once again turning to Dante with a sweet look of warmth. Dante seems to focus on the expressive countenance of Virgil to mark the unexpected turns and triumphs of the journey.

Although Dante describes his expressions, Virgil’s physical features remain a mystery. The illustrator boldly bridges the literary and the visual. In William Blake’s 1825 watercolor, an angelic Virgil, suspended above the earth, appears to the fleeing pilgrim. His youthful face and curly blond hair are almost feminine. This ethereal and beatific Virgil suggests poetic vision rather than reason, which tends to oppose
imagination in Blake’s understanding (Nassar 31). The Virgil of Gustave Dore possesses a more recognizably aristocratic Roman countenance, as well as the typical Roman robe and the laurel wreath signifying poetic prominence. As Virgil and Dante observe the shade of Farinata in his tomb in Dore’s 1861 engraving, the Roman poet wears a distanced expression, an almost disdainful look, which suggests his feeling of moral prominence despite the disadvantage of his birth. The illustrator’s filling of the creative space in the absence of physical description mirrors that of the reader’s adoption of a particular way of reading in the absence of explicit authorial instruction. In this way the reader’s contribution may be seen as something not independent from the text but a distinctly new and individual contribution.

The complexity of the reader’s imaginative contribution intensifies with a consideration that Dante himself lays claim to the creative nature of reading with his own portrayal of Virgil and, thus, Dante as a reader becomes critical to every subsequent person who reads the Comedy. Dante imagines Virgil in very particular visual and relational ways, and Dante’s placement of Virgil in the Comedy is not only an act of literary interpretation, but also one that takes the form of a “creative misreading” (Kirkpatrick 19). Harold Bloom focuses on this “misreading” in terms of poetic fatherhood, arguing that a text only fulfills an older text through some kind of self-serving caricature of that earlier text. Bloom’s Dante is a poet trying to write his way out of the Roman poet’s long, legendary shadow by deriding the very source of his literary anxiety. The long-standing medieval authority of Virgil clearly weighed on Dante’s mind, but his response to the Roman poet seems more complex than the anxiety of influence. According to Bloom, Virgil “should be read not as Reason, the light of nature,
but as the trope of that light . . . Dante abandons Virgil not to seek grace but to find his own image of voice”(43-5).

However, one may also understand the act of “misreading” as an activity conducted by any reading, not just the particularly anxious ones. The search for Bloom’s “image of voice” follows the reading of a text as an attempt to encapsulate the impact of the author. The reader imagines the influence that the text exerts in metaphorical terms, terms that serve to imaginatively link the act of reading and the act of writing. The particularly vivid metaphorical language of the Bible provides an important context in which to understand the function of these metaphors. A writer of the Psalms refers to the Torah as a light: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psalm 119:105). In the New Testament, the word of God becomes “quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow”(Hebrews 4:12). These metaphors do not describe the text as much as they describe the reader. The text does not change; the ways in which the reader approaches and uses these words vary. The metaphors are significant in their ability to capture the nature of the act of reading in all its complexity. Describing the Hebrew Scriptures as a lamp seems a straightforward means of signifying the ways in which they illuminate and guide. A lamp is not like the sun, however, and requires the involvement of the carrier of the lamp, who must point the lamp in the most obscure places. Thus, the poet achieves the fine balance between divine revelation within the sacred text and the responsibility of the individual reader, and the “misreading” of these scriptural passages involves reaching any conclusion concerning their meaning.
When Virgil enters the *Comedy*, he arrives as a walking, talking misreading, a character Dante did not invent but one he must imagine in reaction to extended interaction with the *Aeneid*. Virgil, in answer to the question proposed at the beginning of this essay, represents a record of reading, but this question is displaced by a query that more sufficiently describes the interaction. The primary question for the reader of the *Comedy*, then, as for the illustrator, becomes not what Virgil represents but what represents Virgil. Consequently, the most revealing way to approach Dante’s Virgil is not assuming predetermined meaning that serves to define the images of Virgil in the *Comedy* but as a character to be discovered through these images. Dante’s metaphor of Virgil as a fountain of words is the sort of image that runs through the *Comedy*, assuming life as a narrative of its own due to its depth of meaning and ambiguity and the complex nature of interpreting metaphors.

Dante’s first words to Virgil identify him as a “fount from which pours forth so rich a stream of words” (1.79-80). The *Aeneid* is this abundant well and source of inspiration as the Comedy begins; Beatrice did recruit Virgil for his “elegance of speech.” Dante the poet does indeed draw much from the ancient epic, including locations like his underground inferno, characters like Charon with his glowing eyes of fire, and even extended scenes, such as Inferno 13 when the pilgrim and his guide enter a forest with black and twisted branches. Virgil instructs Dante to break off a branch and when the pilgrim does so, the plant’s wound bleeds and a voice cries out in pain. Dante borrowed this episode from the third book of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas breaks a branch from a flowering tree on a mound and hears the voice of the murdered Polydorus reveal the story of his most foul death. Dante drew deeply from the fount of the *Aeneid*. 
However, Barolini notes that Dante’s imitation of the *Aeneid* decreases in frequency as the *Comedy* progresses, with the *Inferno* essentially being “Virgil’s canticle” (201). Even as Dante moves away from his reliance on that rich “stream of words,” the continuation of the metaphor suggests a shift in its meaning. In canto eight, Dante observes the mysterious lights in the upcoming towers of the walls of the demonic city of Dis and turns with questions to “that vast sea of human knowledge” that walks beside him (*Inf.* 8.7). This “vast sea” does not suggest the *Aeneid* as much as it does the actual poet of the narrative with whom the pilgrim interacts because, although his reliance on the actual *Aeneid* seems to be lessening, the pilgrim maintains a great dependence on the material shade. Virgil, imagined as a body of water, will help the pilgrim both figuratively and literally. After Virgil explains to him the structure of hell, Dante exclaims, “Master, your reasoning runs smooth” (*Inf.* 11.67). Yet in a moment of great danger, it is not Virgil’s reasoning, but his actual body which will preserve the two poets. Escaping from the Malebranche, Virgil seizes his ward and slides down the slope, and “water that turns a mill wheel never ran/ the narrow sluice at greater speed” (23.46–7).

With his guide represented as a body of rushing water, Dante the pilgrim assumes the corresponding image, a boat that relies upon the direction and movement of this stream. Under the guidance of Virgil, he maintains a good course toward his destination, and Brunetto Latini encourages the pilgrim saying, “you cannot fail to reach your port of glory” (*Inf.*15.56). Nevertheless, other seas than Virgil await Dante’s exploration, and he begins the ascent of Purgatory by hoisting the sails of “the little bark of my poetic powers” (*Purg.* 1.1-2). Thus, the metaphor communicates Dante’s critical dependence on
his predecessor but also a level of freedom of movement as captain of his own vessel who has more than one ocean to cross on his voyage. Yet a fundamental reliance on Virgil still remains as Dante sets up a metaphorical framework in which his own character is defined by the image of Virgil.

Examining how Dante has chosen to represent Virgil ultimately illuminates the primary question that the reader brings to the *Comedy*—what does Virgil represent? Virgil represents not only Dante’s record of reading but Dante himself because he defines himself in terms of his reading. As Dante has constructed Virgil, we construct a Dante through a reading of the *Comedy* and our means to understand him is primarily through the character of Virgil, not through the pilgrim who bears his name. As Dante the Poet accompanies our own journey through the Inferno, we commence construction of the images that will approximate and define our experience with Dante. In the process, our primary means to do so becomes the figure of Virgil, not Reason or Roman poet, but a reading of Virgil we do not possess the capability to duplicate.
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