

Dante's Henchmen: God's Work and the Monsters of *Inferno*

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In an epistle to his leading patron Cangrande della Scalla, Dante wrote of his *Divina Commedia*:

If the work is taken allegorically... the subject is man, either gaining or losing merit through his freedom of will, subject to the justice of being rewarded or punished...

We can say briefly that the purpose of the whole as well as the part is to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of bliss.

(Marchand)

With this goal in mind Dante approached his epic poem, attempting to chart a path to enlightenment for the faithful. Such a purpose was not wasted on his Italian readers who, constantly reminded of the tenuous nature of their souls, often looked towards their final judgment with a great deal of apprehension. Put simply, Dante's purpose with his *Inferno* was to frighten his readers back to the proper path. Such a method was hardly unusual; if anything, it was the *modus operandi* of the clergy of the day. As Aron Gurevich puts it in his book *Medieval Popular Culture*, "A narrative about an otherworldly visit served in the hands of the clergy as an effective means of influencing the faithful" (Gurevich 110). By employing these hideous and terrifying creatures Dante began his mission of enlightenment. In reading the *Inferno* it is tempting to interpret Dante's descriptions of hell's monsters purely in a negative fashion as it seems Dante has nothing but contempt for these creatures – that they are despicable beings whose presence is a necessary evil. This interpretation is a mistake, however. The reality is Dante respects and admires the abilities of these creatures to punish and terrify and thus employs them in the highest calling of all – the service of God through punishment of the damned.

Conceptions of divine justice and its interpretation are hardly restricted to the *Commedia*. Conflicting theories of divine justice have been part and parcel of theological debates for time immemorial. In "God is Great, God is Good: Medieval Conceptions of Goodness and the

Problem of Hell” Kelly James Clark argues that the belief in eternal punishment of the damned such as the Dantean view is nonsensical. Dante’s Hell is one in which the damned are punished in the manner of the sin which put them there. With this she does not quarrel. The problem as she sees it is the notion of infinite punishment. Clark puts it this way:

In retributive punishment, the wicked person is repaid with harm for the harm he inflicted. In scripture retributive justice was delimited by ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’, which prevents exacting retributive punishment beyond the harm inflicted. One merits exactly the harm one has inflicted. To justify infinite torment, there must be infinite harm inflicted. The medievals believe that God has been infinitely sinned against. Has God been harmed? (23)

Kelly thinks not. Man can hurt man, but not God. As she sees it, unbelief and disobedience hurt us, not God (Clark 23). Clark then contrasts her argument with Eleonore Stump’s which argues the Dantean view that the damned are treated to God’s love by simply being allowed to exist, even if that existence is only in eternal torment. As she puts it, “Stump, on Dante’s view of hell, imagines that people may reasonably prefer eternal existence, apart from divine grace, because God has permitted the eternal willing of their preferred finite good,” such as lust or the accumulation of power, instead of the infinite good for which they were created, namely God himself. “In as sense,” Clark surmises Stumps position, “the damned simply get what they want” (24).

William G.T. Shedd would also agree with Stump on the question of just desserts. In his 1885 article “The Certainty of Endless Punishment,” Shedd is adamant in his belief that the damned seal their own fate:

The Bible and all the creeds of Christendom affirm man’s free agency in sinning against God. The transgression which is to receive endless punishment is voluntary.

Sin, whether it be inward inclination or outward act, is unforced human agency.

This is the uniform premise of Christian theologians of all schools. Endless punishment supposes the liberty of the human will, and is impossible without it.

(154)

In other words, by choosing the sinful path, man has chosen to betray God. This to Shedd, and more importantly to Dante, is unforgivable – and the most grievous of sins. The autonomy granted by God is therefore not without consequences. Free will, which generates the initial step by man toward or away from God, is replete with choices. As Dante saw it, the damned made poor choices when they betrayed God's trust and thus deserve His wrath. Paul G. Chevigny in "From Betrayal to Violence: Dante's *Inferno* and the Social Construction of Crime," traces the evolution of the notion of desert as it applies to the punishment of crime, juxtaposing the grading of crimes by Dante in his *Inferno* with the grading of crimes today. Chevigny points out that to Dante the most grievous crimes were not crimes of violence, but crimes of betrayal. As Chevigny puts it, Dante believed "fraud and betrayal were the most serious crimes because they were the most deliberate, the most calculated" (788). It is that calculation that so infuriates Dante and helps bring out his enjoyment of seeing the monsters give the damned their just desserts. John A. Scott in *Understanding Dante* finds the same hatred by Dante of fraud. As he puts it: "Fraud is declared to be most hateful to God, because it implies misuse of the God-given intellect, the very faculty intended to distinguish human beings from beasts" (193). Following the pattern of like begets like, it is easy to see why Dante would use beasts to punish those who he believed were no better than beasts.

Dante believed such betrayal and deceit deserved no mercy and thus no end to punishment. So too did many other theologians, including those cited above. While Shedd would agree with

Stump on the subject of free will, he would disagree vociferously with Clark on the correctness of eternal punishment. Shedd sees punishment, both divine and secular, not as a means of deterrence but as a means to exact retribution; deterrence is only secondary. In the case of divine justice, however, there can be no end to the transgressors punishment. Sin, as Shedd interprets it, is endless. And because it is endless, it must be punished endlessly. Shedd puts it this way:

Suffering must continue as long as the reason for it continues... Suffering that is educational and corrective may come to an end, because moral infirmity, and not guilt, is the reason for its infliction; and moral infirmity may cease to exist. But suffering that is penal can never come to an end, because guilt is the reason for its infliction, and guilt once incurred never ceases to be. (157)

Such an unyielding view may seem overly harsh, but it is a view that some find comforting as George McLean Harper expresses in "If Dante Were Alive." Written shortly after the turmoil and chaos of the First World War, Harper compares his time with the time of Dante. Harper posits that one of Dante's principal motivating factors in his writings was to help establish unity among men. This, according to Harper, was what Dante and his fellow thinkers cherished, and something which the absoluteness of Christian doctrine provided. Harper states that the modern world is not a world of which Dante would approve. According to Harper the modern world would "not seem to him a world, or cosmos, at all, but a chaos of meaningless and restless change, with no unity of structure, direction, or purpose" (263). The modern world is also not a world of which Harper entirely approves either. "The object cherished by the medieval mind was unity; the object most striven for by men of the Renaissance and of the modern time is diversity," declares Harper. He does not go so far as to wish for a complete reversion to the medieval mindset; he does, however, find a certain amount of comfort in the steadfast medieval belief of an absolute

power in control of things. “Call it what you please – liberty, independence, self-expression, expansion, specialization, progress – the new ideal is exactly opposite to the old” (261). And one which Harper is willing to sacrifice to a degree for – as he sees it – a more stable society.

Besides the less yielding views of people such as Harper, and particularly Shedd, there are some more nuanced views to be found in theological argument. In “Divine Punishment and Reconciliation,” J. Brenton Stearns takes a more forgiving tack than Shedd. Whereas Shedd takes the view that there is no end to punishment because there is ultimately no forgiveness, Brenton takes the approach that there is such a thing as forgiveness and redemption. His contention is that once forgiveness is granted endless punishment is no longer viable. As he puts it, “My aim in this essay is to set the concept of divine punishment loose from its ancient moorings in theologically based ethical theory, predestination, and anthropomorphic views of God” (119). Stearns does not propose that punishment is unjustified, but rather that there should be a possibility of redemption, even if that redemption ultimately leads to an end of punishment.

As we know, in Dante’s time there was no such thing as belief in an end to punishment once the dead were cast down into hell. Medieval people were extremely concerned about life after death and with prodding from vision writers such as Dante, the hell they imagined was a place which became a vivid reflection of their own consciousness. As Gurevich puts it, “[Medieval people] populated the realm of the dead with their own aspirations and nightmares and thereby embodied their collective mental complexes and obsessions in the scenes and images of the Other World” (104). Those imaginings, and the theories that generated them, were not always uniform. Some theologians even see demons as angelic. As one critic puts it, “These demons stay in rather association with man. According to their original meaning they are neutral entities or impersonal powers. In this sense angels are mainly demons” (Petzoldt 14). In essence, Petzoldt believes demons

serve as mediators between God and man. In Dante's *Inferno* the demons can in no way be interpreted as angels. They are neither neutral nor impersonal. Clearly they relish their work and so cannot be seen as impartial. They can, however, be seen as mediators. As the monsters inflict torment on the damned they are in essence serving as intermediaries between God and the souls of hell. While there is no chance at redemption for the damned they are still able to maintain contact with God in the manner described by Eleonore Stump.

In *Inferno* we see the nightmarish creatures of the medieval imagination brought to life by Dante. With his three heads and slobbering manner, in Cerberus Dante employs a particularly repugnant creature, something which was no accident. Thomas H. Seiler in "Filth and Stench as Aspects of the Iconography of Hell," claims that writers such as Dante:

seek to evoke the atmosphere of which they speak in quite specific images chosen to engage the auditor's sensory memory, and thus we find... that certain categories of images, drawn from the realities of people's lives, are used to characterize damnation and – the writers no doubt hoped – persuade to holiness by making the alternative profoundly repulsive. (133)

Past societies often created monsters and other kinds of demonic creatures out of a variety of mutations and deformities found in the animals surrounding them in the real world. Barbara D. Palmer in "The Inhabitants of Hell: Devils puts it best:

At first glance demons appear to be horrific, nightmarish creatures escaped from another world; consequent examination reveals that the elements which compound diabolic representation are in fact simples from the world of man, of nature and of sacred art. (26)

D.S. Lamb in his article “Mythical Monsters” suggests the same idea. As he puts it, “Among primitive peoples every material thing, every action, and every form of thought had its deity or demon” (278). Just as Palmer suggests Lamb states:

If we divide everything, visible and invisible, actions and modes of thought, into good and bad, helpful and hurtful, we shall find that almost without exception the good or helpful things were personified by forms that are natural or normal and comely, and the bad or hurtful by forms that are unnatural (so-called), abnormal, and uncomely, perhaps even hideous and monstrous. (278)

No one can argue that Cerberus, being both hideous and monstrous, fits Lamb's description perfectly.

Palmer presents a similar argument when she states that iconic images spring from the collective mind of the society in which they are introduced. As a result, she says, “Images of evil tend to reflect their cultural environment, its values, abuses, and terrors” (20). Palmer discusses as well how grotesque beings took on the forms of a variety of deformities from the many different animals seen in real life. Those deformities were then imaginatively put together into something hideous and terrifying. As she puts it, it is in essence “the expression of chaos, a disorientation from that which is recognized as divine or human order” (27). These man-made creatures represented medieval societies’ worst fears writ large, something which Dante put to full use as he created his vision of hell.

While Dante lacked no resoluteness in his ultimate aim to bring his fellow man back to the path of righteousness, whether or not they followed that path was not up to him – man comes to God of his own free will. Nonetheless, he would provide them a path to salvation, monumental a task as it was. As A.N. Williams puts it:

The extent to which salvation depends on human decisions and human actions – whether the choice to believe rather than not, or to live a life of virtue or of vice – has been sharply contested in the history of Christian theology, yet the conviction that human beings can affect their own, and even others', salvation, is the dominant theological idea in the *Comedy*" (202).

From its publication the *Commedia* has been interpreted as a theological poem, something which Dante did little to dissuade. As one critic puts it, "Given Dante's reputation as a 'Christian Classic,' it may seem that the core faith that informed his life was much like that of other medieval Catholics. This is very much the impression he wants to give – of someone fitting into the received faith rather than blazing trails" (Hawkins 99). While there is no doubt that Dante was indeed trying to blaze new trails – for example with his terza rima rhyme scheme – Dante intended the tone of his *Commedia* to be suitably conventional in its piety.

The piety found in the *Commedia*, while theoretically conventional, should not be interpreted as conceptually unoriginal, however. As Karl Vossler puts it, "Genuine piety can flourish in every church, in every creed and cult. Its value lies in the spontaneity and confidence, not in the dogmatic correctness, of the faith" (54). Piety, as Vossler finds it, is something which is in a constant state of flux as the tenets of a faith change. As he puts it:

[Piety] has its history, its crises, catastrophes, and revolutions, its rises, declines, and re-births, its creators, leaders, discoverers, and heroes, its camp-followers, traitors, and foes. In this chain of events, dogma plays the role of a bulwark or of a stronghold which is reared, built, fortified, and again undermined, captured, destroyed, and yet again created in new forms – by piety. (54-55)

Dante would have agreed wholeheartedly. The Dantean view of hell, formed in great part by the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, places the damned there of their own free will. Those cast down to the fires of hell have failed in their responsibility to manage the gift of free will in concert with God's divinity. Otto W. Heick in his book *A History of Christian Thought* sums up Aquinas's belief in spiritual responsibility when he says, "Predestination to life is absolute, whereas damnation is the fault of man who 'fails to obtain it [grace] through mortal sin...' Aquinas follows Augustine quite closely but is anxious to warn the faithful against complacency" (284-285). The crux of the problem for Aquinas, and later Dante, was finding the right balance. As Vossler describes it:

The problem, to put it briefly, was to give adequate value to Nature's moral law without destroying the precedence of the divine law of grace. Between Augustine, who was inclined to sacrifice the first to the second, and the apostles of culture, who would give up the latter for the former, some middle ground must be discovered (275).

Aquinas attempted to find that middle ground by wedding the two disparate principles of reason and divinity, though ultimately he was unable to combine the opposing ideas to his satisfaction. Fusion of the two principles would have been easiest for Aquinas as he attempted to make his case. As Vossler puts it:

He would then have taught that by obedience to moral law man resists evil; by submission to the law of grace he devotes himself to the good. The first law is the negative and the second the positive side of one and the same principle. By asserting his own worth, by moral conduct, man satisfies his conscience and acquires inward harmony; by surrender to a higher power, by piety, he obtains the gift of grace, blessedness, and puts himself in harmony with the universe and with God. As the

critical philosopher refutes error and the intuitive champion of the faith receives the truth, so man's character fights sin, and his piety receives the reward. (276)

This is too simple for Aquinas, however. According to Vossler, the problem for Aquinas is that "God appears at odds with Himself, and the oft-disputed question arises again as to whether He acts in accordance with fixed law and by necessity, or solely in accordance with His will" (277). As Vossler describes, Dante had to make a decision:

He had the choice of three ways. First: to conceal and bridge over the gap by mystical ties and by logical subtleties, propping up the unstable partition between earthly morality and divine grace as well as he could. So Thomas had done. Second: to sacrifice boldly one of the two principles, and either, after the example of Augustine... to accept a supernatural and voluntaristic scope for moral action, or [thirdly], following Averroes and the apostles of culture, to adopt a naturalistic and intellectualistic conception of it. (277)

Instead of choosing one, however, Dante chose all three. "On the theological and psychological side, his ethics is Thomistic," says Vossler, "on the philosophical-historical and political side it is influenced by Augustine and the Franciscans, but betrays at the same time a vein of rationalism and intellectualism that points unmistakably to Averroes" (278) Nonetheless, the genius of Dante was to bring these seemingly irreconcilable approaches together. As Vossler puts it:

There can be but few examples of an ethico-political creed which, in so far as its philosophical sources are concerned, appears so comprehensive, many-sided, and contradictory, and on the other hand so compact, so direct and effective, as it wells from the inner spring of personality. (278)

It is with that inner spring of personality that Dante begins his epic. Dante wastes no time influencing the faithful as he takes them on a journey into the realm of sinners where insidious creatures make it their business to punish the wicked. Through his use of language Dante indicates his appreciation for these monsters. We see this for the first time on the shore of Acheron when Charon rages at Dante and Virgil for daring to attempt to cross the river. Virgil addresses Charon harshly at first: “Charon, bite back your spleen:/ this has been willed where what is willed must be,/ and is not yours to ask what it may mean” (Ciardi III, 91-93). Such a rebuke is expected. The monsters are in charge of the souls of hell, but not in charge of the still living, as Dante remains. Living souls have the gift of free will, something which the souls of hell obviously made poor use. It is for that reason that Virgil says to Dante: “No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing;/ therefore if Charon rages at your presence/ you will understand the reason for his cursing” (Ciardi 124-126). Mark Musa, in his translation *The Portable Dante*, uses somewhat different wording but the thrust of the passage is the same: “A good soul never comes to make this crossing,/ so, if Charon grumbles at the sight of you,/ you can see now what his words are really saying” (127-129). Whether he rages or grumbles, it is clear that Charon is unhappy with Dante’s presence. Nonetheless, the poet, by way of Virgil, has made it clear that Charon is simply doing his job and therefore should not be judged so harshly by Dante.

The poet’s relatively positive treatment of Charon is not unique. Dating back at least to the fifth or sixth centuries B.C. in Etruscan art, Charon is “always a fearsome, and often a gruesome figure, with flaming eyes and savage aspect” (Sullivan 15). This is very much the figure found in *Inferno* who Dante describes as “the ancient steersman of the livid marsh,/ whose eyes were set in glowing wheels of fire” (Musa III, 98-99). Over the ages, the depiction of Charon changed according to the beliefs of the particular time. In some he was pictured as an old man, in others he

was described as young and heroic. His mood toward his work shifted with the times as well. As Sullivan puts it, "It varies according as men conceive him as a minister and messenger of God, or as a free agent, responsible to no one else" (16). Dante chose to make him an agent of God and as such "someone who is straightly charged by God to ravish souls" (Sullivan 16). It is entirely appropriate then that Virgil would serve as something of an apologist for Dante's Charon.

It is the liberty of the human will with its risk of falling into complacency of which Aquinas warned that brings the souls of hell in to the presence of Minos, the judge of the damned. Minos, as he decides the fates of the souls, is another example of a creature who manages to impress Dante. In Ciardi's translation, Dante describes him as "grinning, grotesque, and hale" (V, 4). Grotesque speaks for itself; there is no ambiguity there. Whereas grinning could be taken lightheartedly in other contexts, there is no such possibility in this case. We can clearly feel the malevolence of Minos's grin here. In Mark Musa's translation that sense of malevolence is no less intense: "There stands Minos grotesquely, and he snarls,/ examining the guilty at the entrance;/ he judges and dispatches, tail in coils" (4-6). We see yet another example of Dante's favoritism towards the monsters when he describes Minos as "that grim sorter of the dark and foul" (Ciardi 9). Minos is not dark and foul, it is the souls of Hell that are. Musa's translation is just as convincing in its approving tone of Dante towards Minos. Describing Minos as he goes about his task, Musa translates it thus: "By this I mean that when the evil soul/ appears before him, it confesses all,/ and he, who is the expert judge of sins,// knows what place in Hell the soul belongs;" (7-10). Once again, it is the souls who get the point of Dante's pen, not Minos. It is the souls that are evil, whereas Minos is the quintessential arbiter of each individual's fall from grace. With his stern and unyielding demeanor Minos is not unhappy or sad in his position. Quite the contrary; one feels his sense of enjoyment as he coils his tale about him to assign each soul to its ring. And as

such, one gets the sense that Dante enjoys it as well. Through his choice of words Dante has given Minos, and the power he wields, a positive spin.

There seems to be no positive spin as Dante and Virgil descend to the Third Circle where the Gluttons wallow in putrid mud as the three-headed beast Cerberus stands guard over them. Dante's description of the beast presents an extraordinarily offensive creature at first: "His eyes are red, his beard is greased with phlegm,/ his belly is swollen..." (Ciardi VI, 16-17). Robert Pinsky in his translation paints a similar picture: "His eyes are red, his beard/ Grease-black, he has the belly of a meat-feeder" (14-15). With such an explicit description the reader is well aware of the repulsive nature of this monster. This fits with the initial expectation of Dante's abhorrence of the monsters. The stanza finishes, however, with a different sentiment: "and his hands are claws/ to rip the wretches and flay and mangle them" (Ciardi 17-18). Musa's translation is essentially the same: "and he has claws for hands;/ he rips the spirits, flays and mangles them" (17-18). With these words Dante again cleverly gives a horrid creature his stamp of approval through the subterfuge of his word choice, in this case with the word "and". By using "and," Dante causes his reader to mistakenly include the sensations of the first half of the stanza with those of the second, thus interpreting the description of the claws in a negative manner. Dante's description of the claws, however, is just the opposite. One must remember, the souls of Hell are there to be punished and what better way than for Cerberus to use those claws than to "*rip* the wretches and *flay* and *mangle* them" [italics mine]. Rip, flay, mangle: these words are extraordinary in their ferocity, not to mention directness, and as such bring up vivid images of intense violence for the reader.

Just as Dante described Minos with his evil grin, we find it also in his description of Cerberus: "When Cerberus discovered us in that swill/ his dragon jaws yawed wide, his lips drew back in a grin of fangs" (Ciardi VI, 22-24). In this description of Cerberus, with his "grin of fangs,"

Dante conveys his feelings of genuine fear at the sight of this monster that harasses him. But, it is interesting that again Dante would describe one of these foul creatures as grinning. It is that description of a monster grinning which gives the reader the sense of satisfaction each monster gets from its job. They love it, and can't wait to punish these souls. And neither can Dante.

While Cerberus is described revoltingly by Dante, Phlygeas is given much more credit by the pilgrim. With Phlygeas, Dante starts out with a compliment in his description of Phlygeas's handling of his craft: "No twanging bowspring ever shot an arrow/ that bored the air it rode dead to the mark/ more swiftly than the flying skiff whose prow shot toward us" (Ciardi VIII, 13-16). That is unmistakably approving, both in its wording and its tone. While Ciardi's translation is more hyperbolic, other translations suggest the same sense of approval of Phlygeas's handling of his craft. Whether it be the Pinsky translation: "Bow never drove/ Arrow through air so quickly as then came/ Skimming across the water a little skiff" (13-15) or Musa's translation: "A bowstring never shot an arrow off/ that cut the thin air any faster than a little boat I saw that very second// skimming along the water in our direction" (13-16), Dante's tone can only be interpreted as one of admiration.

Depending on the translation, Phlygeas either continues to be respected by Dante or suffers his contempt once Virgil rebukes Phlygeas for descending on them. In the Ciardi translation Phlygeas is described with utter scorn: "Phlygeas, the madman, blew his rage among/ those muddy marshes like a cheat deceived,/ or like a fool at some imagined wrong" (22-24). In an instant, Phlygeas has gone from the hero (of a sort) to the goat. Musa's translation is less scathing: "As one who learns of some incredible trick/ just played on him flares up resentfully -- / so, Phlygeas there was seething in his anger" (22-24). Phlygeas is painted here more as a victim of misrepresentation than a fool, his seething even justifiable. Ultimately, it is Pinsky's translation which puts Phlygeas in

the best light: “Like one convinced that he has been the butt/ Of gross deception, and bursting to complain,/ Phlygeas held his wrath” (21-23). By Phlygeas holding his temper, Dante suggests a sense of composure in Phlygeas. Such composure despite “bursting to complain” is the antithesis of a monster such as Cerberus, whose wrath can only be contained by drawing his attention elsewhere. Cerberus is quieted with two fistfuls of slop hurled down his throat, his wrath controlled by another. Phlygeas, on the other hand, is in control of his emotions. He is furious, but he is able to check that fury. The assignment of such a quality denotes the poet’s willingness to grant considerably human traits to creatures which are expected to be intractably inhuman.

It is with Dante’s description of the Centaurs, particularly with their leader Chiron, that Dante illustrates not only approval, but genuine respect. The Centaurs patrol the banks of the River of Blood, seeing to it that those who were violent against their neighbors stay in this river of boiling blood. Whereas many of the monsters thus far encountered seem to operate more on instinct than intellect – Cerberus being the prime example – the Centaurs seem unusually thoughtful. For instance, the first Centaur we meet (who is not identified) gives a warning to Virgil and Dante before firing an arrow: “To what pain are you sent down that dark coast?/ Answer or I draw the bow” (Ciardi XII, 62-63). Rather than react rashly to these interlopers, as Cerberus did when he confronted the pair, the Centaur tries to get a handle on the situation before springing into action. The Centaur is not reluctant to apply the necessary force, though, and gives a strong warning which is particularly evident in the Pinsky translation: “Tell us from there – if not, I draw my bow” (56). Here the message is clear – the Centaur will allow no one to come in to his territory that does not belong there and in essence he draws a line for Dante and Virgil.

The Centaurs are observant, thinking creatures, none more so than Chiron. When Virgil and Dante approach the Centaurs, Dante describes Chiron as drawing back an arrow “in a

thoughtful pause” (Ciardi 76). And it is in that thoughtful pause that Chiron recognizes that Dante is not yet dead. He says to his fellow Centaurs: “Have you noticed/ how the one who walks behind moves what he touches?// That is not how the dead go” (Ciardi 80-82). With that, Chiron has demonstrated the power to reason, something that Virgil recognizes and respects, although Dante is a little slow on the uptake: “I turned then/ to speak to the Poet but he raised a hand:/ ‘Let him be the teacher now, and I will listen”” (Ciardi 112-114). With Chiron, the poet has now moved from praise for physical skills, such as was given to Phlygeas for the superior handling of his boat, to the praising of both physical prowess as well as an engaging mental acuity. Pinsky’s translation is equally respectful: “I turned toward the poet, whose answer was,// ‘Let him be first guide, I your second, now”” (105-106). Musa’s translation manages to give a sense of irritation with Dante on the part of Virgil: “With that I looked to Virgil, but he said/ ‘Let him instruct you now, don’t look to me”” (113-114). In the Ciardi and Pinsky translations Virgil seems the gentle teacher while in the Musa translation Virgil seems more the harsh schoolmaster. Regardless of translation, however, through Virgil the poet has given very high praise to a creature that abides in a place whose inhabitants can seem without intellectual insight of any kind.

Geryon, the monster of fraud, is another dichotomy. Dante’s first description of Geryon is scathing and contemptuous, describing him as the “filthy prototype of fraud” (Ciardi XVII, 7). Musa’s translation is equally harsh as Geryon is described as “that repulsive spectacle of fraud” (7). Pinsky’s translation, which is opposite the original Italian and arguably the most accurate to the original, is equally damning as Geryon is described as “frauds foul emblem” (6). Dante describes how Geryon’s duplicitous nature is manifested in his physical makeup: “His face was innocent of every guile,/ benign and just in feature and expression” (Ciardi 10-11). As is often found in the Ciardi translation, a monster is described more glowingly than Dante may have intended. Pinsky’s

translation is more terse: “His face was just a man’s face, outwardly kind” (9). Musa’s translation takes a more middle course: “His face was the face of any honest man,/ it shone with such a look of benediction” (10-11). Musa’s version is almost as complimentary to Geryon as Ciardi’s – backhanded a compliment though it is. Dante then contrasts that innocent demeanor to the reptilian body with its “two paws hairy to the armpits,” and how “His back and breast and both sides down to the shank// Were painted with designs of knots and circlets” (Pinsky 11-13). Such a rendering gives the reader a vivid picture of little more than a mindless beast, in this case to be put to work as one might put any beast of burden.

It seems Virgil has little regard for Geryon as well, evidenced when he says to Dante, “Behold the beast that makes the whole world stink” (Ciardi 3). The Pinsky translation appears even more damning as Dante describes Geryon as the beast which “makes the stench of which the world is full!” (3). In other words Dante editorializes about the state of the world above, which already has more than its share of corruption and fraud. Nonetheless, Dante immediately “signal[s] the weird beast to come to ground” (Ciardi 5). By signaling Geryon and the beast responding, one might feel justified in seeing Geryon as just another beast of burden. Just as an ox might be signaled to start down a row or a horse might be signaled to go to the right, so Virgil signals Geryon to come to him, which Geryon does. But to assume Geryon is no more than a creature of service would be a mistake, one which is proven just a little later in the canto. When Virgil sends Dante off to talk with the usurers who crouch nearby, he says, “Til you return, I’ll parley with this beast,/ So we may borrow his shoulders” (Pinsky 35-36). Dante describes Geryon in less glowing terms in this version, simply referring to Geryon’s shoulders, unlike Ciardi’s translation which uses more appreciative language: “I will stay/ and reason with this beast till you return, / that his *strong back* [italics mine] may serve us on our way” (37-39). Musa also translates

Dante's words in an equally positive way with Virgil saying that he will ask Geryon "for the loan of his strong back" (42). No matter what translation is used, however, there is one inescapable fact which is that Geryon is not a mindless beast but rather a creature that must be treated with a certain degree of respect. One does not reason with an ox or a horse or any such animal; one tells it what to do. Not so, with Geryon. Virgil doesn't even say that Geryon's strong back *will* serve them, but only that it "may" serve them. In other words, it will serve them only if Geryon agrees to it. Once again, we find a creature with at least a certain degree of autonomy, quite unlike the souls who have been damned and no longer decide their fate.

It is in Dante's depiction of his encounter with the demons that guard the grafters of Hell that Dante is simultaneously terrified and excited. One gets the sense of an almost childlike quality when he says, "I turned like one who cannot wait to see/ the thing he dreads" (Ciardi XXI, 25-26). He sees "a Demon huge and black" running at him (30). His reaction to this is telling when he exclaims, "Ah what a face he had, all hate and wildness!" (31). Such an exclamation can be interpreted in at least two ways. On one hand, it can be interpreted strictly as fear; this monster's visage strikes terror into the heart of Dante. In fact, one translation has Dante proclaiming his fear outright: "His face, his look, how frightening it was!" (Musa 31). On the other hand, Dante's exclamation can be interpreted as excitement; Dante is thrilled at the sight of this monster that terrorizes and punishes the souls in his charge. There is a third interpretation however, and the one which makes the most sense, which is that Dante is experiencing both these emotions. The exclamation point at the end of the line punctuates both the terror and the thrill that Dante is experiencing. Within moments of that initial reaction, however, Dante settles into the mode of a spectator watching something which is performed well. Just as Dante recognized the skill with which Phlygeas piloted his boat, so too does he approve of the manner the demon goes about his

job: “At once the Demon/spun from the cliff; no mastiff ever sprang/more eager from the leash to chase a felon” (Ciardi 43-45). Musa’s translation is similarly effusive: “No hound unleashed to chase a thief/ could have taken off with greater speed than he” (44-45). In Pinsky’s translation Dante gives the strongest impression of the desire of the monster to get at the damned when he says “no mastiff/ Was ever more impatient to shake the leash// And run his fastest after a fleeing thief” (44-46). Once again, in each translation we can hear Dante’s appreciation for the way the demon torments his prey, just as Dante would have it.

In the first lines of his book on Dante, Peter S. Hawkins states flatly “Any study of Dante must begin with the man himself: there is no getting around him. Indeed, Dante has made it impossible for us *not* to look for him or read his work as autobiographical” (1). One is hard pressed to disagree with that assertion. Virtually everything Dante wrote sprang from his life and the events which shaped it, not the least his exile from his beloved Florence. It is not surprising then that Dante would to a great extent people his *Inferno* with those toward whom he felt extreme ill will. Add to that those figures from history that disrupted the unity among men so cherished by Dante and one is able to process the idea that Dante would want the most vicious characters he could find to mete out divine justice with impunity. That is not to say Dante had no misgivings about these creatures with their dark spirits. On the face of it they were evil, something which often gave Dante the pilgrim pause. But, Dante the poet found solace in the fact that through their evil ways God’s work could begin to be accomplished.

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