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Ironic in the underworlds of Dante and Virgil: Readings of Francesca and Palinurus

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to draw readers’ attention to a similarity of poetic procedure in the underworlds of Dante and Virgil: namely, the ironic presentation of the souls of the damned in the Inferno and also, as I propose here, of the shades who speak (or, in the case of Dido, fail to speak) with Aeneas in the underworld in Aeneid 6. In both texts, degrees of self-misrepresentation and/or self-delusion shape the utterances of the underworld speakers, with the effect that readers are invited to see these speakers differently from the way that they see and present themselves. I would ask my own readers please to note that I am not proposing that Dante derived this application of irony from Virgil: intentional borrowing of this trope would be impossible to prove. In addition, I myself do not hold such firm conviction on the matter as to put forward this argument. Nevertheless, the similarity of the two poets’ use of this ironic procedure in their underworlds, as I do propose to argue, has potential interpretive resonance for both texts. Consequently, I wish to set forth for other readers of Dante and Virgil my understanding of how irony, the constitutive trope of the Inferno, figures as poetic procedure in Aeneid 6 as well. Similarity of practice, of course, does not necessarily entail similarity of significance or effect. Indeed, on my reading, the irony that I observe in these two texts subserves virtually antithetical purposes. In my conclusion, therefore, I will speculate briefly on differences

1. I follow the definition of irony in Quintilian: that it is a function of difference, discrepancy, contradiction. Quint. Inst. 8.8.54: “in eo utero genere quo contraria ostenduntur icta est...quia aut pronuntiatione intelligiunt aut persona aut rei natura: nam si quae eumus utili disserent, appareat discensus esse creatissimi subternatur.” See also W. Booth, Rhetoric of Fiction, Chicago 1974, p. 183, the fundamental text of irony is disparity. Julian Freccero’s Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell, M.S.L. 96, 1983, pp. 769-786 is a crucial study for irony in the Inferno. See also his Introduction to Inferno, in Cambridge Companion to Dante, ed. R. Jacob, Cambridge 1993, pp. 172-195; specifically, p. 175: “Each encounter in Hell amounts to the ironic undercutting of the values enunciated by the separate characters...since these values are undermined by the fact of being championed by the damned.”
between what I perceive to be Dante’s Christian irony vs. Virgil’s pagan irony.

**Irony in the Inferno**

In the Inferno there is consistent, if subtle, disparity between the claims of the souls of the damned and the justice of God that condemned them to Inferno, as the inscription above the entrance to Inferno makes unambiguous:

> giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;  
> fecemi la divina podestà,  
> la somma sapienza e' l primo amore. (Inf 3.4-6)

Although intending in some way to justify their actions and/or to elicit pity from Dante-pilgrim, these speakers nevertheless reveal—despite themselves—that they fail to acknowledge or indeed still love their sin, and thus fail to see themselves as God sees them. While recognition of this ironic representation of the damned is currently an accepted reading among Anglo-American scholars of Dante, it is not so for scholars of any nationality with respect to the souls encountered in Virgil’s underworld. Therefore, in proposing this perspective on the reading of Virgil’s underworld interviews, I may perhaps add further resonance to our readings of Aeneid 6 and perhaps, as well, contribute indirectly to the plausibility of the ironic reading of the Inferno.

Many Dante scholars argue that irony is a constitutive trope of the Inferno. As a conversion narrative, the Commenda entails necessarily a discrepancy in perspective between Dante-pilgrim and Dante-poet. This discrepancy, whence results the irony of which

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2. For reviews of the history of American readings of Dante, see A. Banfi, *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, Turin 1997, pp. 19-24; R. Holland, *Theologische Fakten, «Dante Studies»* 94, 1976, pp. 95-126, and Dante and His Commentators, in Cambridge Companion, pp. 226-36; R. Jacoff, Introduction, pp. xi-xvii in J. Fresco, *Dante: The Poetry of Conversion*, Cambridge, MA 1988. American readings of Dante have become characteristically theological, while, on the other hand, romantic and poet-romantic (generally European) readings of Dante tend to interpret speakers in Inf. as heroic and tragic in their individual strivings. Fresco, *Infernal Irony*, p. 779: "...the history of Dante criticism is filled with debates between partisans of 'Divine Justice' on one hand and of 'humanity' on the other. The debates are confined to the Inferno because of the ironic mode of the representation, a consistent contradiction of the perspective of the pilgrim by the perspective of the poet." Similarly in Jacoff, ed., *Cambridge Companion*, p. 184: "...the dichotomy of conversion...is the source of the irony that is pervasive in the Inferno" (i.e., since it privileges the perspective of the conclusion).
I speak, is manifest in the gap between the knowledge and perspective of Dante-pilgrim, a lost soul accompanied through Inferno by "Virgil," and Dante-poet, who writes from the perspective of revealed truth. The perspectives of Dante-pilgrim and Dante-poet are not fully joined until the revelations of Paradiso. In making Dante-pilgrim converse with the damned in Inferno, Dante-poet has the opportunity to portray the faults of the damned as well as those of his prior self. The souls of the damned are, then, "unreliable narrators" in their responses to Dante-pilgrim's questioning. Dante-pilgrim, along with many readers, may initially fail to appreciate the irony in these infernal portraits, since readers are most likely to fail to perceive irony when the ironized values coincide with their own. Thus readers of certain sensibilities are moved, for example, by the passion and romance of Francesca and Paolo in canto 5; the humanistic values of Brunetto Latini in canto 15; the fearless questing of Ulysses in canto 26. Yet sympathy for these characters must ultimately be a snare and a delusion, as their place in God's scheme necessarily shows. That the reader should wish otherwise (cf. e.g., Dante-pilgrim in Inf. 15.79-81) should serve as a warning of the reader's own unilluminated state. Dante-pilgrim's journey is salvific for himself and is divinely sanctioned (Paradiso 17.23, 25) to be so for readers.

It is not impossible that Dante might have seen a model of this ironic (as in Quintilian's understanding of irony as defined by difference or discrepancy) representational mode in Aeneid 6. Scholars at least since Servius noted the discrepancy or contradiction between the account of Palinurus' death by the Aeneid narrator at the end of Aeneid 5 and Palinurus' own account to Aeneas in the underworld in Aeneid 6. The discrepancies are stark and thus create an interpretive "gap" that scholars have filled in various ways. The traditional explanation of the discrepancies is that Virgil's death prevented his intended revision of the poem, which, it is assumed, would have included the harmonizing of variant accounts of Palinurus' death. Yet, the differences between the passages are not trivial, and they can lead to questions

5. Freccero, Infernal Irony, p. 785; "The journey that Dante depicts is both a critique of human society and of his own illusionary self.


5. As set forth in note 1, above.
of great moral and theological consequence. Further, Palmarus’ own account of the event is more credible to himself than is the narrator’s account; indeed, Palmarus’ account has the character of a protestation of innocence. 6 (Analogous disparities may be argued for both Dido and Desphobus.)

Aeneas (pilgrim) addresses three shades in the underworld (four including the exceptional episode with Anchises 7), Dante-pilgrim a lengthy series. Treatment of irony in all these exchanges would become repetitive, and for Dante, in any case, has already been done for many speakers by accomplished scholars. 9 Therefore, to argue for my reading of parallel or analogous irony in the Inferno and Aeneid underworlds, I propose to study the first of the interlocutors in each text, thus Francesca da Rimini in Inferno 5 and Palmarus in Aeneid 6, assuming that, by virtue of primacy, they are to a great degree paradigmatic and thus offer a legitimate basis for comparison.

IRONY IN THE INFERNO: FRANCESCA DA RIMINI

In reading this “structurally determining” “key episode” that resonates throughout the poem 10 I rely on the work done by a number of critics whose insights I gratefully summarize. 11

6. C. Connelly, The Unquiet Grave by Palmarus, 1944, repr. New York 1999, p. 134. In the “Epilogue” to this memoir/novel from the second World War period, Connelly offers his novelist’s imaginative “case study” of the character of Palmarus in the Aeneid, in which he points to resonant implications of this discontinuous portrait. Full discussion below.

7. I will study irony in all three speakers more fully in a forthcoming essay.

8. The Anchises passage is commonly interpreted as parallel to Cacciaguida’s investiture of Dante-pilgrim in Par. 17 with the mission of writing this poem, termed “sacro poema” (Par. 25-6a) and “poema sacro” (Par. 25-5).


10. Iannacci, Contemporary Perspectives, p. 271.

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This episode offers a brilliantly condensed, resonant characterization of both Francesca and Dante-pilgrim, who catches sight of Francesca in the second circle of Inferno, amongst those condemned for lust. As in the world above these souls were carried away by their desires, so in Inferno they are blown about eternally by infernal winds.

Enno danniti i peccator cartali,  
che la ragion sommestunto al talento...

Nulla speranza li conforta mai,  
non ché di pena, ma di minor pena (5.18-19, 46-47)

Unlike others, such as Dido, who appear in Inferno's second circle, Francesca is a contemporary of Dante. As Francesca tells her story in response to Dante-pilgrim's questioning, quite a full portrait emerges: Francesca was married to the brother of Paolo; together the two spent time reading a book of courtly love, specifically the story of the forbidden love of Lancelot and Guinevere. Impassioned (repeatedly: "per più fiante," 5.36) by the story, they are drawn to enact their own illicit romance. Francesca's husband, on discovering the affair, kills the two of them. Presently, then, they find themselves, buffeted by winds, coupled for eternity, in the second circle of hell. This story is so seductive to unsaved readers of a certain sensibility that they, along with Dante-pilgrim (who falls in a dead faint to end the canto), extract from it only thrilling tragic romance. Dante-pilgrim is moved by pity, he claims; but also, as Dante-poet allows, from unrenounced love of the very values of courtly poetry that led Francesca and Paolo to their fatal sin. Dante-poet now sees, however, the couple's condemnable failure to act on love's correct nature and purposes, the models of which are embodied in the salvific love of Beatrice for Dante. Paradiso 33 "enables us to judge Paolo and Francesca correctly."

[12] Note every observation, but refer readers to these studies generally. See also A. Quaglio, Enciclopedia Danteana, Vol. 12, pp. 143, 465, "Francesca da Rimini" for discussion of readings by many (generally Italian) scholars.


I son Beatrice che ti faccio andare;  
vegno del loco e vene tornar diso;
The irony in this episode results from the discrepancy between Francesca’s manner of telling her story — which has the character of a defense and whose unexpressed purpose is to elicit pity from Dante’s pilgrim — and the truth as we must infer it from her condemnation to Inferno. Briefly: Francesca, still imbued with the values of courtly love, speaks in the vocabulary of courtly romance (Singleton ad loc.). Claiming that a “cor gentil” (which, by implication, she and Paolo have) is necessarily responsive to love, she blames the unhappy outcome of her life not on her own self and sin, but on love:

Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende... (100)

Amor, ch’a mulo amato amar perdona,
mi preso del cosui placer si forte,
ché, come vedi, ancor non m’abbandona.
Amor conduce me ad una morte. (105-106)\(^4\)

She blames also the book, as if it had agency, as a panderer, a “Galeotto [who arranged for Lancelot and Guinevere to meet] fu’ libro e chi lo scrisse” (5.137). In implicitly attributing to herself (and Paolo) a gentle heart, she praises herself, as also in the self-aware sensuality of her fair body. Desire lives in the powerful physical memory of Paolo’s loss on her mouth. Therefore, “quel giorno più non vi leggessimo avanti” (5.138).\(^5\) Despite eternal punishment, Francesca still wants the beautiful (5.104) Paolo, who will be with her always (“questi, che mai da me non fia di-

\(^{14}\) Commentators reference the Canzonie of Guido Guinizelli, beginning “Al cor gentil rimpianga sempre amore, come il faggio in selva a la verdura.”

\(^{15}\) Barolini, Dante and Francesca, p. 28, n. 61 and others read Francesca as a poor reader because of her incomplete or imperfectly remembered reading of the Lancelot story. I suggest that there may be another instance of her misreading, seemingly not proposed by Dante scholars. Francesca says:

“Nessun maggior dolore
che ricordarsi del tempo felice
ne la miseria; ciò è ‘l noo dotore.” Inf. 5.121-123.

C. Singleton, ed. and trans., Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, 3 vols., Princeton 1970, ad loc. references comparable sentiments in Augustine, Aquinas, and Boethius. However, I propose that by saying “as your teacher knows,” Francesca takes the citation from Virgil specifically. I propose further, therefore, that, as a bad reader, she may be mis-remembering, indeed completely inverting, the meaning of Aeneas’ melancholy encouragement to his men in Aen. 1.203: *fuerat et hanc ulum memoriam nutata.* His tense there, the very contrary of her point here, is that in the future there will be some pleasure in reflecting on past grief survived.
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viso," 5.335).16 Paolo, as often noted, speaks not a word, but only weeps, thus revealing that it is Francesca who is the dominant of the two. Francesca’s anticipation of vengeance for their murders ("Catha attende chi a vita ci spense," 5.107) further hints at her willful strength of character.

Francesca is not the only target of Dante-poet’s irony. As Dante scholars note, Dante himself had earlier written this style of poetry. Here in Inferno Dante-pilgrim reveals his continuing enchantment with fabled ladies and lordly gentlemen ("Le donin antiche c’ cavalieri," 5.71). He is, indeed, lost ("fui quasi smarrito," 5.72; cf. "la diritta via era smarrita," 1.3). Further to his discredit is not only his voyeuristic curiosity about the details of the affair ("Ma dimmi: al tempo di dolci sospiri, a che e come congedate amore/che conosciaste i dubiosi disti?" 5.118-20), but also his agreement that it was love that made them act on their desires. Misplaced pity (117, 140) at the tragic tale overwhelms him, as he falls heavily in a faint ("e caddi come corpo morto cade," 5.142). Dante-poet thus underlines the physicality of the error of both Francesca and himself/Dante-pilgrim. While explicit authorial judgment is lacking here, as elsewhere throughout, the ironic disparity between the characters’ utterances and their context allows willing readers to infer the moral meaning of the episode.17

To summarize: As Francesca tells her story, she inadvertently – ironically – reveals the justice of God’s judgment in placing her in Inferno. She fails to confess; she fails to take responsibility as a moral Christian agent; she fails to see herself or her sin as God sees her and it. Dante-pilgrim’s response implicitly reveals his own debased spiritual state, as he is too taken with chivalric lords and ladies, too curious for details, too moved by what is in fact not a tragic story, but a story of sin and just punishment.18

16. For Poggioli (Paolo e Francesca), p. 64, a cry of possession, where pride misleads with despair.
17. Poggioli, Paolo e Francesca, p. 78: "Though verbally unasserted, Dante’s judgment...his moral message is implicit in the situation and structure of the story, so that no further intervention on the poet’s part is required to make it meaningful to us." Barallos, Dante and Francesca, p. 8: "Dante-pilgrim’s curiosity is an "act of voyeurism that the text both solicits and rebukes." Similarly, p. 9: "...narrator’s moral clarity (carnal sinners who subject reason to desire) has given way to the pilgrim’s moral confusion."
18. Poggioli, Paolo e Francesca, p. 66 suggests that the effect is to evoke, but the purpose is to exercise, romantic love.
IRON IN THE AENEID: PALINURUS

As noted above, discrepancy in the accounts of Palinurus’ death creates a ‘gap,’ an interpretive space that has been filled by readers in different ways. However interpreted, the verses comprising the Palinurus episode engage issues crucial to Dante’s faith, e.g., guilt, punishment, gods’ justice, redemption, eternity (of one’s name or of one’s soul).

To resume the discrepancies: In Aeneid 5 – as told by the Aeneid narrator – the weather is calm; Palinurus, the helmsman, alone is awake. The god Sleep (Somnus) comes to him (cf. Palinure, petens, 5.840), bringing bad/fatal dreams (somnia tristia, 5.840). (The narrator’s apostrophe to Palinurus heightens the pathos of the scene.) Assuming the form of Phorbas (presumably dead at Troy, I.14.490), Somnus urges that Palinurus put down his head in sleep while he, Somnus, takes over the helm. Palinurus resists this urging, for, he says, he knows the sea’s treachery. The passage is freighted with terms of moral import: the narrator describes Palinurus as incutit (5.841). Phorbas implies that giving in to sleep is a kind of theft (famure, 5.845). In Palinurus’ world the sea has moral valence: it is a deceptive monster (monstro, 5.849; fraude, 5.851). For him, he says, dedicated as he is, sleep would constitute a violation of trust (Aenean credam... fallaxibus auris? 5.850). Not to be put off, however, Somnus overcomes Palinurus with Lethean sleep and casts him into the sea:

\[
\begin{align*}
et & \text{ super incumbens cum puppis parte reunusa} \\
& \text{ cumque gubernaculo liquidas protecit in undas} \\
& \text{ praecipitam ac socios nequisquam sape uocantem. (5.858-560)}
\end{align*}
\]

Curiously, Palinurus drags with him as he falls both the tiller and part of the stern. Aeneas, in time sensing that the ship is about to founder, awakens to take over the helm himself – a mysterious feature of this passage, for, as the narrator has just said, Palinurus took the tiller with him in his fall. Inferring that Palinurus went or fell to sleep, Aeneas, in a virtual epitaph, speaks of Palinurus’ misplaced faith and lost burial:

10. A. Barchiesi, Poldino e Cianate: Das "Epigramma" Vergiliani, «Maià» 24, 1979, pp. 2-41, discusses both the formal features of the funeral epigram ("la riconoscibilita estrema della forma epigrammatica") as well as its particular thematic power in closing book 5, where we expect "enucrazione riassuntiva sul piano tematico, che raccolga e organi piu limpidamente, in forma paradigmatica, opposizioni e tenoni ricorrenti nel testo" (8).
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"O nimium calo et pelago confise sereno,
nullus in ignoti, Palmarus, iacibus harena." (5.870-871)

By whose or by what agency does Aeneas save and steer the ship? And what explains the damage that Palmarus does to the ship as he goes overboard? Since these questions cannot be answered, we see that this account of Palmarus' disappearance at sea, even without its discrepancy with Aeneid 6, resists easy interpretation.

In the underworld of Aeneid 6, Aeneas sights Palmarus' shade by the river Styx where he wanders in shadows amongst other unburied souls. Aeneas asks:

..."quis te, Palmarus, deorum
expuit nobis, medioque sub sequore meritis?
dic aeg. Namque nihil, fallax haud ante repertus,
hoc uno responso nimium deluit: Apollo,
qui fore te ponere incolumem finisque canebat
utimurum Ausoniis. En haec promissa fides est?" (6.341-346)

Here Aeneas attributes Palmarus' loss to a god, not to carelessness on his own part. This change might be attributed to tact: (Aeneas' question implies the possibility of an untrustworthy god rather than a too-trusting human being.) Or has Aeneas indeed settled on a different interpretation of the event? Palmarus responds (direct discourse) that it was no god who took him, but that in stormy seas he fell overboard with tiller still in hand, fearing -- he swears "by the rough seas" -- for Aeneas and his ship, without a helmsman, lest they perish. Then, he says, he swam for three days and nights, finally sighting Italy on the fourth day. Yet as he grasped for a rocky landfall, he was killed by "cruel" and "ignorant" people who took him for a prize and left his body at the mercy of winds and waves (6.347-352). Thus he represents himself as victim two times over, of both storm and savages. He beseeches Aeneas to return to bury him or, instead, to carry him

20. Dryden fills this "gap" by supplying a god that takes over:
The Victor Daemon mounts obscure in Air;
While the Ship sails without the Pilot's care.
On Neptune's feast the floating Fleet relies;
But what the Man foresaw, the God supplies. Aen. 5.403-406.

21. Connolly, Unquiet Grave, p. 94, n. 4: "In the original [sic; that it is the original is his interpretation], Palmarus makes no mention of being asleep, nor is there any mention of Apollo's prophecy, which may be a trap set by Aeneas. Notice how Palmarus' reply is calculated to allay suspicion."
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across the Styx. Aeneas makes no response. The Sibyl, however, rebukes Palinurus for his transgressive request, but adds that divine prodigies will compel the local people to appease Palinurus' bones by erecting a tomb and naming the place after him (presently Capo Palinuro). For (susceptible) readers the most significant discrepancy between this account and that of Aeneid 5 concerns the weather, since the presence or absence of storm conditions has potential bearing on the question of Palinurus' complicity or guilt in slipping into the water.

As noted above, the conventional explanation of the inconsistencies between these two passages is that Virgil did not live to make the revisions that would have harmonized them. Certainly this is a plausible explanation. However, it would be unwise to imagine that all seemingly anomalous (in the view of some scholars) passages would have been altered or eliminated by Virgil, had he lived longer; for one man's anomaly is another's brilliant innovation. So, although the often accepted strategy for dealing with inconsistencies is to assume that Virgil would have normalized them in revision, another, potentially richer, strategy is to interpret the text as it stands. Some scholars have done so, suggesting, for example, that the narrator's ver-


26. Consider the existing continuing controversy over the ending of the Aeneid, in which Michael Dunsam's work has played the decisive part. While others have felt the poem's closure to be insufficient and have therefore hypothesized that the poem was unfinished, on Putnam's reading, the Aeneid's closure is brilliant in its "disappointments." Maffei Vegio's thirteenth book that ties up all (perceived) loose ends is not held to improve upon Virgil's text.
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sion of events in Aeneid 5 is the “correct” one, since the narrator has access to a higher level of truth than does Palmarus. Palmarus’ own account in Aeneid 6 would then express only his limited human perspective. Susanne Wofford argues that contradictions in the text result necessarily from contradictions within imperial ideology itself. The text (virtually as an independent agent) tries to hide Aeneas’ and Virgil’s sacrificial strategies through a delusive idyllicism that obscures the costs of dominance. She indicates that readers may observe this strategy at work in aetologies of place names, wherein, for example, the cape named for Palmarus and the spring named for Juturna function to naturalize their sufferings by absorbing them into the landscape. In G. B. Conte’s important reading of the Aeneid, the text is shot through with unreconciled contradictions, emanating largely from the isolation and deaths of sentient speakers, whose values remain unincorporated into the epic’s endorsed imperial purpose—or indeed, must be sacrificed to it. Among these he counts characters such as Dido, Mezentius, Turnus, Creusa, and Palmarus. Julia Dyson, in her study of the Aeneid as a cultic text, argues that the contradictions between Aeneid 5 and 6 allow Palmarus’ death to be associated with deaths of other characters by water, thus a series of imperfected sacrifices for the Roman mission that led not to expiation, but only to further sacrifices.

For my present project, Cyril Connolly’s resonant reconstruction of the character of Palmarus in his pseudo-psychological “case study” is critical. As the “attending psychiatrist,” he attributes the events of Aeneid 5 and 6 to a “will to failure” (137) in the patient. Palmarus, a loss of faith in the mission—which Palmarus then attempts to deny by essentially “protesting his innocence” in the underworld (134). Connolly’s imaginative attention to textual detail allows him to construct a sustained argument for this reading.

First, we note in retrospect that Aeneid 5 contains several in-
stances of questioning of the mission or loss of faith in Aeneas. As
the book opens, the men, seeing smoke rise from Carthage, are
filled with dark presentiments:

Quae tanum accenderit ignem
causa later, duri magno sed amore dolores
polluto, nouumque furres quid femina possit,
triste per augeiim Teucrium pectora durant. (Aen. 5.4-7)

After the long delayed, anxious departure from Carthage, they
are once again diverted from their goal by impenetrable (Palinus
says [Aen. l.5.12-18]) weather and instead must make for Sicily.
As Putnam acutely points out, many readers experience Aeneid
5 as dull, since nothing important for the plot occurs. Readers,
like the characters, are frustrated by the delay. Aeneas’
funeral games to honor Anchises become unexpectedly costly in
physical and emotional terms, although Aeneas, as master of the
games, attempts to impose the justice and equity in victory that did
not come of their own accord. Meanwhile, the women, tired of the
thus-far fruitless voyage and goaded by the gods, set fire to the
ships. At this point Aeneas falls into despair and himself ques-
tions whether to abandon the mission (oblitus fatorum, 5.700-93).
As Hunt observes (34), this is one of only three instances in the
poem in which Aeneas is esse concusus (5.700). Persuaded
ultimately by Nausa, later confirmed by a vision of Anchises, Aeneas
determines to continue with only the young and fit and to
leave the women and others behind. A disheartening sequence
of events. Is it significant that Palinus, although the chief helms-
man, is not mentioned as a participant in the ship race (Connolly,
p. 150) Connolly thinks so and fills the “gap” of Palinus’ appar-
ent absence by hypothesizing a Palinus “brooding over the
storm and his leader’s conduct” (556). On Connolly’s reading,
Palinus, troubled by events, unconsciously or deliberately
abandons the mission, even attempting sabotage:

But was Palinus guilty? If, as we suggest, he was tired of the fruit-
less voyage, horrified by the callousness of Aeneas, by the disasters
which he seemed to attract by his rowdy games, by the ultimate burn-
ing of some of the ships by the angry women...then was his disapper-
ance as accidental as Aeneas supposed?...[T]he clue we should notice is

Design, Cambridge, ma 1969, p. 64.
that, although the sea is calm, Palinurus when he falls takes with him
tiller, rudder, and a section of poop. Tilts may come off easily, but not
part of the stem! (325)

Hunt builds on Connolly's construction of a withdrawn, brood-
ing, Palinurus. In his reading Aeneas is troubled about the cause
of Palinurus' disappearance. In his journey through the under-
world (read by Hunt as a "dream vision," e.g., p. 459), Aeneas
hears what he wants to hear: Palinurus, "protesting his inno-
cence," did not abandon ship but fought the elements with fear-
less concern for Aeneas. In the underworld, convinced by the
clear proofs of Aeneas' divine support, Palinurus reaffirms his
faith in Aeneas, addressing him as "inuiete" (a rare epithet):

Nunc me fluctus habet, versantque in istore venti.
Quod te per caeli Jackieum lumen et auras,
per genitor orae, per spes surgentis fuli,
scripe me his, inuiete, malis: aut tu mihi terram
inuic, natuque putes, portusque require Velino;
aut tu, si qua uia est, si quam tibi diva creatrix
ostendit - neque enim, credo, sine numine divum
flumina tanta para Stygiaque innare paludem -
da dextram misero, et tecum me tolle per undas. (6.363-370)

This Palinurus reassures Aeneas in his troubled state; yet, as Ac-
neas experienced the events, there was no storm. Hence he re-
mains silent while the Sibyl, in a famous verse, rebukes Palini-
rus' impious request (dita cupido, 6.373): desine fata deum fleti
esperare precando (Aen. 6.376).

Virgil's readers would have recognized the resemblance of this
scene to Odysseus' encounter with Elpenor's shade on his jour-
ney to Hades: Elpenor and Palinurus, both unburied, both the
first familiar shades encountered by their respective leaders, re-
quest burial in order to cross the Styx to have peace in death.
Dante may not have known this detail of the Odyssey, but we can

32. C. G. More's Memory and Forgetting in the Aeneid, "Vergilius" 47, 2001, p. 120
   [Special Issue: "The Vergilian Century," ed., Joseph Farrell], observes that nothing
   from Aeneid 6 figures later in the poem. "On the level of the action of the rest of the
   Aeneid, it is as though book 6 never existed: no narrative thread links it to any later
   event... as though, perhaps, it had been for [Aeneas] simply a false dream and no-
   thing more?"

33. Norden, op. cit., p. 24, ad loc., details the formal finish of Palinurus' speech.
   Yet, is this accomplished rhetorical performance appropriate for an innocent man?
   Or does it suggest instead well-planned ảnh rub?
perceive a contrast between Odysseus' sympathetic response to Elpenor and Aeneas' (possibly unsympathetic) silence to Palinurus. Odysseus mourns at length with Elpenor (an insignificant crew member who, having drunk too much, fell off Circe's roof to his death), promises the requested burial, and performs it as promised on his return to the upper world. In reflecting on these passages, could Virgil's close readers sense dismay or anger in Aeneas' silence? Where really was the fault? Was Palinurus' death the sacrifice of an 'innocent'? an accident? desertion? As it stands, Virgil's text implicitly poses these haunting questions, but refrains from answering them. Therein lies the enduring fascination of these passages, which have generated so much comment. A happy accident if Virgil did not intentionally create this effect.

**Dante and Palinurus**

Although Palinurus does not appear by name in the *Commedia*, he did elicit interpretive comment from some medieval scholars and theologians. Interestingly for my argument here, the commentators Fulgentius and "Bernardus" read Palinurus as an exemplar of errabunda visio, a serious failing that had to be transcended in order to achieve doctrina or initium philosophandi. This

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25. T. Zbikowski, *Virgil and the Moderns*, Princeton 1999, pp. 107-108 and 144-145 discuss modern readings of Palinurus, sympathetic and haunted (Ungaretti's in the ironically titled *La terra promessa* and Connolly's in *The Unquiet Grave*). Mintz, p. 80 exemplifies this trend: "But glory in the land of Rome can never silence wholly the secret voice of the sorrowful pilot who vanished into the shadows and the sea."

26. However, Dante scholars have identified what they argue are allusions to Palinurus in the *Purgatorio*: They read these allusions as Dante's "correcting" of Palinurus' pagan values. For these and other suggested allusions and corrections ("a dynamic of displacement"), see C. Cioffi, *Purgatorio*, *Prayer, and Politics: Virgil's Palinurus in Purgatorio v and vi*, *Dante Studies* 140, 1999, pp. 194 and passim; similarly Singleton on Purg. 3.190 (it echoes *Am. 6.326*) and 3.18-40 (it recalls *Am. 6.326-33*). See also N. R. Hawley, *Brunetto and Palinurus*, *Dante Studies* 108, 1999, pp. 39-38, with bibliography.
Irony in the Underworlds of Dante and Virgil

negative medieval reading of Palmarius suggests that for Dante it might have been altogether conventional to read Palmarius as a deficient figure rather than as a sympathetic one, as now characteristically. A Palmarius such as Connolly constructs, guilty and anxious over the state of his soul, would have been compatible with a medieval Christian perspective familiar to Dante. 37

Reflections on Irony in the Inferno and Aeneid 6

In the Inferno irony is created as characters, while intending accounts that are exculpatory, inadvertently reveal the truth of their sins and the justice of their assignment to Inferno. From Dante’s perspective ideally, this irony would allow readers to critique the limited or wrong values voiced by the condemned souls and, consequently, to put themselves on the road to salvation. We might, then, call this “Christian irony,” as it portrays a state of delusion in order to lead readers to revelation, to God’s truth.

What effect might underworld irony have in the Aeneid? On my reading, such irony as is manifest in the shades’ self-misrepresentation in Aeneid 6 (whether through delusion or deceit) does not lead readers to any higher truth. On the contrary, it would seem that irony in the Aeneid mirrors the inaccessibility of any ultimate truth. This failure of Virgil’s speakers to represent themselves truly can be read, I suggest, as but one instance of the Aeneid’s pervasive representation of the limitations of human understanding. For example, as scholars have noted: oracles and prophecies are misinterpreted; 38 gods’ intentions remain obscure; 39 unanswered questions are a constitutive motif of the text. 40 Aeneas himself is described explicitly as unknowing or ignorant (Aen. 4.72 in simile; Aen. 8.730). 41 This unknowing condition mutates into a kind of self-delusion in the poem’s final

37. See Havely, Brunetto and Palmarius, pp. 18, n. 37 and 38 for the readings by Fulgentius and “Bernardus” of Palmarius as a figure of erubetens vita, an impediment to achieving doctrine or humin philosophandi. See also C. Cioffi, Rome, Prayer, and Politics, p. 220, n. 51 for another possibly perceived deficiency in Palmarius, i.e., his failure to reach the promised land as an “emblem of sin.”


verses. Here Aeneas, who is neither Pallas nor an authorized sacrificial claim (explicitly in the former case, implicitly in the latter) to be both:

... "Tune hinc spolii induce meorum
eriplae nihil? Pallas te hoc uulnere, Pallas
inmolaet et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit." (xii.947-949)

In this emphatically placed extension of the irony motif, the ironic self-misrepresentation that characterizes Virgil's underworld speakers in Aeneid 6 characterizes Aeneas as well. While Christian irony, then, may be a means to saving revelation, the Aeneid's pagan irony, both for the underworld speakers as well as for Aeneas, correlates with an absence of insight, saving or otherwise." If I am on a legitimate interpretive track here, Dante would again be "correcting" Virgil; for Dante, irony would not, as for Virgil, characterize the human condition as a whole; rather it would characterize only those who have no access to God's truth.

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