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MINOS’S TAIL: THE LABOR OF DEVISING HELL
(INFERNO 5.1–24)

Così discesi del cerchio primo
giù nel secondo, che men loco cinghia
3 e tanto più dolor, che punge a guaioc.
Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia:
essamina le colpe ne l’intrata;
6 giudica e manda secondo ch’avvinghia.
Dico che quando l’anima mal nata
li vien dinanzi, tutta si confessa;
9 e quel conoscitor de le peccata
vede qual loco d’inferno è da essa;
cignesi con la coda tante volte
12 quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa.
Sempre dinanzi a lui ne stanno molte:
vanno a vicenda ciascuna al giudizio,
15 dicono e odono e poi son giù volte.
“O tu che vieni al doloroso ospizio,”
disse Minòs a me quando mi vide,
18 lasciando l’atto di cotanto officio,
“guarda com’entri e di cui tu ti fide;
non t’inganni l’ampiezza de l’intrare!”
21 E l’duca mio a lui: “Perché pur gridi?
Non impedir lo suo fatale andare:
vuolsi così colà dove si puote
24 ciò che si vuole, e più non dimandare.”

Inferno 5 elicited from the ancient commentators two basic views of its
structure: while one group divides it into numerous small sections (Boc-
caccio opts for six, Benvenuto for five), Buti puts forth the suggestion that
has proved more congenial to modern interpreters, namely that the canto falls
into two parts.¹ Indeed, like Inferno 1, which is also sundered by a dramatic

¹. Boccaccio divides the canto into six parts: 1–3, 4–24, 25–51, 52–69, 70–138,
139–142. See Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante, ed. Giorgio Padoan (Milano:
Mondadori, 1965) 280. Benvenuto divides the canto into five parts: 1–24, 25–45,
J. P. Lacaita, 5 vols. (Firenze: Barbèra, 1887) 1: 184. Buti offers the more cogent
analysis, noting that “questo canto si divide in due parti principalmente, perchè prima

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encounter that divides the narrative into two halves—pre-Vergil and post-Vergil—, so *Inferno* 5 pivots around the central tercet that paves the way for its monumental encounter with Francesca da Rimini. The first half of canto 5 thus prepares us for the poem’s first great infernal interview, serving as the moral and poetic backdrop on which Francesca’s drama can most effectively be played out; it also participates in the dominant project of creating a possible world in which we can live, breathe, wander at imaginative will, and—most importantly—suspend our disbelief. While that project is one whose boundaries are coterminous with the *Commedia* itself, at this stage of the narrative enterprise, when the task of beginning is still very much at the forefront of the poet’s agenda, the work of creating a possible world is more discernible than at others. Of the three narrative segments that compose the first half of canto 5, the first—verses 1–24, a segment routinely identified by commentators with Minos—is dedicated most explicitly to the ongoing labor of devising hell.

I have written previously of Dante’s “poetics of the new,” his art of transition, gradation, and differentiation intended to mimic the experience of life, an art that attempts to render the human epistemological condition in its essential subjection to the new things that the divine episteme has no part of: God is defined as “He who never saw a new thing” (“Colui che mai non vide cosa nova” [*Purg.* 10.94]) and angels have no need of memory “because their sight is not intercepted by new objects” (“però non hanno vedere interciso / da novo obietto” [*Par.* 29.79–80]), while life on earth is subject “to the influence of the new things” (“a la virtute de le cose nove” [*Par.* 7.72]), and we experience life as relentless forward motion, mirrored in the pilgrim’s encounters with “le vite spirituali ad una ad una” (*Par.* 33.24)—which is to say, with the new.² Dante’s commitment to the poetics of the new, to an ultimate mimesis, a mimesis that aspires not just to the content of life but to its very rhythm and epistemological flow, generates the textual imperatives that govern the opening cantos of *Inferno*. His will to make a text in which we make choices within a simulacrum of reality involves designing a textual fabric that

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implicitly counters the artifice of beginning. Dante does this by creating multiple beginnings, so that each beginning undermines the absolute status of the previous beginning. The subversion of absolute beginning that is a textual hallmark of *Inferno* 1 occurs on a larger scale in the opening cantos as a group, which can be read as a graduated series of textual *cose nòve*, new beginnings: only in canto 2 do we find the poet’s invocation to the Muses, and only in canto 3 does the pilgrim approach the gate of hell and does the actual voyage get under way. Moreover, although the first souls we see are those in hell’s vestibule, in canto 3, we do not reach the first circle, and thus the first souls of hell proper, until canto 4, and the first prolonged infernal interview does not occur until canto 5, when the pilgrim meets Francesca.

In each of the *Commedia*’s early cantos the art of transition is particularly in evidence, as Dante works to make each new beginning the real new beginning at the expense of its predecessor, thus creating the illusion of a deferral of beginning while at the same time relaying information essential to the creation of the possible world that is, in fact, beginning to take shape. Throughout these early cantos there are recurring textual signs related to the work of beginning: we think, for instance, of the recurrent presence of *entrare*, which will denote transition throughout the *Commedia*, and which is present at least once in each of the first five cantos of the poem; also significant is the repetition of locative adverbs, such as *qui* and *quivi*. The reiterated locatives stress the place where we have arrived, where we are now, at the expense of previous locations; they serve to differentiate our experience of the journey thus far, to mark it off into discrete segments, conferring volume and density on the space that is taking shape in our imaginations. Thus, the passage into Limbo in *Inferno* 4 is marked by little verbal markers of newness, words that stress this place and this moment at the expense of the last place and the last moment: “Or descendiam qua giù nel cieco mondo” (*Inf.* 4.13) says Vergil, articulating the new both temporally (“Or”) and spatially (“qua giù”). We note the repetition of “qua giù” a few verses later (“L’angoscia de le genti / che son qua giù” [*Inf.* 4.19–20]) and the use of “Quivi” to lead off a tercet differentiating the sounds of Limbo from the sounds of the vestibule we have left behind; with “Quivi, secondo che per ascoltare, / non avea pianto mai che di sospiri” (*Inf.* 4.25–26), the poet asserts a new reality to replace the “Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai” of a similarly aural tercet on the threshold of canto 3. The methods employed for differentiating this newest new place from previous new places now expand to include number, our most precise denoter of difference, used in canto 4 for the first time (in collaboration with the by now standard *intrare*) to tag Limbo as the “primo cerchio”: “Così si mise e così mi fé intrare / nel primo cerchio che l’abisso cigne” (*Inf.* 4.23–24).

The work of beginning comes into sharp focus at the outset of canto 5, in an initial tercet that recapitulates and recombines many of the transitional elements of *Inferno* 4.23–24 cited above, transposing them from the descent into the first circle to the descent into the second. The use of “Così” as a

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marker of transition (a “nesso narrativo” as Mattalia puts it), followed by a verb of action in the past absolute, is one such transposed element: “Così si mise e così mi fé intrare” becomes “Così discesi,” where further transitional force is accrued from the placement at the canto’s exordium. As always when dealing with recombinatory patterns, repetition is a vehicle that allows us to derive significance from variation: in this case the shift from “si mise” to “discesi” highlights the downward plunge—into what is intended to feel by contrast like “real” sinfulness and “true” hell—that signals the entrance into the second circle.

In order to understand fully the way in which Dante marshals this sense of total disjunction between circles one and two, we must bear in mind his will to create a textuality that comes alive by way of a dialectically informed narrative that works at cross purposes to itself. Thus, Dante labels Limbo with numerical precision, in a fashion that seems not susceptible to confusion: it is the first circle of hell. And yet, master of the manipulation of narrative to create dialectical perspectives, Dante then dedicates the rest of canto 4 to making us disbelieve this simple fact, and indeed, how many readers “forget” that Limbo is hell’s first circle? The technique involved is basic to the Commedia, a means of structuring tension into the discourse, and it is based on the exploitation of the text’s temporal dimension: first the poet presents a truth, a warning directed at the reader; then he does everything in his power to make us disregard the warning we have received. For instance, although we learn at the outset of the journey that hell is governed by justice (“Giustizia mosse mio alto fattore” [Inf. 3.4]), this is information that we will internalize—if at all—only after completing much of the voyage, not here at the outset. Nor would the poet want it otherwise; in fact, he counts on our not internalizing much of the information that he yet so carefully places on the record, since much of the Inferno’s power, as poetry, derives from the tension that exists between abstract verities such as these and the palpable sympathy for the damned that the poet manipulating the reader into feeling.

This technique will be very much in evidence in canto 5, whose first half is devoted to establishing the verity of sin and damnation and whose second half is equally devoted to dispelling it. Dante establishes the sinful nature of the second circle by exploiting its difference from the first circle, which in his invention is remarkably un-hellish; we remember, for instance, that the souls of Limbo suffer less than the souls of the vestibule, souls who do not even

3. La Divina Commedia, comm. Daniele Mattalia (Milano: Rizzoli, 1960).
4. A striking recent example is provided by the commentators Pietro Cataldi and Romano Luperini, who deny that the souls of Limbo are damned: “Le anime dei dannati subiscono qui questo veloce e sicuro ‘processo,’ all’inizio del secondo cerchio, perché qui inizia il vero e proprio Inferno: gli ignavi sono infatti in una zona a se stante, e le anime del Limbo, nel primo cerchio, non sono anime dannate, ma solo escluse dalla visione di Dio, e quindi dal Paradiso” (La Divina Commedia [Firenze: Le Monnier, 1989] 45; italics mine).
technically belong to hell. The second circle thus derives its initial character from the fact that it is not like the first, and it is this disjunction that Dante takes such pains to underscore from the outset of canto 5, and for which he prepares us at the end of canto 4. *Inferno* 4 ends with the pilgrim's departure from Limbo: "per altra via mi mena il savio duca, / fuor de la queta, ne l'aura che trema. / E vegno in parte ove non è che luca." These verses highlight those aspects of Limbo that will be irretrievably absent from the infernal landscape once we leave it, that make Limbo truly different from the rest of hell; we now embark on an "other path" that takes us beyond Limbo's quiet, beyond its theologically stunning and anomalous light. It is the light that no longer shines in canto 5 that gives us the feeling that we are not really in hell when we are in Limbo; by the same token, it is the light that no longer shines in canto 5 that reinforces the feeling that in the darkness of the second circle we have finally reached hell. The last verses of canto 4 implicitly set up the second circle as everything that the first circle is not; canto 5's opening tercet then affirms and amplifies the difference that is implied by canto 4's conclusion.

After the downward plunge of "Così discesi," difference is driven home by the numbers "primaio" and "secondo," whose differentiating function is enhanced by the quantifying adverbs "più" and "meno," used here in tandem for the first time in the poem. Looking back at the transition into Limbo, "Così si mise e così mi fé intrare / nel primo cerchio che l'abissio cigne" (*Inf.* 4.23–24), we see that the recycled elements include not only the use of *Così*+verb as an incipit, but also "primo cerchio"/"cerchio primaio," and "cigne"/"cinghia." On this backdrop of similarity, the difference registered by "discesi," by "giù" (which will be repeated twice more in this opening sequence, in verses 12 and 15), by the novel correlation between "men loco"

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5. I do not agree with Francesco Mazzoni's contention that the ending of canto 4 should be read as a return to that part of Limbo that is outside of the noble castle, rather than as a movement forward to the second circle. See "Saggio di un nuovo commento alla Commedia: il canto IV dell'Inferno," *Studi danteschi* 42 (1965): 29–206, where Mazzoni writes of the ending of canto 4 that "non sarà da considerarsi prolettico rispetto alla atmosfera del canto seguente" (203). The proleptic nature of canto 4's final verses is confirmed by canto 5's first words.

6. The linked use of *più* and *meno* will turn out to be of great significance for the *Commedia* as a marker of difference, it comes into its own in the *Paradiso*, where difference is no longer supposed to exist (see chapter 8 of *The Undivine Comedy*). In the *Inferno* we are introduced to degree and gradation—the notions summed up by *più* and *meno*—through Minos's determinations and assignments. Minos's language, which institutionalizes difference by assigning each soul to its precise location, will be picked up in the canto devoted to institutionalizing difference in the *Inferno* as a whole, namely canto 11. "First" and "second" were linked once previously, in *Inf.* 4.15, where Vergil says "io sarò primo, e tu sarai secondo"; the differentiating function of *primo* and *secondo* in 4.15 is enhanced by the correlation with *più* and *meno* in 5.1–3.
and “tanto più dolor,” and especially by the specification that this suffering “punge a guaio,” is the more emphatic. The energetic “giù” at the beginning of the second verse is redundant but crucial to conveying negative movement—into a place labeled “secondo” that embraces less space but more suffering: “Così discesi del cerchio primo / giù nel secondo, che men loco cinghia / e tanto più dolor, che punge a guaio.” The correlation between “men loco” and “più dolor” is particularly forceful because of its unexpectedness; we are surprised by the transition from the neutral physical word loco to the affectively charged dolor. While “più dolor” grabs our attention, “men loco” is arguably the more important datum, since it provides precious information on the structure of hell, whose cone-like shape we are now able to infer. Remembering Michael Riffaterre’s injunction that “Description begets narrative; in fact, narrative cannot come into being without description,” we can better grasp the subtlety of this opening tercet, whose coupling of concretely descriptive with intensely emotional elements prevents us from lingering too long on (and perhaps questioning) the concrete information that is discreetly relayed.

All the work done by the opening three verses (and, as we have seen, it is a surprising amount) culminates in the canto’s fourth verse, which makes the change that has already occurred explicit, giving it an institutional cast and converting it into an overbearingly embodied physical presence: “Stavvi Mi- nòs orribilmente, e ringhia.” There, in that new place to which we have come (we note the enclitic locative “vi” subliminally stressing the new), stands Minos, whose juridical function is succinctly delineated; his task is to examine the sins of the damned, judge the sinners and dispatch them to their appropriate eternal destinations: “essamina le colpe ne l’intrata; / giudica e manda secondo ch’avvinghia.” With the appearance of Minos, the issue of judgment that was presented abstractly on hell’s gate—“Justice moved my high maker”—takes on plastic form in a bizarrely configured demonic judge with bestial characteristics. But the first and most important point to make about Dante’s infernal judge is that, as was duly noted by the Commedia’s earliest commentators, Minos has a classical, and specifically Vergilian, pedigree. In other words, the presence of Minos is an installment in the ongoing narrative regarding the use to which Dante puts classical culture in constructing his otherworld; also, given the brief but pungent interaction between Minos and Vergil, it brings up the more specific issue of Dante’s treatment of his great precursor and guide.

8. For a discussion of textual misprision vis-à-vis the Aeneid, see Robert Hollander, Il Virgilio dantesco: tragedia nella Commedia (Firenze: Olschki, 1983). For a reading of the Commedia's intertwined Vergil-narrative that looks at Vergil both as author of the Aeneid and as a character within Dante's poem, see Teodolinda Barolini, Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1984) chapter 3. See also the essays contained in the The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in
Minos, mythical king of Crete, son of Jupiter and Europa, appears as an underworld judge in *Aeneid* 6. The Vergilian verses cited by commentators are invariably the two lines that describe him: “quae sitor Minos urnam movet; ille silentum / conciliumque vocat, vites et crimina discit” (“Minos, the presiding judge, shakes the urn; he calls a court of the silent, he learns mens’ lives and crimes” [Aen. 6.432–433]). To these verses commentators frequently add the description of another infernal judge from a later passage in *Aeneid* 6, Rhadamanthus (Minos’s brother), where the confession of sin and its punishment are more pronounced: “Gnosius habe Rhadamanthus habet durissima regna / castigatque auditque dolos subigitus fateri” (“Gnosian Rhadamanthus here holds his iron sway; he flogs them, and hears their guile, compelling them to confess” [Aen. 6.566–567]). In his article on Minos in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, Giorgio Padoan suggests that Dante conflates the two Vergilian judges into one figure (“ha unificato nel suo Minosse . . . quel che Virgilio dice dei due”10), a view that seems perfectly plausible.

However, the verse from *Aeneid* 6 that is, in my opinion, most important in reconstructing what is at stake for Dante in the figure of Minos has, to the best of my knowledge, gone unremarked. It is the verse that introduces the description of Minos, preceding the two lines that are routinely cited, where Vergil links Minos’s presence to the idea of order and procedure in the affairs of the afterlife: “nec vero haec sine sorte datae, sine iudice, sedes” (“nor indeed are these places given without lot, without a judge” [431]). As T. E. Page comments in his notes to the *Aeneid*, the words “sine sorte, sine iudice” are “a reference to the *sortitio iudicum* (‘appointment of the jury by lot’) in a Roman court by the magistrate investigating the case (*quaesitor*), who here is Minos who ‘shakes the urn and holds assize among the silent, and examines the record of their lives.’”11 Of the three verses devoted to Minos in the *Aeneid*—“nec vero haec sine sorte datae, sine iudice, sedes: / quaesitor Minos urnam movet; ille silentum / conciliumque vocat, vites et crimina discit”—the key for the *Commedia* is the ideologically freighted first verse, rather than the descriptive verses that follow.

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9. This is the translation of these verses offered in the notes of *The Aeneid of Virgil*, Books I–VI, ed. T.E. Page (London: Macmillan, 1964) 480. If “castigat” does indeed refer to flogging, as this translation holds, then the figure of Rhadamanthus with his whip may have suggested Minos’s coiling tail to Dante’s imagination. The figure encountered right after Rhadamanthus is even more suggestive: “avenging Tisiphone, girt with a lash”—“accinta flagello” (Aen. 6.570).


11. According to Page, *urnam movet* “Because the names were placed on tablets, and the urn shaken until one ‘leapt out’ ” (473).
There are fundamentally two connotative features deployed by Dante to shape his Minos, one very physical and the other supremely ideological. These are on the one hand Minos’s pronounced bestiality, epitomized in the emphasis placed on his tail (we shall return to this feature), and on the other the juridical language in which the figure is enveloped: he examines the sinners (“essamina le colpe”), judges and disposes of them (“giudica e manda”), serves as omniscient confessor (“l’anima . . . tutta si confessa”) and “knower of sins” (“conoscitor de le peccata”), who renders definitive judgment (“vanno . . . al giudizio”). This is the language of judgment and justice, which is to say, the language of the ideological structures that hold up the *Commedia*; its deployment is far from casual. We find in this passage one of only three uses of *essaminare*, one of only nine uses of *confessare*, as well as the poem’s only use of *conoscitore*, a technical juridical term that serves, I would suggest, as Dante’s reply to Vergil’s equally technical *quaesitor*. Most significant are *giudicare* and *giudizio*, words that are associated throughout the *Commedia* with divine justice.

After their coordinated appearance with respect to Minos in *Inferno* 5, *giudicare* and *giudizio* appear together again only once, in *Inferno* 7, where they apply to Fortuna (“seguendo lo giudizio di costei,” “questa provede, giudica, e perseguie” [Inf. 7.83, 86]), a goddess whom we can now see as a celestial counterpart to Minos; we can say equally of both, after all, that they are providentially inspired ministers whose judgments are God’s judgments. *Giudizio* occurs on two other occasions in the *Inferno*; both “duro giudizio” in *Inferno* 2.96 and—obviously—“giudizio divin” in *Inferno* 20.30 refer to divine judgments. The third and final use of *giudicare* in *Inferno*, after Minos and Fortuna, actually constitutes a gloss on Minos’s behavior: Mohammed, thinking that the pilgrim is a sinner, suggests that Dante’s scrutiny of the schismatics is a ploy designed to delay the “punishment that was adjudicated on the basis of your self-accusation” (“pena / ch’e giudicata in su le tue accuse” [Inf. 28.44–45]). Mohammed thus reminds us that Minos renders his judgments based on the sinners’ own confessions (“le tue accuse”); we come back to the importance of speech and discourse in Francesca’s canto. The indirect citation of Minos in canto 28 forms, with the namings of Minos in cantos 27 and 29, a crescendo of references that culminate, as indeed all the *Inferno*’s

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references to Minos culminate, in Griffolino d’Arezzo’s statement that he was damned by “Minós, a cui fallar non lece”—“Minos, to whom it is not permitted to err” (Inf. 29.120).

It is this idea of infallible judgment, of infallibility in the execution of justice (God’s “infallibil giustizia” will be invoked in this same canto), that is at the core of Dante’s conception of Minos. Like Fortuna, Minos cannot err because of whose minister he is. The crucial point for Dante is that the determinations of hell are infallible; they are not random or arbitrary, and — precisely for that reason — they are not unjust. The universe has an order, it is informed by a reasoning presence whose decisions are infallible and — precisely for that reason — just. *Giustizia mosse mio alto fattore.* Or, as Vergil had more guardedly put it, “these places were not assigned without a judge”: “nec vero haec sine sorte datae, sine iudice, sedes.”

With respect to the Vergilian Minos, then, Dante takes the message of the *Aeneid* and he enormously reinforces it; he puts steel reinforcing bars into the concrete structure that Vergil had created vis-à-vis justice and the afterlife. This is not a case in which Dante rewrites or corrects the *Aeneid*, as he will so blatantly later in the poem, but a case in which he appropriates a congenial thought from Vergil’s text and emphasizes it, removes the attenuating litotes so typical of Vergil’s doubt-ridden elegiac ethos, and hammers justice home with a contrastingly typical Dantesque vehemence. In terms of a typology of Dantesque uses of the *Aeneid*, the figure of Minos constitutes an example of appropriation rather than correction, by which I mean that Vergil’s idea is not negated but amplified; in this case, the Vergilian idea of due process in the afterlife, as incarnated in the judge Minos, is grafted — with juridical language intact and expanded — onto a full-fledged ideology of providential justice.

One could say, of course, that a correction of the *Aeneid’s* world-view is implied by this very shift, that an outright negation of the *Aeneid* is not required in order to register a critique. Indeed, the critique of the pagan edifice, of the vulnerable Vergilian structure lacking its steel reinforcements, could be seen as already coded into Dante’s first descriptor of Minos, the striking adverb “orribilmente” in the famous introduction: “Stavvi Minós orribilmente, e ringhia.” Uncoiling itself ferally over the verse, as shortly we will learn that Minos uncoils and wraps his tail around his body, *orribilmente* evokes by aural counterpoint the vanished elegiac world of the “orrevol gente” of the previous canto. Where canto 4 was marked by repeated forms of *onore*, honor being a quintessentially pagan value, we have now moved to *orrore*, the dread induced by the embodiment of justice. The transition from *orrevol* (a contraction of *onorevole*) to *orribil* betokens the transition from the pagan to the Christian underworld.13

14. Minos is named in *Inferno* twice in canto 5 and on four other occasions, once in *Purgatorio* and as part of a periphrasis for Ariadne in *Paradiso*.

15. The use of the adjective *orribile* with respect to the “orribili favelle” that the
If Dante reinforces and amplifies the Minos quaesitor of the Aeneid, he also substantially complicates matters by making Minos a composite image in his rendering: not only a minister of divine judgment, but also a figure endowed with a quasi-burlesque bestiality.\textsuperscript{16} His description oscillates between these two characteristics, which the poet takes no pains to suture together, seeming instead to want to underscore their fantastic convergence, as with the strong caesura separating the two parts of “Stavvi Minòs orribilmente // e ringhia.” In verse 4, as again in verse 6—“giudica e manda // secondo ch’avvinghia”—the first hemistich conveys the judge and the second the beast (the early commentators all agree on the bestial connotations of ringhiare, although they differ on the nature of the sound in question).\textsuperscript{17} This dichotomy is then replayed on a larger scale in the subsequent tercets. First verses 7–10 elaborate on Minos’s judicial role, explaining that after the soul comes before him and confesses, the judge determines the soul’s placement in hell: “vede qual loco d’inferno è da essa.” Verses 11–12 then detail the peculiar method adopted by this court to indicate its verdict: Minos wraps his tail around himself as many times as the number of the circle to which he wants the soul sent. With respect to the precise anatomy of this tail, whether it be a short tail requiring seriatim girdings or long enough to accomplish many girdings simultaneously, I second Mattalia’s witty endorsement of freedom for the reader: “il lettore scelga liberamente, tra il pensoso dibatter di certi interpreti: o una coda lunga lunga attorcigliata d’un sol gesto per un certo numero di giri; o corta, con avvinghiamenti in ritmata successione.”

As it happens, my imagination prefers, upon being granted its freedom, to conjure a long tail, many times girded (Mattalia instead envisions a short tail: “Personalmente, questa coda, la vediamo corta”). What is significant here is not the length of the tail, but the existence of critical wrangling on this sub-

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\textsuperscript{16} Fernando Salsano deflates the excessive puffery that had built up in the commentary tradition regarding a Minos whose office is viewed as “grave,” “solemn,” “elevato,” pointing to the tail as the key element “che rompe la tradizione, che imbestia la figura del re mitico”; see “La coda di Minosse,” in \textit{La coda di Minosse e altri saggi danteschi} (Milano: Marzorati, 1968) 11–19; quotation 15. While I agree with Salsano regarding the importance of Minos’s bestiality, I think he is wrong to deny the judicial function that coexists with it, and that renders the bestiality more provocative and problematic.

\textsuperscript{17} Boccaccio’s snarling dog interpretation (“‘Ringhiare’ suole essere atto de’ cani, minaccianti alcuno che al suo albergo s’appressi” [283]) became the canonical reading, in comparison to Buti’s “come fa il porco, o come il cavallo.”
ject. The existence of such discussion is a signal that we are witnessing Dante’s ability, as I put it in *The Undivine Comedy*, “to construct a textual metaphysics so enveloping that it prevents us from analyzing the conditions that give rise to the illusion that such a metaphysics is possible” (20). Put baldly, the reader is so thoroughly induced to suspend his disbelief vis-à-vis this possible world that discussion can ensue about matters on which the text has provided no information—as though these matters existed outside the text, in an independently verifiable or deducible reality not limited by what the author/inventor has chosen to tell us. The strategies whereby the poet renders the reader complicit in this process are manifold. In the relatively modest case of the representation of Minos the techniques involved are worth noting precisely because it is a modest rather than a blatant case, and therefore all the more revealing, offering an excellent example of techniques “employed so unremittingly throughout the *Commedia* that we barely notice them” (*The Undivine Comedy*, 32).

Dante is a master of the art of verisimilitude, an art that is based on furnishing just the right amount of information and no more. In the case of Minos’s tail, he tells us enough to make us focus on his infernal judge’s bestial nature, and to make us wed this bestial feature indissolubly to Minos’s judicial tasks; the tail is after all not a decorative afterthought, a bit of grotesque ornamentation, but an essential component of the process whereby infallible justice is apportioned. The central fact with respect to Dante’s figuration of Minos is precisely, as we noted earlier, his composite nature. Before concluding our discussion of Minos, we will need to assess the significance—the “deep meaning”—of an infernal judge who is all-knowing with respect to the sinners, who is vested with divine powers of scrutiny, whose solemn office (“co-tanto offizio” [18]) is duly acknowledged, but who is at the same time graphically rendered as a brute, who administers his judgments with brutish crudity.

Dante uses Minos’s bestiality to connote something about his hell that is lacking in Vergil’s somber, even tragic, but much more static and monochrome vision. Minos’s tail is an early signpost in a web of signifiers extending all the

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19. For an extensive rehearsal of such strategies let me refer the reader to *The Undivine Comedy*.

20. With respect to the undescribed “altra via” leading from Limbo to the second circle, Grandgent notes that “we have no means of conjecturing the size or the steepness of the cliff,” and derives the larger principle: “The journey through Hell being physically impossible, Dante purposely refrains from furnishing particulars that might destroy the illusion, while abounding in such details as serve to heighten it”; see *La Divina Commedia*, comm. C.H. Grandgent, rev. Charles S. Singleton (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1972) 45. Of course, the trick is knowing which details serve to destroy the illusion and which to heighten it.
way to Lucifer's thickly-piled hide, a web that serves to conjure a hell that is densely corporeal, viscously physical, verbally foul—in short, much more degraded and degrading than anything Vergil has to offer. Minos's tail is an apt emblem for the transition from the homogenous decorum of Vergilian alta tragedia to the unfettered transgressiveness of comedìa and the vision it entails, a vision that plumbs depths of degradation and scales heights of sublimity equally unknown to the Aeneid. The disjunctiveness of Dante's Minos, the carefully unbledichotomy that characterizes this figure, reflects the willed disjunctiveness of the mixed style, a mode that can veer vertiginously from high to low—as, indeed, in a brief textual compass comedìa veers from the vulgar corporeality of Minos's tail as it coils and uncoils itself to the refined elegance of Francesca's courtly diction. The figuration of Minos, then, reflects and embodies the radical stylistic choices inherent in the genre comedìa.21

The representation of Minos also testifies to Dante's ability to deploy techniques of verisimilitude that "function as tiny and remarkably effective subliminal contributors to a textual metaphysics that seeks to persuade us to accord it the status of reality" (The Undivine Comedy, 32). The construction of a possible world in language is effected at the micro-level, not by grand sweeping statements: in the case of Minos, for instance, verisimilitude is garnered by the unpretentious pronoun "vi" in "Stavvi Minòs orribilmente," which assumes our acceptance of the "there" in which Minos is situated, a "there" that is reinforced by the repetition of the spatial preposition "dinanzi" ("li vien dinanzi," "Sempre dinanzi a lui ne stanno molte"); analogous assumptions with respect to behavior underwrite the pseudo-precision of the qualifiers in "secondo ch'avvinghia," or "cignesi con la coda tante volte / quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa." Noteworthy in this regard is Dante's deployment of the concentric-circle technique of narration, whereby the narrator circles back to a previous point in order to expand on it; in this case the cryptically dramatic description of Minos offered in verses 4–6 is amplified in the following tercets. We do well to remember, however, that even when complete the description leaves much to the imagination—what do we really know of Minos's shape, beyond that he possesses a tail?22

21. A discussion of tragedìa and comedìa for Dante, with bibliography, may be found in chapter 3 of Dante's Poets and chapters 3 and 4 of The Undivine Comedy.

22. As Salsano puts it, "il Minosse della Divina Commedia vive in grazia della coda" (12). The Commedia's illustrators developed an iconography for Minos that fills in the blanks left by the text. Minos emerges from the illustrations as a bearded man with horns (of varying shapes), frequently with spiky wings, in one case with rooster's claws for feet. He always possesses a tail, which sometimes wraps around a sinner rather than around himself and frequently appears phallicly from between his legs. It is worth noting that none of this iconography is present in the Vatican Vergil's illustration of Minos, where he appears as a pagan philosopher. My thanks to Karl Fugelso, a doctoral candidate in art history at Columbia who is writing a dissertation on viewer engagement in Commedia illustrations, for helping me decipher depictions of Minos and providing me the Virgilius Vaticanus information.
The explicit reprise, signaled by “Dico che” in verse 7, is noted by Boccaccio, who considers it a means of elaborating a succinct description into a more complex one: “Ora, per ciò che all’autore pare aver molto soccintamente dis- critto l’uficio di questo Minòs, per farlo più chiaro, reassume e dice: Dico, reassumendo . . .” (286). The late 19th century commentator, Giacomo Belli, devotes the most attention to “Dico che”; he insists that Dante loses authorial credibility by demonstrating a need to clarify his discourse:

Anche altrove, sebbene di rado, noi vedremo che l’autore riprende la dicitura con un dico, quasi a chiarimento di quello che ha detto e quasi la tirata del periodo sia troppo lunga sicché il lettore possa averne dimenticato il nesso. Questo modo di sintassi non è il più regolare, poiché il discorso si deve pregiare di essere chiaro per se stesso e non deve confessare di avere bisogno di riprendere il filo per essere chiaro. Così qui avrebbe dovuto l’autore sin dal principio esporre chiaramente l’ufficio di Minosse senza bisogno di venire poi ad uno chiarimento di quello che crede di aver detto in confuso, poiché l’attenzione del lettore nelle due esposizioni va perdendosi; avendosi cioè già formato un qualche concetto della cosa che si descrive è costretto poi a fare un esame interno se quel concetto era giusto paragonandolo ai susseguenti dettagli e dovendo confermare o riformare, restringere od ampliare a seconda di quello che deriva del suo confronto. Oltre che si forma il concetto che non sempre l’autore sappia esporre bene quello che intende di dire e perciò non vi presta tutta quell’attenzione che si richiede, diminuendo in lui la fede nell’autore, e stimando che altrove possa spiegare meglio quello che ha detto, non si sforza di penetrare a prima giunta nel significato di un periodo che non gli riesca subito chiaro e così l’autore non riesce pienamente nel suo intento. Qualunque autore deve far supporre al suo lettore che esso comprende bene quello che dice e che lo sa spiegare esattamente e non dubita affatto di avere parlato con chiarezza facendo delle correzioni e delle ulteriori spiegazioni a quello che ha detto. Il ripetere la dicitura col dico vale lo stesso che dire: io era alquanto astratto e non ho compenetrato bene nelle parole i termini essenziali di quello che io voleva dire, e perciò dico il che riesce appunto a far perdere la fiducia in esso ed a svolgere l’attenzione.23

Belli had the right instinct regarding this passage but the wrong interpretation. If we bear in mind that “narrative verisimilitude tends to flaunt rather than mask its fictitious nature” (Riffaterre, Fictional Truth, 21), we see that the

intrusively authorial “Dico che” of *Inferno* 5.7 (like the analogously positioned “Vero è” in the seventh verse of the preceding canto) does indeed alert us, as Belli senses, to issues of fictionality and credibility, but that its effect is to authenticate rather than to discredit the description.

In his elegant analysis of fictional truth, Riffaterre further reminds us that “a narrative must contain features that are self-verifiable and therefore resistant to the vagaries of reference” (*Fictional Truth*, 10). This law is never more operative than in a context where the vagaries of reference cannot either support or interfere with the reader’s experience of the text as true, as in a description of hell. And, in fact, if we look back through verses 1–24 of *Inferno* 5, we are struck by how self-verifying a narrative this is, beginning with the initial tercet’s careful grafting of the second circle of hell onto the first, in a move that both generates textual authority and referentiality from its own already established fictional truth and adds new dimensions to that fictional truth by clarifying the physical shape of the place in which we find ourselves. Likewise, the belt-like girding of Minos’s tail as it wraps about his body—“cignesi”—echoes the ever-tightening noose of hell, “che men loco cinghia,” with the result that Minos’s coiled tail replicates in a specular *mise en abyme* the very structure of the realm he serves.24 The repetition of “dinnanzi” in verses 8 and 13 is similarly self-verifying with respect to Minos as an embodied presence; moreover, “Sempre dinnanzi a lui ne stanno molte” reinforces previous information about hell, for instance regarding the “tumulto, il qual s’aggira / sempre in quell’aura sanza tempo tinta” (*Inf.* 3.28–29).25 Even the detail of the one-by-oneness of the souls as they approach Minos—“vanno *a vicenda ciascuna* al giudizio”—adds to the persuasiveness of the possible world under construction by echoing the behavior of the souls on the banks of Acheron, who had thrown themselves from the shore “ad una ad una” (*Inf.* 3.116).

The interaction between Minos and Vergil that takes up the last three tercets of our opening sequence will bring us back to the issue of Dante’s treatment of classical culture in general and of his guide in particular. Before moving on, however, I want to point out that the famous formula that Vergil uses to bypass Charon in canto 3, Minos in canto 5, and (with significant variations) Pluto in canto 7—“vuolsi così colà dove si puote / ciò che si vuole, e più non dimandare”—constitutes another self-verifying repetition on the part of the narrative. (Indeed, this repetition seems tailored to buttress Riffaterre’s proposal that his definition of “narrative truth as unchanging iteration within a changing story” find its test in Lewis Carroll’s line “What I tell you three times

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25. The only previous use of *sempre* is in *Inf.* 1: “sì che ’l piè fermo sempre era ’l più basso” (30).
is true" [Fictional Truth, 21]). My reading of Vergil’s repetitive formula demonstrates how a narrative approach—a "detheologized" approach—can offer a fresh dimension to a text that has been approached so thematically for so long: when we consider the formula as a textual building-block in the ongoing construction of a fictionally true hell, we gain a greater understanding of what is going on in these early cantos of Inferno, and are less tempted by the facile critique of Dante’s poetic abilities that bewilderment at the repetition has prompted in commentary after commentary. I offer Sapegno as an example of an all too common approach to the problem: "E’ un procedimento, in cui ancora s’avverte un certo schematismo e una certa meccanicità d’invenzione, che solo più tardi lascerà posto a una rappresentazione alquanto più variata e drammaticamente mossa del viaggio con i suoi incidenti e le sue peripezie."

The verbal exchange between Vergil and Minos (between, it is worth specifying, Vergil and a character who was once his, in the Aeneid, but who has now become—like Vergil himself—Dante’s), offers us a variation on the Commedia’s Vergilian problematic: if in one set we place Dante’s deformations and revisions of Vergilian texts, notably the Aeneid, to a second set belongs his handling not of Vergil’s texts but of “Vergilio,” the character invented for the Commedia. Although these two sets are inevitably intertwined, it is useful, from a critical perspective, to keep them separate. Thus, another way to approach the surprising complexity of the Minos episode at the beginning of Inferno 5, and another way to indicate the amount of narrative work being accomplished in this brief passage, is to note that both categories of the Vergilian problematic are already operative: verses 1–24 contain both an intertextual resonance vis-à-vis the Aeneid, which we have discussed, and also a narrative segment to be added to the developing story-line under the rubric “Vergilio,” to which we now turn.

Minos’s admonition to the pilgrim to beware hell’s entrance contains a gratuitous slight directed at the guide: “guarda com’entri e di cui tu ti fide” is a warning that calls Vergil’s personal trustworthiness into question. Benvenuto crisply glosses “e di cui tu ti fide” by remarking that “Virgilius non erat sufficiens dux.” Boccaccio recognizes that Minos’s words raise the specter of Vergil’s damnation and implicitly prompt the reader to wonder how a damned soul can lead someone else to salvation: “quasi voglia dire: ‘Virgilio non ha saputo salvar sé: dunque come credi tu che egli salvi te?’” (287). Once again, then, we are left to wonder at Dante’s narrative mastery, for in posing this question, albeit implicitly, he is forecasting the paradox that pulses at the heart of the Commedia’s “Virgilio,” of whom it will ultimately be said, many cantos and much textual time from now, that he behaved “as one who goes by night, who carries the light behind and helps not himself, but makes the people after him knowledgeable” (“come quei che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e

sé non giova, / ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte” [Purg. 22.67–69]). The implied query regarding Vergil’s fitness that Boccaccio hears in Minos’s veiled threat will find its answer in Statius’s poignantly beautiful image, which tells us that it is indeed possible to be an unilluminated source of illumination. Dante’s “Virgilio,” a persona that is beginning to take shape in these opening cantos of hell, is—inter alia—the Commedia’s most profound and extensive commentary on, and incarnation of, Vergilian melancholy, Vergilian lacrimae rerum.

In concluding our discussion of Inferno 5’s opening sequence, I will return to the poetics of the new. We discussed earlier the ways in which the first tercet, in particular, works toward the goals mandated by such a poetics, but we have yet to note Minos’s role: Minos stands at the entrance (“intrata” [5], “entri” [19], “intrare” [20]) to a new narrative beginning as a sentient marker of difference, constituting a barrier between the souls who do not have to submit to his judgment and those who do, a barrier that cuts between canto 5 and all that precedes it, putting canto 5 on the wrong side of the divide, in the same way that Acheron cuts between canto 4 and its predecessors, to the detriment of those in canto 4. Minos’s differentiating function will be recalled later in the poem by none other than Vergil, who tells Cato that he is from Limbo by saying that he is not bound by Minos: “Minòs me non lega; / ma son del cerchio ove son li occhi casti / di Marzia tua” (Purg. 1.77–79). Vergil’s eagerness to define himself as not under Minos’s jurisdiction is perhaps related to the barb that Minos had directed at him way back in Inferno 5, and to the complicated web of classical interrelations it suggests: the pagan poet’s own invention, coopted by a Christian text, now finds him wanting as a guide! But, whatever may be the “personal” motivations behind Vergil’s remark, it also serves to highlight the importance of Minos as a boundary: there is a difference between those who have been “bound” by Minos and those who have not.

Given that the great majority of the souls in hell is subject to Minos, Dante’s placement of his judge is most immediately relevant to that small but salient minority that is exempted from his rule. In other words, the most explicit ideological thrust of the decision to place Minos at the entrance to the second rather than the first circle of hell (the obvious and logical choice, as Castelvetro disgruntedly remarked) is to reinforce the heterodoxically outsider status assigned by Dante to Limbo. (Castelvetro notes that the judge should be situated in the area preceding Limbo, so that no soul remains outside the purview of justice: “dovendosi ragionevolmente far il giudicio in luogo separato, e non solamente in luogo separato, ma per aventura nell’anzi limbo, acciochè niuna anima restasse, che non avesse il suo luogo assegnato e certo per dirittura di giudizio.” [27]) This is the point underscored in Purgatorio 1 by Vergil, and it

27. See Sposizione di Lodovico Castelvetro a XXIX Canti dell’Inferno dantesco (Modena: Società tipografica, 1886) 73.
brings us back to the under-appreciated radicalism of Dante’s conceptualization of Limbo. But the placement of Minos is not without relevance to what follows him as well.

What follows Minos most immediately is the encounter with the lustful and particularly Francesca. This is a suggestive symmetry, since Minos in the *Aeneid* is followed by the “Lugentes Campi,” where Dido dwells among those “whom bitter love consumed with cruel waste” (*Aen.* 6.442). The proximity between Minos and the unhappy lovers in the *Aeneid* sheds further light on the placement of Minos at the threshold of lust in the *Inferno*: as Vergil’s Minos paves the way for Dido, so, I suggest, Dante’s Minos paves the way for Francesca—who is marked as Didoesque, coming to the pilgrim from “la schiera ov’è Dido” (85). This symmetry brings us back to the differences instituted by Dante between his Minos and Vergil’s; it brings us back to that *coda*. Dante follows Vergil—creating an analogy between Francesca and Dido that includes a structural contiguity to Minos—as part of the complex interplay whereby he both appropriates from his precursor (even the pairing of Francesca with Paolo has its forerunner in *Aeneid* 6’s pairing of Dido with Sychaeus, to whom Dido turns after she spurns Aeneas) and deviates from him, in this case by imposing much harsher conditions on his lovers than does Vergil. Dante uses Vergil to deviate from Vergil, in that it is precisely a re-fashioned Minos—whose phallic tail proleptically carnalizes the figure of Francesca and offsets her romanticizing—who marks the difference between Vergil’s “Lugentes Campi” and the second circle of hell.

Francesca’s efforts are so successfully directed at dulling the reader’s perception of her sinfulness that it is bracing to recall that she too passed by Minos and was judged by him. Indeed, given the importance of speech and language to Francesca, the most compelling way to formulate her connection to Minos may be by relating her to verse 15: “dicono e odono e poi son giù volte.” The souls speak to Minos and then hear his judgment: “dicono e odono.” Francesca’s speech to the pilgram, then, the honeyed discourse that has seduced so many generations of readers, is at the least her second speech since she entered hell. She has spoken at least once before—to Minos. We will never know what she said on that prior occasion; did she favor Minos with echoes of Guido Guinizzelli and Andrea Cappellanus, as she does us, or did she offer him a starker version of her tale? Whatever she told him, her signifying was subjected to a greater signifier: Minos’s tail, an instrument with which Dante’s Minos, having read the sinners’ lives, now writes their futures.28

28. We know that Minos also speaks: Guido da Montefeltro reports that Minos wrapped his tail about himself eight times, indicating the eighth circle, and then specified “Questi è d’i rei del foco furo” (*Inf.* 27.127), thus indicating the bolgia within the eighth circle to which Guido belongs. While Salsano takes Minos’s words as indicating the relative failure of the tail as signifier, referring to the “generale insufficienza pratica del sistema caudino” (18), I would stress the richness of the different signifying systems to which Minos is given access.
The tail signifies—va significando, to adopt Dante’s poetic credo from Purgatorio 24—and as a result Francesca is sent to the second circle of hell, to join the lustful, and to experience a torment that the next section of the canto will undertake to describe. What Vergil said about exiting hell, we will apply rather to writing it: Hoc opus, hic labor est.

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