In the course of their journey downward through the eighth circle of Hell, through the series of ten concentric ditches (bolge) which form the Malebolge, Dante the Pilgrim and his guide Virgil complete their observation of the diviners and move toward the bridge over the fifth bolgia, talking of matters that are not pertinent to the poem. The opening verses of canto 21 of the Inferno announce in their flowing, casual—one might even say, lighthearted—style the free-wheeling scene that is to come:1

Cosí di ponte in ponte, altro parlando che la mia comedía cantar non cura, venimmo; e tenavamo ’l colmo, quando restavamo per veder l’altra fessura di Malebolge e li altri pianti vani.

(21.1–5)

As will be evident only later, the superficial lightness of these verses masks the profound seriousness of the events in these cantos, and, as such, it establishes from the beginning a sense of tension which will continue throughout the entire episode. The use of “comedía” is, on the one hand, a naming device (the poem is, after all, a “comedy” for reasons of content and style) and, on the other hand, a specific reference to the present episode and its presentation through a mixture of stylistic and lexical registers.2 The reiteration of “ponte” serves to focus attention on what will prove to be the major concern of this episode—the search for a bridge over the sixth bolgia, the ditch in which the hypocrites are punished. And it is this quest that sets the action of cantos 21–23 in motion. The easy, rhythmical forward movement of these verses comes to an abrupt halt at the end of the second tercet when the Pilgrim declares what he saw, or better what he did not see: “e vidila mirabilmente oscura” (21.6). The darkness of the bolgia precludes easy comprehension of its features and inhabitants and may be taken as a sign of the perceptual and interpretive
difficulties of these cantos. The Pilgrim’s lack of understanding is accompanied by a sense of fear suggested by the use of the adverb “mirabilmente” and more clearly evoked by the adjective “oscura,” which recalls to the reader’s mind the “selva oscura” of Inferno I and its wealth of meanings and associations.

The fifth bolgia of the eighth circle of Hell, wherein are punished those who were guilty of corruption in public office, appears to be a vast expanse of boiling pitch, similar to that employed in the Venetian shipyard:

Quale ne l’arzanà de’ Viniziani
bolle l’inverno la tenace pece . . .

. . .
tal, non per foco, ma per divin’ arte,
bollia là giuso una pegola spessa,
che ‘nviscava la ripa d’ogne parte.

(21.7-8, 16-18)

For the moment the Pilgrim sees nothing except the black pitch:

I’ vedea lei, ma non vedēa in essa
mai che le bolle che ’l bollor levava,
e gonfiar tutta, e riseder compressa.

(21.19-21)

In addition to the long introductory simile, the play in this passage on seeing and not seeing (“I’ vedea lei, ma non vedēa in essa,” 21.19), which suggests the potentially deceptive nature of appearances, establishes a context of suspense and sets the stage for the unexpected and, more specifically, for the unpleasant surprises that await the unsuspecting Pilgrim and his guide.

Dante’s contemplation of the pitch is interrupted by Virgil’s imperative words (“Guarda, guarda!” 21.23), which warn him of the approaching devil, and his protective gesture: “mi trasse a sé del loco dov’ io stava” (21.24). The four verses that describe the Pilgrim’s response to Virgil’s command are carefully constructed to convey the sense of anxiety induced by fear and to depict that state of tension between the simultaneous desire to see and to flee from the thing feared:

Allor mi volsi come l’uom cui tarda
di veder quel che li convien fuggire
e cui paura sùbita sgagliarda,
che, per veder, non indugia 'l partire.

(21.25–28)

As will become apparent as the episode unfolds, these verses are also monitory, for they conjure certain spectres—objects and persons to be avoided, the paralyzing power of fear. Moreover, they present sound counsel—the necessity of flight, the dangers of delay. In short, they anticipate the deceit perpetrated by Malacoda, the leader of the devils, and the very real danger of physical harm posed by the devils, the Malebranche.

A brief summary of the principal events of these cantos follows. With Dante and Virgil looking on, a devil arrives bearing a barrator from Lucca whom he unceremoniously throws into the boiling pitch (21.29–46). The demons on the bank engage in devilish words and antics with this particular sinner (21.47–57). Attempting to conceal Dante’s presence, Virgil meets with and tries to learn from the devils and their leader, Malacoda, if there is a passage across the sixth bolgia (21.58–87). His presence disclosed, the Pilgrim comes forward into the devils’ presence (21.88–105), and Malacoda tells an elaborate story, part truth and part fiction, concerning the bridges over the sixth bolgia (21.106–114). Traveling in the perilous company of the devils (21.115–139; 22.1–30), Dante and Virgil encounter Ciampolo, a barrator from Navarre, whom the devils have captured (22.31–96). With a clever ruse Ciampolo tricks the devils and jumps back into the pitch (22.97–123), and two devils (Alichino and Calcabrina), angered over his escape, come to blows and fall into the pitch (22.124–151). Left to their own devices, Dante and Virgil move ahead and, suddenly pursued by the Malebranche, narrowly escape harm by sliding down into the sixth bolgia (23.1–57).

Taking great care to protect his charge from the devils, Virgil orders him to hide “dopo uno scheggio, ch’alcun schermo t’aia” (21.60) and assures him of his control over the situation:

“e per nulla offension che mi sia fatta,
non temer tu, ch’i’ ho le cose conte,
per ch’altra volta fui a tal baratta.”

(21.61–63)

The irony of Virgil’s bold assertion (“i’ ho le cose conte,” 21.62) will be apparent only later, for at this point in the narrative neither he nor we the readers can foretell the course of events. Further emphasis
is placed on the necessity of his maintaining an external show of confidence—"mestier li fu d’aver sicura fronte" (21.66)—especially in view of the assault on him by the devils:

Con quel fure e con quella tempesta
ch’escono i cani a dosso al poverello
che di subito chiede ove s’arresta,
usciron quei di sotto al ponticello,
e volser contra lui tutt’i runcigli.

(21.67–71)

The image evoked of Virgil as a poor beggar accurately describes the true nature of the situation and undermines the picture of strength and confidence that he wished to present. Attempting to reestablish his authority, Virgil asks that the devils send their leader to hear him out:

“Nessun di voi sia fello!
Innanzi che l’uncin vostro mi pigli,
traggasi avante l’un di voi che m’oda,
e poi d’arruncigliarmi si consigli.”

(21.72–75)

Unanimously proclaimed as their representative, Malacoda moves forward and utters a rhetorical question ("Che li approda?" 21.78), which clearly suggests that Virgil’s words will have no influence on their actions. Virgil’s confident words to Malacoda are similar to the formulaic passe partout that he had employed—successfully—with Charon, Minos, and Plutus:

“Credi tu, Malacoda, qui veder mi
esser venuto . . .
sicuro già da tutti vostri scherni,
senza voler divino e fato destro?”

(21.79–82)

However, Virgil has apparently forgotten his unsuccessful attempt in dealing with the demons who denied them entry to the city of Dis (Inf. 8–9). Indeed, he is so confident about the efficacy of these words with their reference to divine grace that he is willing to put his trust in the enemies of God. Furthermore, despite his initial concern for the Pilgrim’s safety (to the extent that he ordered him to hide and not reveal his presence), Virgil discloses too much information too soon. Without receiving any guarantee of safe passage or assistance
and without even waiting for a response from Malacoda, he proceeds to betray the Pilgrim’s presence:

“Lascian’ andar, ché nel cielo è voluto
ch’i’ mostrì altrui questo cammin silvestro.”

(21.83–84)

Malacoda’s response to these words is a masterpiece of theatricality, designed to convince Virgil of his “sincerity”: He appears to be crestfallen (“Allor li fu l’orgoglio si caduto,” 21.85); he dramatically drops his instrument of torture (“. . . e’ si lasciò cascar l’uncino a’ piedi,” 21.86) and says in a mock show of acquiescence: “Omai non sia feruto” (21.87). Virgil is taken in, deceived by these actions and words. Throughout this episode the Poet carefully draws and develops the contrast between Virgil’s rational activity and the Pilgrim’s instinctive response to events.

From the moment he joins his guide, Dante the Pilgrim senses the devils’ malevolence in their words and actions:

. . . io mi mossi e a lui venni ratto;
   e i diavoli si fecer tutti avanti,
   sì ch’io temetti ch’ei tenesser patto.

(21.91–93)

The sense of tension and dread which permeates the episode is enhanced by the use of a strikingly vivid military image:

cosí vid’io già temer li fanti
   ch’uscivan patteggiati di Caprona,
   veggendo sé tra nemici cotanti.

(21.94–96)

Critics are generally agreed that this passage contains some reliable autobiographical information: As a member of the army of Tuscan Guelphs, Dante participated in the siege and eventual surrender of the castle of Caprona (August 16, 1289) and witnessed the safe passage of the terrified Pisan soldiers from the castle under the supervision of the Florentine troops. The fear evoked by this reference is made even more real and palpable, for the roles of captor and captured have been reversed: while there at Caprona Dante was the victorious observer, here in Hell he recognizes his subordinate and powerless position as similar to that of the Pisan troops offered safe-conduct.

The words and gestures of the devils are at once menacing and
After the devils are named, Dante's suspicions about their intentions are heightened:

"Omè, maestro, che è quel ch'i' veggio?",
diss'io, "deh, sanza scorta andianci soli,
se tu sa' ir; ch'i' per me non la cheggio.
Se tu se' sí accorto come suoli,
non vedi tu ch'e' digrignan li denti
e con le ciglia ne minaccian duoli?"  

(21.127-132)

Virgil discounts these visible signs of danger, reiterating his command over the situation. Nevertheless, his response is only partially correct and, to be sure, only partially reassuring to the Pilgrim:

"Non vo' che tu paventi;
lasciali digrignar pur a lor senno,
ch'e' fanno ciò per li lessi dolenti."

(21.133-135)

This is then the extended prelude to the grotesque and dramatic events of these cantos.

Extending over two and one third cantos, this longest single episode in the *Inferno* has been the subject of much discussion, much of it devoted to the nature of comic elements and *comicità* in the poem. The scene in the fifth *bolgia* has been likened to those presented on the stage in contemporary religious dramas, particularly in the transalpine regions, and the interaction here between "performers" (devils, sinners) and "observers" (Dante, Virgil) most probably derives from those interludes in medieval plays when the "devils" would run about among the audience, inspiring both laughter and fear. In the *Inferno*, of course, there is no such "interlude," no "intermission" in the performance, and although the *dramatis personae* do not wear masks and costumes, they do successfully conceal their intentions under the cover of duplicitous words. Indeed, the ever-present, diabolical undercurrent attacks the superficially "festive" atmosphere and gradually subverts it.
From the earliest commentaries on the poem to the present day critics have noted Malacoda’s deceitful ways—his story about the bridges over the sixth bolgia (21.106–114) and his “promise” of safe conduct (21.125–126). The success of the devil’s first lie derives from its presentation—the lie is embedded in the truth:

. . . “Più oltre andar per questo
is coglio non si può, però che giace
tutto spezzato al fondo l’arco sesto.
E se l’andare avante pur vi piace,
andatevene su per questa grotta;
presso è un altro scoglio che via face.
L’er, più oltre cinqu’ore che quest’otta,
mille dugento con sessanta sei
anni compié che qui la via fu rota.”

(21.106–114)

As Malacoda truthfully reports, there are no bridges across the bolgia of the hypocrites (21.106–108) because of the earthquake that occurred at the moment of Christ’s crucifixion (21.112–114). However, by bracketing the false story of the “altro scoglio che via face” (21.109–111), these two truths condition it and make it appear as though it, too, were true. Malacoda’s fraudulent promise of safe conduct for Dante and Virgil depends directly on the embedded lie in his first speech:

“costor sian salvi infino a l’altro scheggio
che tutto intero va sovra le tane.”

(21.125–126)

Since there is no other “scheggio,” the command that “costor sian salvi” until that point has no weight and is, in short, no guarantee at all. However, the two wayfarers do not yet know the true nature of the situation, and, in fact, at this point neither does the reader. With our annotated editions of the Commedia it is easy to forget that Dante expected his text to be read, understood, and responded to on its own terms. He expected his readers to experience the poem in an immediate and unmediated fashion and, thus, to be caught up in its drama, to be assailed by the same fears, doubts, and questions that confront the Pilgrim. The vast commentary tradition that has grown up around the text of the Commedia should serve as an aid to our interpretation of the text, but not as a substitute for it, for the text is what Dante
wrote and what he expected us to read and evaluate. This is certainly not to deny the utility and, indeed, the necessity—especially for modern readers who generally lack an adequate medieval cultural preparation—of bringing other texts to bear on the meaning of the *Commedia*, but only to remind us that the first readers of the poem encountered it on the manuscript page and generally without any critical or interpretative apparatus, although these glosses began to appear even in the first decades following Dante’s death.

In this episode where appearances are not always what they seem, Dante demonstrates that language, too, can be used in an ironic or deceitful fashion,\(^{14}\) that it can be used and misused, that it can both reveal and conceal. Our perception of the events in cantos 21–23 is determined in large part by two contradictory thematic currents: devilish playfulness and diabolical cunning. On the one hand, the devilish antics, or *diableries*, seem to provide the mainstay of the action, affecting all the participants and reducing them to a common denominator. On the other hand, since every coin has two sides, the *rovescio* of this “innocent” activity may be glimpsed from time to time in the machinations contrived both by the devils (Malacoda’s lie which aims to entrap Dante and Virgil) and by the sinners (Ciampolo’s ruse calculated to free himself from the Malebranche). There are in simultaneous operation, then, two levels on which the events of these cantos should be understood: 1) grotesque humor and 2) profound seriousness, the latter underlying and consistently undermining the former.

Several factors contribute to the successful representation of this duality. One is the basic and ironic dichotomy between appearance and reality. Dante extends the opening simile by describing the intense activity in the Venetian shipyard:

\[
\text{Quale ne l’arzanà de’ Viniziani}
\text{bolle l’inverno la tenace pece}
\text{a rimpalmare i legnì lor non sani,}
\text{ché navicar non ponno—in quella vece}
\text{chi fa suo legnò novo e chi ristoppa}
\text{le coste a quel che più viaggi fece;}
\text{chi ribatte da proda e chi da poppa;}
\text{altri fa remi e altri volge sarte;}
\text{chi terzeruolo e artimon rintoppa—.}
\]

\[^{21.7-15}\]
The impression created by this image is one of openness, energy and productivity, and consequently this well-populated scene in the Arsenal contrasts sharply both with the seemingly deserted bolgia and, further, with the unproductive and secretive undertakings of the grafters. As in life these secular counterparts to the simonists (who are punished in the third bolgia), ignoring the greater and more important needs of the state, thought only of personal gain, so here in Hell they continue their nefarious operations in darkness (under the pitch) and with deceit (the tricks played on their guardians, the Malebranche). The nature of the contrappasso has, therefore, a direct relationship to the overall structure of the episode. By concealing the sinners, the pitch itself—bubbling, hot and black—presents a false appearance, which initially "deceives" the Pilgrim as to its true content.

Another manner of enhancing the duality of vision in these cantos involves the use of certain parodic elements. The "trumpet" blast, on whose note canto 21 ends ("ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta," 139), gives rise to the marvellous mock-heroic introduction to canto 22 (vv. 1–12), where Dante, by "elevating" this "diversa cennamella" (22.10), effectively lowers it to its proper level and underscores its base nature.

The recurrent use of animal imagery also helps to maintain the tension between the calm and tumultuous, the playful and the threatening. The movement and position of the sinners are described respectively as those of dolphins (22.19) and frogs (22.26), and even here there is the hint of danger. Although they come to the surface "ad alleggiar la pena" (22.22), which is ostensibly a beneficial activity, the sinners are compared to

... i delfini, quando fanno segno
a' marinar con l'arco de la schiena
che s'argomentin di campar lor legno.

(22.19–21)

The warning that dolphins give sailors of an impending storm suggests the violence that is lurking behind the devils' calm exterior appearance, as well as the very dangerous nature of this presumably salutary movement. Similarly, the image of the frogs that remain

... a l'orlo de l'acqua d'un fosso
... pur col muso fuori,
Christopher Kleinhenz

sì che celano i piedi e l'altro grosso (22.25–27)

reminds the reader that there is a hidden, secret part that lies below the surface, that there is more to the scene than meets the eye. The one sinner—Ciampolo—who falls into the hands of the devils is described as a "lontra" (22.36), which, sleek, black-skinned and playful, is here the prize of a deadly hunt. His fate at the hands of the devils is aptly characterized by another animal image: "Tra male gatte era venuto 'l sorco" (22.58). In addition to the dual level of superficial playfulness and underlying seriousness which all these images convey, linguistic duplicity contributes to the prevailing ambiguous atmosphere in which the distinctions between appearance and reality are blurred.

The cleverness with which Malacoda constructed his tale about the bridges over the sixth bolgia is matched and perhaps even surpassed by that of Ciampolo, the grafter from Navarre, who, true to his manipulative earthly ways, tricks the devils at their own game: he tries to corrupt them through bribery. As is customary in the Commedia, Ciampolo tells Dante the Pilgrim about his earthly existence and discloses the identity of other sinners in this bolgia. By answering questions such as these, the Navarrese barrator is able to forestall the mutilation and torment which the devils wish to inflict upon him. At the end of his speech Ciampolo calls the wayfarers’ attention to the devil Farfarello’s menacing look:

"Omè, vedete l'altro che digrigna;
i' direi anche, ma i' temo ch'ello
non s'apparecchi a grattarmi la tigna." (22.91–93)

Given a momentary reprieve from attack, the grafter from Navarre, who is referred to ambiguously at this critical point in the narrative as "lo spaurato" (22.98), continues his conversation with Dante and Virgil, taking advantage of their presence to devise a scheme which will ultimately deceive both wayfarers and devils. He first offers to have other sinners come to the surface to speak with Dante and Virgil:
"Se voi volete vedere o udire
Toschi o Lombardi, io ne farò venire."

(22.97, 99)

But before a response can be made, he continues, seizing on this as the pretext for the second part of his plan: the Malebranche must withdraw behind the bank to ensure that the sinners not fear further torment when they come to the surface:

"ma stieno i Malebranche un poco in cesso,
sí ch'ei non teman de le lor vendette."

(22.100-101)

Ciampolo then discloses that the sinners have a secret all-clear signal which they customarily use in order to know when they might safely come to the surface of the boiling pitch for some relief:

". . . io, seggendo in questo loco stesso,
per un ch'io son, ne farò venir sette
quand'io suffolerò, com'è nostro uso
di fare allor che fori alcun si mette."

(22.102-105)

Although initially addressed to Dante and Virgil and carefully crafted to appeal to their regional predilections ("Toschi" for Dante, "Lombardi" for Virgil), Ciampolo's offer to summon additional souls caters directly to the devils' obviously greedy desire to do injury to as many sinners as possible. And the 700% rate of return is certainly attractive. These words are ambiguous: Is Ciampolo describing an actual practice? Or is he merely contriving a clever ruse to escape the clutches of the devils, to regain his freedom, relatively speaking, in the boiling pitch? Cagnazzo, another of the devils, perceives the possibility of a trick:

"Odi malizia
ch'elli ha pensata per gittarsi giuso!"

(22.107-108)

Ciampolo, who is described here as a consummate master of deceit ("ei, ch'avea lacciuoli a gran divizia," 22.109), responds in what has generally been taken to be a declaration of his "malvagità":

"Malizioso son io troppo,
quand'io procuro a' mia maggior trestizia"

(22.110-111)
and, consequently, of his remorseful recognition that this action will bring harm to his companions. To arrive at this sense, we must understand that Ciampolo, to present a convincing self-image, took the devil’s term “malizia” (= “astuzia”) and modified its form and meaning (“malizioso” = “malvagio, cattivo”) to suit his purpose.\(^2\) Another possible reading of this verse is offered by Sapegno, who, recognizing that he is in the minority on this matter, would retain the equation “malizia” = “astuzia” and interpret Ciampolo’s response as ironic:\(^3\)

Oh che malizioso sopraffino son io, che, con la mia malizia, procurso ai miei compagni maggior dolore, esponendoli alle vostre offese!

In addition to the ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of “malizioso,” there are problems attendant in the following verse regarding the meaning of “maggior.” While almost all modern critics read “maggior” as an adjective modifying “trestizia,” some of the early commentators would have it associated with “a’ mia” and to refer thus to Ciampolo’s fellow barrators who were of greater renown.\(^4\) For example, Francesco da Buti glosses these verses as follows:\(^5\)

Malizioso son io troppo; ecco che confessa esser malizioso nel modo che dirà, per compiacere a’ demoni, Quand’io procurso a’ miei maggior trestizia; cioè a quelli che sono sotto la pegola, il quali finge esser maggiore di sè, per farne più desiderosi li demoni i quali sono più vaghi di schernire e di straziare li grandi spiriti, che li piccoli, e questo disse Giampolo, perchè li demoni si scostassono più volentieri, com’elli volea, per gittarsi giuso.

However, in addition to these two possibilities, I believe there is another, equally valid way of interpreting Ciampolo’s response, one that remains very close to the letter of the text and accords well with the sort of linguistic duplicity and ambiguity which is present throughout this episode. Very simply, I would suggest that in verse 111 Ciampolo says two quite different things, depending on how the line is read and how the parts are construed, the key term, in my view, being “maggior.” The apparent sense of the phrase, the one that Ciampolo wants the devils to understand—and what they do understand—is “quand’ io procurso a’ mia [pause] maggior trestizia” (= “when I cause greater torment to my companions”). The
other sense of the phrase, the “real” or underlying “true” meaning as Ciampolo would want it—and the one eventually realized—is “quand’ io procurso a’ mia maggior [pause] trestizia” (= “when I cause my superiors [i.e., those who are in command, the devils] torment”). Similarly, the shifting meaning of “malizioso” in verse 110 would then change in accordance with these two models, so that in the first instance it would mean “malvagio” and in the second “astuto.” We will recall that at the end of the episode Ciampolo succeeds in escaping from the devils: he does not whistle, nor do any other sinners appear. The Navarrese barrator jumps into the pitch, and two devils (Alichino and Calcabrina), enraged at this deceit, grapple in aerial combat with each other, and fall thus entangled into the pitch, at which point Dante and Virgil depart on their own, leaving them “così ’mpacciati” (22.151).

In verse 111 Ciampolo thus combines truth and illusion into a single, but ambiguous whole, whose meaning is now one thing and now another, depending on how it is read and understood. Just as Malacoda conditioned Dante and Virgil’s response by embedding a lie in the middle of truthful statements, so the Navarrese barrator, with his own special linguistic trick, turns the tables on his captors and does them one better. However, rather than planting what will be eventually recognized as a blatant lie in the middle of the truth—a ploy we admit was efficacious for Malacoda—Ciampolo devises a much more subtle linguistic stratagem, for the meaning of his words shifts or perhaps better, evolves, chameleon-like, depending on the way they are perceived and on their context. Indeed, it is only in retrospect that we the readers, like Dante the Pilgrim, can reflect on and perceive the true intention of Ciampolo’s words.

Hindsight is generally completely accurate, and Dante the Pilgrim engages in just such a retrospective moment at the beginning of canto 23, when he considers the events he has just witnessed (in cantos 21–22) and compares them with the beginning and the ending of Aesop’s fable of the frog and the mouse:25

Vòlt’ era in su la favola d’Isopo
lo mio pensier per la presente rissa,
dov’ el parlò de la rana e del topo;
ché piú non si pareggia “mo” e “issa”
che l’un con l’altro fa, se ben s’accoppia
There has been a long and sustained controversy over the precise application of the fable to the events in cantos 21–22, and, by having his character, the Pilgrim, give a retrospective reading and interpretation of a situation, Dante the Poet provides us with guidance as to how we as readers should approach this particular text in order to ferret out its proper meaning. By inviting us to consider his text in the light of another text—Aesop’s fable—the Poet points to the more general problems of interpretation which the first experience with events or the first reading of a text presents. The Poet is showing through the figure of the Pilgrim that we are all susceptible to deception, that appearances may indeed be deceiving, and that we may get at the truth of the matter only through rereading and reevaluating a text or a situation. Commentators have long noted that the relationships of the protagonists in the fable to those in the Commedia are ambiguous, and the several proposed solutions disclose these interpretative problems. The most common interpretation would have Alichino as the mouse, Calcabrina as the frog, and the pitch—the “sghermitor” (22.142)—as the kite. However, in his important study Larkin stresses the “complete innocence of the intended victims” and the “gratuitousness of the treachery” and proposes that Dante and Virgil who seek to cross the bolgia are the mouse, the devils who seek to deceive them are the frog, and the pitch that ensnares the malefactors in the end is the kite. He elaborates:

The tale has four essential stages: 1) the mouse comes to a barrier, 2) the mouse seeks the aid of the frog, 3) the aid is granted but with betrayal in mind, 4) the frog comes to grief through his own craftiness and because of the mouse. Stated in these terms, it is evident that Dante’s fear springs from his review of the final stage of the fable: the demons (frog) come to grief through their own craftiness and because of Dante and Virgil (the mouse). . . . just as the mouse had come to the stream, so Dante and Virgil arrived at the fifth bolgia which they could not traverse without the aid of the demons who controlled it. They request assistance; so, too, did the mouse. The frog appeared to aid the mouse but was in reality plotting its destruction. The devils likewise grant assistance to the pilgrims, but when these two later learn of Barbariccia’s [sic: Malacoda’s] cunning lie about the condition of the bridges. . . . , it is evident that behind this apparent co-operation lay the desire to entrap the pair, thus confirming the fears which Dante had from the beginning. Finally, just as the frog’s own
malice was the cause of its disaster, so that same malicious nature which sought to ensnare Dante and Virgil brought the demons to grips above the pitch. Dante becomes terrified after viewing the events of Inferno XXII in light of the fable, because as the mouse was the innocent accessory to the frog’s misfortune, so Dante and Virgil were the unwitting springboard of Ciampolo’s escape, for their questioning of him triggered the chain of events which culminated in the sinner’s flight and the fall of Alichino and Calcabrina into the pitch.\(^{28}\)

Singleton’s criticism of this solution is well-taken, for Larkin’s proposal does not respect “the all-important distinction between Dante the character in the poem and Dante the poet,” attributing knowledge to the Pilgrim that he does not yet have, that is, that he (as the mouse) already knows of Malacoda’s (the frog’s) treachery.\(^{29}\) Singleton attempts to justify this “oversight” by noting that the Pilgrim “can and does know the evil intent of the devils, since they are evil by their very nature; he is aware of their ‘ill-will’ [23.16] and fears that they will also be wrathful, since they have been put to scorn; this suspicion must serve as sufficient evidence of their intent to deceive.”\(^{30}\) While this may be the case, I believe that a more consistent reading of this entire episode, at least along the lines that I have been developing in this essay, would be to look at the Pilgrim’s reflections on the fable and its relationship to the events in this bolgia exactly as they are described, i.e., as a concatenation of thoughts.

The Pilgrim’s attention is called to the fable because of the “presente rissa” (23.5) between the two devils and their subsequent fall into the pitch. Given Dante’s assurance that there is no exact and absolute equation between these events and the fable (“ché piú non si pareggia ‘mo’ e ‘issa,’” 7), Larkin rightly notes that they are “alike in significance but different in form.”\(^{31}\) No matter which version of the fable is meant, the image of the conclusion (the “fine”) is reasonably accurate: if the mouse and frog are both eaten by the kite, then the two devils are “swallowed up” by the pitch; if only the frog is eaten and the mouse set free (as in Marie de France), then the devils are “swallowed up” by the pitch and Ciampolo escapes. The moral lesson is thus guaranteed, for the evildoers receive their proper punishment: the fiendish devils fall into the pitch, and even if Ciampolo (as the mouse) is “free” he has only “escaped” to return to his usual state of punishment. The image of the beginning is, as Larkin suggests, that of Dante and Virgil’s desire to cross the bolgia
and their encounter with the devils, the mouse’s wish to cross the water and its meeting with the frog. In his two-part, temporally retrograde reflections, the Pilgrim first considers the end (“fine”), the “rissa,” and then the beginning (“principio”), their arrival at the bolgia. From these two separate moments arise a concatenation of two thoughts which very logically yield a third:

\[ E \text{ come l'un pensier de l'altro scoppia,} \\
\text{così nacque di quello un altro poi,} \\
\text{che la prima paura mi fé doppia.} \]

(23.10–12)

The objective analysis that the Pilgrim performs on the last and then on the first events of these cantos and their relationship to the fable and its moral causes him to become apprehensive, for he understands only too clearly the paradigm of deception leading to ultimate destruction, which the fable presents and which is suggestively paralleled by the recent events he has witnessed. The third thought which intensifies his first fear (“che la prima paura mi fé doppia,” 23.12) goes back to their initial encounter with the devils and causes him to reevaluate their general attitude and demeanor in light of their subsequent actions and the perceptive and persuasive account given in the fable:

\[ \text{Io pensava così: "Questi per noi} \\
\text{sono scherniti con danno e con beffa} \\
\text{sí fatta, ch'assai credo che lor nòi.} \\
\text{Se l'ira sovra 'l mal voler s'aggueffa,} \\
\text{ei ne verranno dietro più crudeli} \\
\text{che 'l cane a quella lievre ch'elli acceffa."} \]

(23.13–18)

Even though the Pilgrim will not be aware of Malacoda’s actual deception until the end of canto 23, his initial suspicions are more or less confirmed, and he again expresses his fear to Virgil:

\[ \ldots \text{“Maestro, se non celi} \\
\text{te e me tostamente, i' ho pavento} \\
\text{d'ì Malebranche. Noi li avem già dietro;} \\
\text{io li 'magino sí, che già li sento.”} \]

(23.21–24)

There is in these words a flurry of references to concealment, to external appearances and internal realities, all of which serve to
heighten the vibrant state of tension which permeates the first third of this canto. Even more importantly, this passage summarizes the dichotomy of appearance and reality so dominant in cantos 21–22 as a way of preparing for the encounter with the hypocrites, who are, of course, excellent examples of the perils of deceptive language. In fact, when Virgil says “S’i’ fossi di piombato vetro” (23.25), the image is very similar to and, indeed, anticipates the way in which the hypocrites will appear with their cloaks gilded on the outside and leaden within:

Elli avean cappe con cappucci bassi
dinanzi a li occhi, fatte de la taglia
che in Clugni per li monaci fassi.
Di fuor dorate son, sí ch’elli abbaglia;
ma dentro tutte piombo, e gravi. . . .

(23.61–65)

Claiming to be able to read the Pilgrim’s mind, Virgil shares his concern about the Malebranche and offers a possible plan by which they may escape, if their fears are realized:

. . . “S’i’ fossi di piombato vetro,
l’imagine di fuor tua non trarrei
più tosto a me, che quella dentro ’mpetro.
Pur mo venieno i tuo’ pensier tra ’miei,
con simile atto e con simile faccia,
sí che d’intrambi un sol consiglio fei.
S’elli è che si la destra costa giaccia,
che noi possiam ne l’altra bolgia scendere,
noi fuggirem l’imaginata caccia.”

(23.25–33)

Scarcely does Virgil mention the “imaginata caccia” (23.33) when the Malebranche suddenly appear in hot pursuit of the wayfarers who escape by sliding precipitously down into the sixth bolgia.32

Virgil’s action—picking Dante up and holding him firmly as he slides down the bank—is instinctive, aptly likened to the mother who rescues her child from a house fire. This contrasts with the rational counsel he gave in vv. 31–33, whereby if the configuration of the land were such that they could descend into the next bolgia, then they would in order to escape the “imaginata caccia” (23.33). The tentative, conditional nature of Virgil’s plan and the sudden necessity of rapid action would seem to indicate that he did not take
the Pilgrim’s fear too seriously.

It is not until the end of canto 23 that Dante and Virgil learn to the latter’s chagrin the truth about the bridges over the sixth bolgia and, thus, about Malacoda’s lying words and ways. The sarcastic words spoken by the hypocrite Catalano chide Virgil for his apparent naivete in dealing with devils:

\[
\ldots \text{“I’ udi’ già dire a Bologna}
\text{ del diavol vizi assai, tra ‘quali udi’}
\text{ ch’elli è bugiardo e padre di menzogna.”}
\]

(23.142-144)

In the fifth bolgia devils and sinners are equated symbolically through their mutual immersion in the pitch. The common ground of both groups is their incessant love of sinister play and deceitful strategems. They co-exist in a constant state of tension determined in large part by the simultaneous and interactive currents of playfulness and seriousness and enhanced by ambiguous gestures and words which only hint at the truth of the matter. Upon entering this bolgia, Dante and Virgil, too, are caught up in this state of tension, and their albeit momentary association with the denizens of this infernal zone is aptly suggested by the proverbially inspired tercet:

\[
\text{Noi andavam con li diece demoni.}
\text{ Ahi fiera compagnia! ma ne la chiesa}
\text{ coi santi, e in taverna coi ghiottoni.}
\]

(22.13-15)

Malebolge is, of course, the place in Hell where those guilty of simple fraud are punished, and the concentration on the use and misuse of language in cantos 21-23 complements the attention given this matter in the eighth circle, especially with the panders and seducers, the flatterers, the diviners, the hypocrites, the false counsellors, the sowers of discord, and the liars.\(^{33}\) In addition to the representation of barratry, the episode in the fifth bolgia is calculated in part to describe the workings of fraud and in part to show how language can be used rightly—to represent truth—and wrongly—to deceive through half-truths and lies. In this episode devils and sinners coalesce, and strange and shifting alliances are formed among devils, sinners, and wayfarers. Would-be deceivers deceive and are deceived, just as their innocent victims are deceived precisely through the duplicitous use of language, and it is often only in retrospect that they—and we
the readers—are able to discover the truth that has been so carefully concealed behind the veil of words or within the very texture of the words themselves.

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NOTES

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1 All passages from the *Commedia* follow the Petrocchi edition.
2 For Dante’s use of the term “commedia” and its changing meaning, see *De Vulgari Eloquentia* 2.4.5–6, and the Letter to Can Grande (*Epistola* 13.28–31) [in *Opere minori*], as well as Quaglio 79–81. See also *Inferno* 16.128.
3 See Anceschi.
4 Another recall to the initial, fearful stage in the journey is found in Virgil’s words to Malacoda, in which he discloses that his mission is to lead Dante on “questo cammin silvestro” (21.84; cf. *Inf*. 2.142).
5 The Pilgrim’s intense fear which continues throughout these cantos is perhaps a reflection of an episode in his life. On January 27, 1302, Dante was accused and condemned, in absentia, of having committed several crimes during his terms of office as Prior (June 15–August 15, 1300), and among these a charge of barratry.
6 In these four verses all the verbs are in the subjunctive mood, and some have an impersonal passive sense. Perhaps the absence of the indicative mood and active verbs would suggest a lack of force on Virgil’s part, and this would in turn indicate his eventual defeat at the hands of the devils.
7 See *Inferno* 3.94–96; 5.21–24; 7.8–12.
8 Commentators have noted the similarity between these two scenes. Sapegno, for example, notes the moral dimension of this episode: “Si ripete ... in diversa forma, la situazione già sperimentata dei due pellegrini davanti alle mura di Dite: la ragione umana, in Virgilio troppo fiduciosa di sé, è naturalmente vinta, come lì dalla tracotanza, così qui dall’astuzia dei diavoli; la paura di Dante, che è in ultima analisi più ragionevole e avveduta, qui è un elemento positivo della situazione e diventerà da ultimo una delle forze risolutive dell’intreccio drammatico” (236).
9 Many critics view Malacoda’s response as serious. See, for example, the opinion of Giuseppe Giacalone, who includes in his commentary portions of a *lectura Dantis* by Scolari: “Allora l’orgoglio di Malacoda cadde d’un tratto, si afflosciò tanto che lasciò cascare l’uncino ai piedi. ‘La terzina è grave, con accenti pesanti, con intensità sonora decrescente e rallentamento del ritmo, sino all’esclamazione di Malacoda. *Omai*: ora che c’è di mezzo la volontà di
Dio, non c'è più nulla da fare, dobbiamo lasciare che vada' (Scolari, 23). La situazione stessa dell'impotenza in cui è ridotto l'orgoglio del diavolo, dopo aver fatto intendere che a nulla avrebbe approdato il colloquio, diventa di per sé comica dinanzi al lettore, senza che D[ante] abbia avuto alcuna intenzione di comicità” (419).

For further information, see Saffiotti Bernardi.

Among the works I have consulted are all the major early (Francesco da Buti, Guido da Pisa, the Ottimo, et al.) and modern commentators (Scar-tazzini, Sapegno, Singleton, Bosco-Reggio, Giacalone, et al.), as well as the following general *letture* or specific studies of the cantos in question (see Works Cited): Baccelli, Baglivi and McCutchan, Bertoni, Cesareo, Chiappelli, Chieri, Chini, Del Beccaro, Della Giovanna, Favati, Montano, Needler, Olschki, Pagliaro, Pietrobono, Pirandello, Principato, Roncaglia, Ryan, Sacchetto, Salinari, Sanguineti, Sannia, Sarollo, Scolari, Sozzi, Spitzer, Targioni Tozzetti, Turri, and Wolf.

Favati 41–50, Nash 247, Olschki 80, and Owen.

Note the language used to describe the devils' treatment of the Lucchese barrator, to whom they yell after he has been thrown into the boiling pitch: “Però, se tu non vuoi di nostri graffi, / non far sopra la pegola soverchio” (21.50–51), and, after they impale him with their forks, they say in a very colloquial manner: “Coverto convien che qui balli, / sì che, se puoi, nascasamente accaffi” (21.53–54). Their activity with this sinner is described in kitchen terms: “Non altrimenti i cuoci a loro vassalli / fanno attuffare in mezzo la caldaia / la carne con li uncin, perché non galli” (21.55–57). In addition to the similarity between this description and the representation of Satan and his minions as cooks in an infernal kitchen who busy themselves roasting souls, there is a homey, almost comic quality to the scene. For the so-called “kitchen humor,” see Curtius 431–435.

Litotes is incorporated for ironic effect, as, for example, when the devil declares that everyone in Lucca is a “barattier, fuor che Bonturo” (21.41, emphasis mine). Bonturo Dati was, of course, the most notorious criminal of all.

On the other hand, Salinari, for one, views the scene in the Arsenal as “il simbolo del movimento e del lieto agitarsi dei diavoli e dei dannati pur fra tante atrocità che sono più affermate che rappresentate” (626).

For the role that religious art plays in this parodic structure, see Kleinhenz.

For this characteristic of the dolphin, see, e.g., Jacopo Passavanti, *Specchio della vera penitenza*: “quando vengono notando sopra l'acqua del mare, appressandosi alle navi, significano che tosto dee venire tempesta” (cited by Sapegno in his commentary, 247).

In terms of the dual nature of the narrative and the double meaning of words, it is especially significant that this deceiver (Ciampolo) on the verge of perpetrating his deception should be identified with a term that has two possible meanings, each of which presents a different face to the audience. Sapegno
glosses "lo spaurato" with "il pover Navarrese atterrito," but notes "Ma c'è anche chi spiega: 'uscito di paura, non più spaventato', sia perché rassicurato dalle parole di Barbariccia contro Farfarello, sia perché già fiducioso di sfuggire ai diavoli con la sua astuzia" (251). In line with the reading of the episode set forth here I would argue that the term is intentionally ambiguous and that both interpretations are true, but at different times and for different reasons. Given his present circumstances (even though he has narrowly avoided harm from Farfarello), Ciampolo must still be quite terrified, or at least he must appear to be so, if he is to convince the Malabranch of his earnestness. In the end, he will, in retrospect, appear to have been "no longer afraid" because he knew he would successfully deceive them.

19 This figure is, of course, merely approximate, for, following biblical examples (e.g., Proverbs 24:16), Dante uses seven here and elsewhere to indicate an indeterminate number (cf. Inferno 8.97).

20 For this interpretation, see, among others, the note in the commentary by Giacalone: "Ciampolo, vedendosi scoperto, insiste di più nella sua finzione, e cambia le carte in tavola al diavolo, attribuendo alla parola malizioso il senso di 'malvagio,' mentre il diavolo intendeva dire 'astuto.' Con questo expediente egli fa credere a Cagnazzo che avverte già il rimorso di esser così malvagio da procurare ai suoi compagni, oltre a quello della pece, il tormento (tristizia) degli uncini" (435).

21 Sapegno 251.

22 Among other early commentators, Guido da Pisa translates: "Malitiosus sum ego nimis, quando maioribus meis procerro inferre tristitiam" (419). The Ot-timo Commento notes the ambiguity in the interpretation: "Questo testo alcuni spongono maggiori, cioè mie' maggiorenti; alcuni spongono miei, cioè miei compagni, maggior tristizia procreo di quella ch'elli abbiano" (392–393).


24 This use is the same as that in Purgatorio 33.25–26: "color che troppo rever-enti / dinanzi a suo' maggior parlando sono," where maggior is "sostantivato, a indicare 'superiore per grado eautorità'" (Lanci 765).

25 For an excellent treatment of this allusion and its function within the entire episode, see Larkin, "Another Look," with the corrective appraisal of Single-ton 390–393. Other attempts at interpretation include the following: Padoan, and Larkin, "Inferno XXIII." The version of the fable given in the Romulus collection is as follows: "Mus dum transire vellet flumen, a rana petit auxil-iurn. Illa grossum petiti linum, murem sibi ad pedem ligavit, et natare coepit. In medio vero flumine rana se in deorsum merxit ut miserrimo vitam eriperet. Ille validus dum teneret vires, milvus e contra volans murem cum unguibus rapuit, simul et ranam pedentem sustulit. Sic enim et illis contingit qui de salute alterius adversa cogitant" (text cited in Singleton 391). The moral of the fable is certainly appropriate to the present events, for those who thought maliciously to harm others are brought to a bad end. The conclusion in Marie de France's version of the fable is slightly different; there the kite devours
the frog and sets the mouse free:

Li esculies par cuveitise
la suriz lait, la reine ad prise.
Mangie l’ad e devoree,
e la suriz est deliveree.

(Marie de France, *Fables*, Fable 3, vv. 79–82).

26 For an overview of the various proposed solutions, see Larkin, “Another Look.”


29 Singleton 392.

30 Singleton 392–93.

31 Larkin, “Another Look” 99.

32 I would suggest the possibility of a double play on the word “imaginata” which refers primarily to the pursuit which first Dante and then Virgil “imagined,” i.e., conceived in their mind; however, the term might also suggest that Virgil views the Pilgrim’s thought as fantasy, as a purely hypothetical point. According to this second sense, Virgil, despite his grandiloquent claims, would not yet fully understand the danger that they are in or that there has been some double dealing in recent events. Again, the language hints that there are two levels at play in the text.

33 On the general question of the interconnections of language and sin, see Ferrante.

WORKS CITED


Devilish Doubletalk in Inferno 21–23


