Hercules and his Labors as Allegories of Christ and His Victory over Sin in Dante’s Inferno

Every student of Dante’s Inferno knows that, although hell was created by divine power, wisdom, and love — that is by all three persons of the Trinity (Inf. III. 4-6) — the name of Christ is never mentioned in the realm of the damned. But Christ’s relation to hell is progressively and systematically revealed to Dante the pilgrim and to the reader by strategically placed allusions to the effect on hell of the earthquake which occurred at the crucifixion and to Christ’s descent into hell to rescue the souls in limbo, the “harrowing” of hell. The effect of the earthquake is presented as a topographical fact in hell, a fissure which is seen in each of the three major divisions of hell (the incontinent, violent, and fraudulent) and understood more fully each time it is encountered. On the other hand, Christ as harrower of hell is presented not only literally (Inf. IV. 52-54) but also through the surrogate figure or “type” of Hercules. Dante makes the parallel quite unmistakeable when the divine messenger who helps Virgil at the gate of Dis berates the recalcitrant devils:

Perché recalcitrate a quella voglia
cui non puote il fin mai esser mozzo,
e che piu volte v'ha cresciuta doglia?
Che giova ne le fata dar di cozzo?
Cerbero vostro, se ben vi ricorda,
ne porta ancor pelato il mento e 'l gozzo. (Inf. IX. 94-99)

But this central identification of Christ and Hercules is by no means the only allusion to Hercules in the Inferno. Almost all the classical monsters in the Inferno were conquered by the labors of Hercules, the “glory of heroes”:

**Cerberus**, **the centaurs**, **the Harpies**, **Geryon**, **Cacus**, **Antaeus** and the other giants. Hercules also had direct, though less well known, connections with **Charon**, **Pluto**, and the **Minotaur**.

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Thus Christ, as prefigured by Hercules, is present not only at the gates of the infernal city of Dis but throughout all of hell because of his victory over Herculean monsters representing the gradations of sin in the major subdivisions of hell. In his presentation of Hercules and his victims, Dante combines, with great tact and skill, the two main traditions of allegorizing pagan myths, the moral and the Christological. But before we examine Dante’s original use of these traditions, we should try to see how the significance of Hercules as a type of Christ gradually unfolds and reveals itself to Dante the pilgrim and to the reader during the underworld journey. To know abstractly the final plan or scheme of any of the *cantiche* is of little value unless our awareness emerges from the evolving dramatic experience of the pilgrim poet.

Because Christ’s relation to hell emerges more clearly in his other manifestation, the fissure caused by the earthquake in hell, let us first briefly examine the three distinct stages of this revelation. In the circle of the lustful we learn that there is an unexplained “ruina” which has an extraordinary effect on the sinful lovers:

Quando giungon davanti a la ruina,
quivi le strida, il compianto, il lamento;
bestemmian quivi la virtù divina. (*Inf.* V. 34-36)

The reference is so brief and mysterious that some translators have taken “ruina” to refer simply to the fury of the wind. But the repeated “quivi” rules out such an interpretation. We are left only with the knowledge that there is a break along the walls of the circle which is especially painful and inimical to sinful lovers and that it has some connection with divine power.

Entering the circles of the violent, Dante and Virgil descend on the debris of a great rockslide which is again referred to as “ruina” (*Inf.* XII. 4, 32). Virgil explains that shortly before Christ’s descent into hell there was a great earthquake which caused the rock to fall “qui e altrove” (v. 45). Virgil gives an explanation based on the Empedoclean notion that hatred keeps the elements of the world distinct whereas love causes chaos by mingling them. Virgil is not very sure of himself (“se ben discerno . . . è chi creda,” v. 37, v. 42) and in fact his explanation is wrong, though his instincts are right (“i’ pensai che l’universo / sentisse amor,” vv. 41-42). The pilgrim Dante and the Christian reader cannot fail to realize that the earthquake was that which occurred at the cru-
cifixion and the love which "ruined" hell here and which tormented the lustful lovers was not cosmic or Empedoclean but the personal, infinite love of Christ crucified to save mankind from eternal damnation in hell.

In the third great division of hell, among the fraudulent, Virgil learns from Malacoda that one bridge over the sixth malbolgia was broken at the time of the crucifixion (Inf. XXI. 112-14). This turns out to be a half truth that causes Virgil some comic embarrassment since, in fact, all the bridges over the sixth bolgia (hypocrisy) have been broken. Virgil is amazed when he sees Caiphas crucified on the floor of that bolgia and learns from Fra Catalano that Annas and the other members of the council which condemned Christ are similarly punished at other places in this bolgia (Inf. XXIII. 114-26). The contrast between the fraudulent, injurious hypocrisy which has chosen and merited eternal punishment in hell and the open, innocent, and self-sacrificing love of the crucified Christ is sharply and vividly presented. Sinners, whether lustful, violent, or fraudulent, are in hell because they rejected the love of Christ displayed by his suffering and death. The power of love which was so antithetical to hell that it caused a "ruin" in each of its major divisions was Christ's love for mankind.

The earthquake motif stresses divine love; the Herculean theme, the power and (to a lesser degree) the wisdom of Christ. The harrowing of hell through "un possente, / con segno di vittoria coronato" (Inf. IV. 53-54) is explained to Dante by Virgil as they approach the Limbo of the honorable pagans. When we encounter the first of the Herculean monsters, Cerberus, in the circle of gluttony, we notice that Dante has reworked Virgil's horrid, huge, three-headed dog whose shoulders bristle with serpents (Aeneid VI, 417-23) into a smaller creature more like an ordinary dog (Inf. VI. 28-32) with disgusting features that associate him with gluttony: red eyes, greasy beard, big belly, and taloned hands. We may not remember that in the Aeneid, only a few lines before the description of Cerberus, Charon had mentioned to Aeneas and the Sibyl Hercules' victory over Cerberus (Aeneid VI, 392-96), but we cannot help being struck by the terms Dante applies to his three-headed dog: "demonio" and especially "il gran vermo" (v. 22, v. 32). Cerberus is not merely a classical monster but also a devil. Is he a great worm because he is amidst so much rottenness or because he is being assimilated to a huge, diabolical dragon? Satan himself is called "vermo" at Inf. XXXIV. 108. There are enough hints here to prepare us, perhaps subcon-
sciously, for the analogy between Christ’s victory over the devils and Hercules’ triumph over Cerberus. ¹²

Defied by the fallen angels at the entrance to the city of Dis, Virgil refers to their futile resistance to Christ’s harrowing of hell:

*Questa lor tracotanza non è nova;*
  ché già l’usaro a men segreta porta,
  la qual senza serrame ancor si trova.  (Inf. VIII. 124-26)

When the furies threaten Dante and Virgil and lament that “mal non vengiammo in Teseo l’assalto” ¹³ (Inf. IX. 54), any reader familiar with Servius’ commentary on Virgil or with Seneca’s *Hercules furens* would immediately recognize the allusion to Hercules’ “harrowing of hell.” Theseus and Perithous descended into Hades to steal Proserpina as a wife for Perithous. After Perithous had been killed by Cerberus, Theseus was captured and imprisoned. Hercules came to his rescue and freed him. Finally, the messenger from heaven who comes to the aid of Dante and Virgil defies the devils in terms which make quite explicit the parallel between Christ’s harrowing of hell and Hercules’ triumphant descent into Hades:

*Perché recalcitrate a quella voglia*
  a cui non puote il fin mai esser mozzo,
  e che più volte v’ha cresciuta doglia?
*Che giova ne le fata dar di cozzo?*
  Cerbero vostro, se ben vi ricorda,
  ne porta ancor pelato il mento e l’gozzo.  (Inf. IX. 94-99)¹⁴

Once the analogy between Christ’s power and that of Hercules and the parallel between diabolical sin and Hercules’ victim have been prepared for and firmly established, the other Herculean monsters encountered in the further descent into hell fall into the same pattern: as Hercules through power and wisdom defeated various destructive and fraudulent monsters, so Christ defeated the sins of violence and fraud as well as those of incontinence (Cerberus). Though any knowledgeable reader would recognize the monsters of violence (the centaurs and Harpies) and those of fraud (Geryon, Cacus, and Antaeus) as victims of Hercules, Dante explicitly associates three of them with Hercules (Inf. XII. 68; XXV. 32; and XXXI. 132).

The Herculean monsters as Dante presents them seem to be carefully adapted to the three main divisions of hell. The two monsters of incontinence (Cerberus and Pluto)¹⁵ are presented as
animals only: neither can speak intelligibly and neither has any human features.\textsuperscript{16} Both are called \textquoteleft\textquoteleft fiero crudele\textquoteright\textquoteright\ (Inf. VI. 13 and Inf. VII. 15). Cerberus is a dog and Pluto is a wolf (Inf. VI. 14 and Inf. VII. 8). This is in accordance with Dante’s conception of incontinent sins, which are committed because the specific human element of choice is lessened through passion: though they are voluntary, they are not \textit{ex electione} but \textit{ex infirmitate aut passione}.\textsuperscript{17} Beginning with the Minotaur, all the Herculean monsters combine an animal body with a human head or torso, precisely because sins of malice (the covering term for the two lower divisions of hell) are deliberate human choices. The more fully human the sin, the worse it is:

Ma perché frode è de l’uom proprio male, 
più spiacé a Dio; e però stan di sotto 
li frodolenti, e più dolor li assale. (Inf. XI. 25-27)

Antaeus may be an exception since, regardless of his enormous size, he seems to have a human shape. But we never see Dante’s giants below the waist, and there was a strong tradition, stemming from Macrobius, that their legs ended in serpentine coils.\textsuperscript{18} The other major distinction between those outside the walls of Dis and those within is that sins of malice are directed at the injury of others (Inf. XI. 22-24) while sins of incontinence harm primarily the sinner himself. With the possible exception of Cerberus, who claws the sinners,\textsuperscript{19} the Herculean monsters also reflect this difference. The mere words of Virgil cause Pluto to collapse like swollen sails when the mainmast snaps (Inf. VII. 13-15). But the Minotaur, who demanded human sacrifice, is far more dangerous: Virgil renders him impotent with rage but warns Dante to descend before the man-beast recovers (Inf. XII. 16-27). The arrows of the centaurs are dangerous and deadly (Inf. XII. 60-63). The Harpies tear the bleeding trees in the wood of the suicides (Inf. XIII. 101-02). Geryon’s scorpion tail could be lethal to Dante (Inf. XVII. 25-27, 83-84). Cacus, a “modified” centaur, has no arrows but in the upper world “di sangue fece spesse volte laco” (Inf. XXV. 27; Aeneid VIII, 195-97) and in the bolgia of the thieves the fire from the dragon on his shoulders “affuoca qualunque s’intoppa” (Inf. XXV. 24). Though Nimrod and Ephialtes would be hugely destructive if they had the intelligence or liberty to exercise their force, Antaeus seems to be a kindly exception. But only seems: in his North-African homeland he killed not only
lions but also the farmers of the surrounding countryside and strangers who landed on his shore.  

The Herculean monsters also reflect the difference between the two kinds of injurious malice, violence and fraud. The centaurs and Harpies are openly destructive. Geryon, however, has the face of a just man but the tail of a scorpion; the knots and circlets on his sides suggest not only his skilful and intricate deviousness but also the cruelty of the Turks and Tartars who were the exemplar weavers of such patterns; the allusion to Arachne calls to mind the crafty entrapment of the spider’s web (Inf. XVII. 10-18). Cacus is explicitly distinguished from the violent centaurs because of his fraudulent theft of Hercules’ cattle, which he pulled backward by the tail into his lair so as to leave the footprints going the wrong way (Inf. XXV. 28-30, Aeneid VIII, 205-12). Nimrod and Ephialtes when they are encountered in hell are merely violent, not fraudulent, but that is only because they have been deprived of their mental faculties. Contemplating them Dante remarks on the wisdom of nature in ceasing to produce such creatures,

ché dove l’argomento de la gente
s’aggiunge al mal volere e a la possa,
nessun riparo vi può far la gente. (Inf. XXXI. 55-57)

As for Antaeus, his strength was produced by a trick so that Hercules needed both wisdom and strength to overcome him. The hero defeated him only “cum fraude reperta / raptus in excelsum, nec iam spes ulla cadendi, / nec licet extrema matrem contingere planta” [when he found the trick and snatched him up on high, and left him no hope of falling, nor suffered him to touch even with his foot’s extremity his mother earth].  

Thus, just as Christ’s love is progressively revealed in the three major parts of hell by the ruin caused by the earthquake which occurred at his death, so too his power to overcome incontinence, violence, and fraud is expressed by the analogy between Christ’s triumphant descent into hell and Hercules’ victory over Cerberus — an analogy which is extended to the rest of hell by the character and placement of other Herculean victims in the circles of violence and fraud. Three monsters associated with Hercules mark major transitions in lower hell: the Minotaur, Geryon, and Antaeus. In elaborating his Herculean allegory, Dante combined and modified the two main traditions of allegorizing pagan mythology: moral and Christological or (perhaps better) ethical and theological.
Theological allegory of pagan myths, whereby heroes like Perseus or Hercules were taken as types or prefigurations of Christ in a manner analogous to the method which expounded Old Testament figures (such as David, Samson, or Jonas) as types of Christ, was not common until the latter part of Dante’s life. Euhemeristic, chronological pairing of classical and biblical personages (such as Samson and Hercules) was widespread in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, both in literature and in the plastic arts. But of true Christian typology applied to pagan myth there is almost nothing before Dante: only two brief Greek comments by Cyril of Alexandria and Theophylactus on a pair of verses by Lycophron. But from the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Ovide moralisé by Chrétien le Gouays, with its many versions, imitations, and printed editions released a flood of theological mythologizing that still flowed strong as late as the sixteenth century.

Compared with the Ovide moralisé, Dante’s treatment of Hercules as a figure of Christ is remarkable for the tact and brevity with which he chooses, prepares for, and presents the most appropriate parallel, Hercules’ descent into hell to rescue Theseus and his victory over Cerberus. With tireless, relentless, arbitrary, and often inconsistent persistence, the Ovide moralisé forces its Procrustean theology (mostly incarnational) on every episode and almost every detail of the Herculean matter in Ovid. Ovid’s story of Hercules’ defeat of Achelous and winning of Deianira (Metamorphoses IX, 1-100) is recounted in 232 lines and moralized in another 92 in which we learn that the three-fold form of Achelous signifies the world, the flesh, and the devil; that God took human flesh from the virgin to fight against the mutable world (again Achelous) for the human soul; that the cornucopia (the right horn torn from Achelous after he had changed into a bull) is the joy of heaven (the remaining left horn signifies the pride and evil living with which the world is full), and so on. The story of Nessus and Deianira means that the soul, loved by God but given over to the devil (Nessus) by sin, is rescued by God (Hercules), though the devil still continues to tempt man (the poisonous shirt) even after his defeat. In the sequence leading to his death, Christ (Hercules) takes on human flesh (the lion’s skin) to save man. He abandons the Jews (Deianira) in favor of the true Church (Iole), taking flesh (the venemous shirt) from the virgin (a Jewess) in order to save the world from sin: treason, murder, and robbery (Busiris and Diomedes), malice, whether open, hidden, or done under the guise of friendship (Geryon), gluttony (the boar), lust
(the Amazonian girdle and Antaeus). He willingly died in the flesh but was revived and glorified by his Father (Jupiter). The Jews (Erystheus) can no longer harm him but they attack his sons (Christians). \(^{28}\) The Virgin (Alcmena) tells the church (Iole) how she conceived Christ through the words of the angel (the words by which Galanthis deceived Lucina into allowing Alcmena to give birth to Hercules). \(^{29}\) Ovid’s brief mention of Hercules dragging Cerberus from the underworld \((Metamorphoses\ VII, 409-13)\) leads Chrétien le Gouays to narrate at length the descent of Theseus and Perithous in search of Proserpina and of Hercules’ rescue of the two heroes. \(^{30}\) Christ (Theseus), spurred on by divine love (Perithous) descends into hell to save the human soul (Proserpina), is menaced by the devil (Cerberus), but is rescued and glorified by God (Hercules). \(^{31}\)

That Dante chose only one exploit, Hercules’ defeat of Cerberus, for his Christological allegory, shows his restraint and his good judgment. Not only was Hercules’ descent into hell the best known and most prominent of his exploits, \(^{32}\) but the motivation, the events, and the characters of the episode lend themselves easily to a Christian interpretation. There is no such congruity, for example, between the deaths of Christ and of Hercules: abandoning his wife Deianira out of lust for Iole, Hercules dies quite unwillingly (killing the innocent Lichas in the process), with no intention of saving or helping anyone but himself.

The other tradition of allegorizing myth, the ethical, began earlier and lasted longer than the theological. Indeed it had its beginnings in pagan times, but for the middle ages (and for Hercules), Fulgentius, the Vatican Mythographers, Boccaccio, and Salutati may be taken as the main practitioners. In this tradition, which often relies on a fairly simplistic duality of mind and matter or reason and passion, Hercules usually represents heroic virtue, reason, the wise man, the philosopher (or, less commonly, the astronomer). His victims signify various forms of carnal passion, worldliness, malice, vice, and excess. \(^{33}\) Dante was quite familiar with the ethical allegorizing of pagan myth \(^{34}\) (the method is basically the same as the one he applied throughout the Convivio) but he used it very sparingly and selectively in depicting the Herculean monsters of the Inferno.

He adapted the traditional ethical interpretations of Herculean monsters in quite various ways to transform them into appropriate symbols of the kinds and gradations of sin. In making Cerberus a figure of gluttony he fastened on the most primitive and persistent feature of the myth: following Servius \((Aeneid\ VI, 395), \)
Fulgentius (p. 20), Vatican Mythographers II (no. 11, p. 86) and III (13, p. 272) and Salutati (IV, tract. 2, 1, 2, p. 525) all give the etymology of his name as κρέοβοφος "carnem vorans." Servius and Vatican Mythographer III give a very general moral meaning: Hercules is reason which scorns and conquers all appetites and all vices. Fulgentius and Mythographer II focus on Cerberus' three heads, which represent three kinds of quarrels (natural, causal, accidental) or three ages of life (infancy, youth, and age). All this Dante ignores and focuses on the primary feature, voraciousness.

The ethical allegory surrounding the centaurs was almost completely suitable for Dante's purposes. The generation of the centaurs by Ixion on a cloud-simulacrum of Juno signifies an ambitious man seeking to obtain and maintain tyranny by force of arms — "centauri quasi centum armati." Their violence at the wedding of Perithous and Hippodamia hardly needed any moral explanation beyond the literal fact [though Salutati, with his usual ingenuity gives a fairly elaborate allegory of it (III, 12, 16-21, pp. 223-24)]. The allegories of Salutati and Boccaccio (IX, 27, 98c, p. 470) come close to Benvenuto da Imola's comparison between the centaurs and mercenary soldiers.

In the entire elaborate allegory of the Harpies by Fulgentius (I, 9, pp. 21-22) which is repeated by Vatican Mythographer III (V, 5, pp. 185-86) there is only one small detail which Dante incorporated:

Virgil also assigns three harpies to the underworld, the first named Aello, the second Oquipete, the third Celeno — "arpage" in Greek means rapine. They are virgins because rape is dry and sterile; they are covered with feathers because whatever is plundered is hidden away; they can fly because plunderers are very quick to take flight. In Greek Aello comes from "taking what belongs to someone else"; Oquipete means "taking it quickly"; and Celeno means "black."... This signifies that the first step is to desire what belongs to someone else; the second, to take what is desired, and the third to hide what has been taken.

Dante follows the major Virgilian conception of the Harpies as birds of ill omen who attempt to inspire despair; hence his emphasis on their "tristo annunzio" and "lamenti" (Inf. XIII. 12, 15). Unlike Virgil, he places no emphasis on their foulness or the frustration they cause. But Fulgentius' "arida . . . et sterilis" is the very keynote of the six lines which introduce the Harpies:
Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco; 
non rami schietti, ma nodosi e ‘nvolti; 
non pomi v’eran, ma stecchi con tósco. 
Non han sì aspri sterpi né sì folti 
quelle fiere selvagge che ‘n odio hanno 
tra Cecina e Corneta i luoghi cólti. 
Quivi le brutte Arpie lor nidi fanno. . . . (Inf. XIII. 4-10)

Geryon, “quella sozza imagine di froda” (Inf. XVII. 7), is the least classical and most original of Dante’s Herculean monsters. But in creating him Dante was simply taking advantage of deficiencies in the traditional description and allegory of Geryon. The tradition gives no certainty whether Geryon had: 1) three heads and three bodies joined; 2) one head and three bodies; 3) three heads and one body; or 4) three separate bodies, each with one head. Moreover, Geryon was one of the few Herculean monsters for whom no ethical allegory was available to Dante. Fulgentius says nothing about him. The only allegories about him before the latter part of the fourteenth century are euhemeristic or historical. According to Servius (Aeneid VII, 662) he was a Spanish king who was called triple because he ruled three nearby Mediterranean islands, the two Balearic islands and Iviza. His two-headed dog signifies the strength of his army and navy. That Hercules was transported to Spain in a bronze pot signifies that he travelled in an armored ship. All three Vatican Mythographers repeat the same allegory. The other historical interpretation, propounded by Justinus and Rabanus Maurus, presents the triple Geryon as three brothers who were so unanimous that they might be said to have one soul. Boccaccio repeats both traditions (XIII, 1, 133d, pp. 640-41). In another place Boccaccio describes Dante’s image of fraud, who (he says) was called Geryon because this ruler of Spain received guests with an appearance of kindness but afterwards killed them (I, 21, 19b, pp. 51-52). It may well be that Boccaccio invented this story of Geryon’s murderous hypocrisy, modelling it on three other victims of Hercules (Busiris, Diomedes, and Antaeus) all of whom murdered strangers and guests. At any rate, Dante can not really be said to have departed from traditional descriptions and meanings of Geryon; rather he gave precise form and ethical meaning to what had been vague and merely historical.

Dante is generally thought to have described Cacus as a “modified” centaur because he misunderstood Virgil’s “semihominis Caci facies.” But there is good enough reason, both in Virgil and in the ethical allegory, for Dante’s conception of violence com-
bined with fraud. Cacus is among the fraudulent because he was a crafty thief, not merely a marauder like the other centaurs, as Virgil explains to Dante (Inf. XXV. 24-33). When his theft of Hercules' cattle is described in the Aeneid, his motive is given: "ne quid inausum / aut intractatum scelerisve dolive fuisset" [that no deed of crime or craft might be left undared or untried] (VIII, 205-06). Fulgentius allegorizes Cacus as "malitia" which can be subdivided into violence and fraud — an exact correspondence with Dante's division of malice into the second and third subdivisions of hell (Inf. XI. 22-24). Allegorizing Cacus, Fulgentius remarks:

He is double because malice takes many forms, not simply one; malice also injures in three ways, openly through force or craftily like a false friend or secretly like the unavoidable thief.\(^{47}\)

If Dante's presentation of Cacus as a centaur really was based on a misconception and was not a deliberate change, he used the error to very good advantage by highlighting the major notion of lower hell (malice) and its subdivisions (violence and fraud).

The position of Antaeus at the edge of the ice where compound fraud is punished seems to present difficulties because the ethical allegory of Hercules' combat with the Lybian giant seems inap-


propriate: the tradition,\(^ {48}\) which is univocal and strong, makes him a symbol of lust: just as Antaeus regained his vigor by contact with his mother, earth, so lust gets its strength from the flesh; virtue conquers lust by denying the flesh. Hence it seems that Antaeus belongs in upper hell among the incontinent rather than among the fraudulent. In fact, however, Dante seems to have deliberately abandoned the usual allegory in order to place him among the giants and Titans. Perhaps the only remnant of Antaeus' relation to the earth is that, in transferring Virgil and Dante to Cocytus, he bends down and then rises quickly and vigorously "come albero in nave si levò" (Inf. XXXI. 140, 145).

Antaeus has been subsumed into the larger and more important allegory of the giants and titans who rebelled against Jupiter. They are not mentioned by Fulgentius or the Vatican Mythographers, but they were well known as symbols of proud rebellion against God from a passage in Macrobius:

He [Hercules], representing as it were the power of the gods, is believed to have destroyed the giants when he fought for heaven against them. For what else should the giants be taken to signify except some impious race of men who denied the gods so that they were thought to desire to cast down the gods from their heavenly residence?\(^ {49}\)
Nimrod, the first of the giants we encounter in the Inferno, was a well-recognized type of the devil. Thus Isidore says of him: "The giant Nimrod is a type of the devil because in his pride he strove to reach the highest peak of divinity, saying 'I will rise above the height of the clouds and be like the most high [Isa. XIV]." As proud rebels all the giants are a fitting prelude to the proud rebel Satan, who, in a horrible sense, got his wish to be like God.

But the three giants we actually see represent three distinct kinds of pride: solipsistic (Nimrod), futilely violent (Ephialtes), and vainglorious (Antaeus). If we examine Virgil’s flattering speech to Antaeus (Inf. XXXI. 115-29), we can see how calculatingly superficial it is. What does the glory of Scipio have to do with Antaeus? They happen to have fought in the same valley. Antaeus killed a thousand lions (the "thousand" is merely a facile rhetorical exaggeration), but no mention is made of the inhabitants and strangers he murdered. If Antaeus had fought at Phlaeagra "ancor par che si creda / ch’avrebbe vinto i figli de la terra": Lucan’s hyperbole (Pharsalia IV, 596-97) is hardly more factual than Capaneus’ empty boast (Inf. XIV. 52-60). The threat of going for help to Tityus or Typhon is a rather low appeal to envy. The hauteur of Antaeus is suggested by Virgil’s "non torcer lo grifo." And finally the offer of fame: the more intelligent souls of lower hell know that their only fame is infamy and wish to avoid it. In presenting his final Herculean victim Dante ignores the traditional ethical allegory and, by means of a dramatic encounter, places him among his fellow-giants as an example of foolish pride.

Thus, by a sparing, judicious use of theological allegory and a skilful, selective use of ethical allegory, Dante makes Hercules and his labors reveal Christ’s victory over the forces of evil and sin in all three major levels of his Inferno. Recognizing Hercules as a surrogate of Christ throughout the Inferno, not merely at the gates of Dis, may also help us to understand better one of the most famous and variously interpreted episodes in the Inferno: Ulysses’ voyage beyond the pillars of Hercules, “quella foce stretta / dov’Ercule segnò li suoi riguardi / acciò che l’uom piú oltre non si metta” (Inf. XXVI. 107-09). If the pillars are understood as limits placed by a Christ whose victory saved (and saves) man from sin, Ulysses’ enterprise may be seen as a "folle volo" precisely because he was attempting to do by human effort alone what can only be done with the help of Christian grace.
NOTES


2 A glance at the article "Ercole" in Paget Toynbee's *A Dictionary of the Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante*, rev. Charles Singleton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) reveals how often Hercules is both named and alluded to in the *Inferno* (and how rarely and indirectly he appears in the other two *cantiche*).


4 Hercules defeated not only Antaeus but also the other giants, who revolted against Jupiter and were overcome at Phlaegra. See Seneca (*Hercules furens*, 444-46), Virgil (*Aeneid* VIII, 298-99), and Macrobius (*Saturnalia* 1, 20, 8). All these authorities are quoted by Salutati (III, 38, 22, p. 394; III, 43, 32, p. 438). Virgil (*Aeneid* VIII, 298) mentions Typhoeus as overthrown by Hercules. "Tifo" is among the giants in hell (*Inf. XXXI* 124). On the two forms of the same name (Typhus or Typhon) see Boccaccio (IV, 22, 44d, pp. 182-83).

5 On Hercules' defeat of Charon see Salutati (IV, tract. 2, 7, pp. 555-56). On his wounding Pluto see Salutati (IV, tract. 2, 1, p. 526) and Boccaccio (XIII, 1, 134a, p. 641). On his defeat of the white bull who coupled with Pasiphae to produce the Minotaur, see Salutati (III, 18, pp. 274-78) and Boccaccio (XIII, 1, 132b, p. 634). Even Phlegyas (*Inf. VIII* 19) was the grandfather (through Ixion) of one of Hercules' conquests, the centaurs (Salutati, III, 13, 15-16, pp. 222-23). Both Boccaccio and Salutati wrote after Dante's death, but both (especially Salutati) give documentation from classical authors (like Virgil, Ovid, and Seneca) and commentators (like Servius and Fulgentius) who were available to Dante.


7 Malacoda does not mention the event, but merely the time in years, days, and hours; but again, Dante the pilgrim and the Christian reader know what occurred at that time.
8 These two qualities complete the trinity of divine attributes that created hell: "Divina podestate, / la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore" (Inf. III. 4-6).
9 Dante has asked only to become more assured in the knowledge he already had through Christian faith (Inf. IV. 47-48).
10 Singleton, comm., p. 98.
12 In describing Pluto (Inf. VII. 1-15), his next classical monster, Dante makes no allusion to Hercules, and perhaps even a well informed reader would not have been expected to know that as his twenty-sixth labor "Hercules descendit ad Inferos, et ibi, ut in Yliade dicit Omerus, Ditem vulneravit" (Boccaccio, XIII, 1, 132d, p. 636) nor that this victory signified contempt for riches because "divitiarum deus sit Dites, qui totiens vulneratur, quotiens despiciuntur diviti" (Ibid., XIII, 1, 134a, pp. 641-42). Virgil's rebuke to Pluto refers to the victory of St. Michael, one of the figures to whom Hercules was assimilated in the plastic arts (Seznec, p. 153 and Alma Frey-Sallmann, Aus dem Nachleben antiker Göttergestalten [Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931], p. 36).
14 The combination of a scriptural allusion ("recalcitrare" — Singleton, comm., p. 140) with an originally pagan word ("fata") which had taken on a new meaning in a Christian context is a symptom of the radical synthesis of pagan and Christian traditions.
15 Charon and Phlegyas are not strictly monsters, since (however fearful they may be) they have ordinary human shape.
16 Though Cerberus is said to have a beard and hands (Inf. VI. 16-17), these details are intended to associate him metaphorically with human gluttons; Cerberus' own features are probably purely canine. Pluto's "nfiata labbia" (Inf. VII. 7) and especially his deflated collapse hardly suggest human features. Illuminations (Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy, ed. Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles Singleton, Bollingen Series LXXXI [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969], 2 vols.) tend to confirm the distinction between the monsters of incontinence and the lower monsters. Peter Brieger's remark about Cerberus ("It is not clear whether he [Dante] visualized him as a dog," II, p. 123) is true, but of the seventeen illuminations only one presents him as a dog with human faces. Nine present him as a devil (horned or winged) and seven present him with three dog's heads and the body of a dog or demon (I, 93-103). Of Pluto, Brieger remarks: "In most other fourteenth-century illustrations to this canto he is depicted as a devil. . . . When he appears on all fours before the poets [as he does in three manuscripts], it is an allusion to the 'accursed wolf' of Virgil's address" (II, 124-25). The illuminations of the centaurs, Harpies, Geryon, and Cacus (I, 150-64, 165-72, 191, 194-206, 261-62, 264-67) clearly and consistently show a human face (or face and torso) combined with an animal body. Illuminations of the giants (I, 300-07) rarely show the lower part of their bodies, but when they do the giants have fully human form.
17 Singleton, comm., pp. 166, 178.
19 As monsters go, however, he is remarkably easy to pacify.
20 Lucan, Pharsalia (IV, 605-06), quoted by Boccaccio (I, 13, 17b, p. 42).
23 Simon, pp. 169-72. Seznec, pp. 14-20. Jung, pp. 105-08. E. Panofsky, Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962), p. 19, figs. 5-6. Seznec (p. 18) points out that "the Book of the Treasure of Brunetto Latini places Hercules side by side with Moses, Solon, Lycurgus, Numa Pompilius, and the Greek king Phoroneus as among the first legislators, who by instituting codes of law saved the nations of men from the ruin to which their own original frailty and impurity would have condemned them." Dante himself follows this mode when he compares David and Goliath with Hercules and Antaeus (De monarchia, II, 9).


27 Ibid., III, 229-33 (IX, 343-47).
28 Ibid., III, 242-46 (IX, 872-1029).
29 Ibid., III, 252-53 (IX, 1291-1332).
32 Of the 31 labors of Hercules discussed by Boccaccio, five are descents to the underworld (XIII, 1, 132d, p. 636). Salutati devotes his entire fourth book (the last) to this exploit.

33 All of these mythographers also propound a good deal of historical allegory: thus, for example, Vatican Mythographer III (p. 272), Boccaccio (XIII, 1, 133c, p. 640), and Salutati (III, 9, 6, p. 193), all relying on Servius' comment on Aeneid VI, 287, interpret Hercules' victory over the Hydra as an engineering feat, the draining of the Lernian swamp. Servius' notion (Aeneid VII, 662) that Geryon had three bodies because he ruled three Mediterranean islands was also frequently repeated.

34 Singleton, "Two Kinds of Allegory." An ethical allegorizing of Ovid's Metamorphoses has been plausibly attributed to Giovanni del Virgilio, a friend and correspondent of Dante (Philip H. Wicksteed and Edmund G. Gardner, Dante and Giovanni del Virgilio [Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1902], Appendix 1, pp. 314-21).


36 Singleton, comm., pp. 97-98.
38 Vernon, I, 422.
39 "Arpyias etiam tres inferis Uirgilius deputat, quaram prima Aello, secunda Oquipete, tertia Celeno — arpage enim Grece rapina dicitur — ideo uirgines, quod omnis rapina arida sit et sterilis, ideo plumis circumdatae, quia quicquid rapina inuaserit celat, ideo uolatiles, quod omnis rapina ad uolandum sit celeberrma. Aello enim Grece quasi edon allon, id est alienum tollens, Oquipete
id est citius auferens, Celenum uero nigrum Grece dicitur ... hocigitur significare volentes quod primum sit alienum concupiscis, secundum concupita inuadere, tertium celare quae inuadit."

According to Virgil (Aeneid VIII, 202) and Claudian (De raptu Proserpinae, II, Praef. 39) Geryon was "tergeminus"; according to Ovid (Heroides IX, 91), "triplex"; according to Seneca (Dea furens, 231-34), "triformis"; according to Servius (Aeneid VII, 662), "trimembris"; according to Justinus (Historiae philippicae ex Trogo Pompeio, 44, 4, 15), "non triplicis naturae, ut fabulis proditur ... sed tres fratres tantae concordiae ... ut uno animo omnes regi viderentur"; according to Rabanus Maurus (De universo VII, 7, Migne, Patrologia Latina [hereafter cited as PL], III, 197D), who follows Justinus, "triplici forma praeditus." In one place Boccaccio calls him "trianimen" (XIII, 1, 132b, p. 635); in another, "tricipitem seu trimembrum" (XIII, 1, 133d, p. 640). In his chapter heading Salutati calls him "tricipiti," but in the first sentence of the chapter refers to him as "tricorporem" (III, 28, 1, p. 326).

The one exception I have encountered is Bernard Silvestris' brief allegory of Virgil's "forma tricorposium umbrae" (Aeneid VI, 289) as referring to hidden, open, and habitual sins, cited by John B. Friedman in "Antichrist and the Iconography of Dante's Geryon," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, XXXV (1972), 108-22. Later Salutati, who (one sometimes feels) could have allegorized the financial page of a modern newspaper, devised a rather elaborate ethical (and even numerical) allegory for Geryon, (III, 28, 8-18, pp. 328-32).


See footnote 40, above.

The Anonimo Fiorentino gives the same story (Vernon, II, 3).


Vernon, II, 296. Singleton, comm., p. 432.

"Ideo et duplex quod malitia multiformis, non simplex sit; triplici etiam modo nocet malitia, aut in euidenti ut potentior aut subtiliter ut falsus amicus aut occulte ut impossibilis latro" (II, 3. p. 42). On the unusual meaning of "impossibilis" see Thesaurus linguae Latinae (Leipzig, 1900-1956) under "impossibilis" I B 2. Vatican Mythographer XIII (XIII, 1, p. 270) repeats Fulgentius. Boccaccio, following Servius and Albericus, gives only historical allegories of Cacus (XII, 76, 130b, pp. 627-28). Salutati's ethical allegory of Cacus (III, 30, 3-22, pp. 336-43) is a piece of virtuosity that must be read to be believed, but it throws no light on Dante.


"Ipse creditur et Gigantas interemisse cum caelo propugnaret quasi virtus deorum. Gigantas autem quid aliud fuisset credendum est quam hominem quandam impiam gentem deos negamentam et ido aestimatam deos pellere de caelesti sede voluisse" (Saturnalia, I, 20, 8-9), quoted by Boccaccio (IV, 68, 52d, pp. 225-26) and by Salutati (III, 40, 16, pp. 402-03). Equally well known was Cicero's remark: "Quid est enim aliud gigantium modo bellare cum dis nisi naturae repugnare?" (De senectute, 5).

"Nemrod gigas diaboli typum expressit, qui superbò appetitu culmen divinae celsitudinis appetivit, dicens: Ascendam super altitudinem nubium et ero similis Altissimo" (Allegoriae quaedam Scripturae Sacrae, no. 17, PL 83, col. 103). The same point is made by the Glossa ordinaria (PL 113, col. 113) and by Rabanus Maurus (Commentariorum in Genesim Libri Quatuor, XI, PL 107, col. 528B).

Though they are mentioned by Pliny (Historia naturalis III, 4) and Solinus (Collectanea rerum memorabilium XXIII, 13), the sources closest to Dante are Brunetto Latini (Singleton, comm., pp. 465-66) and Martianus Capella (VI, 624), both of whom mention the pillars of Hercules specifically as limits beyond which man is forbidden to travel.
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52 See Singleton, comm. on line 109, p. 466.