
Robert Hollander’s book on Virgil in the Divine Comedy is an exceptionally worthwhile contribution to the field. It presents a new and detailed reading, but it is also a remarkable study of ancient and modern interpretations of possibly the most intriguing character in the poem. It is in this sense that the first essay deserves special attention. It is, in fact, a thorough account of the history of the exegesis of the line which introduces Virgil into the poem: “Chi per lungo silenzio pare a fioco.” The amount of detail in this essay is huge. If Hollander has left out one remark ever made on that line, it does not seem as if he has. To study what everyone in seven hundred years has thought of the wording of just one verse is at very least to risk boring one’s reader. And yet, the essay is not boring. It illustrates a tradition which should interest us, for every time we offer a reading of Dante, we must wonder if Dante needs any more readings and why so many for so long have felt compelled to dig into every detail and every word of this poem in the hope of emerging with one more interpretation. In Hollander’s essay, we follow in circles a history of opinion after opinion on whether “fioco” means “weak” or “hoarse” and whether “silenzio” means “unread,” “not speaking” or “dead” and, while the favourite questions never seem to be answered conclusively, over and over the discussion brings up points that enrich our reading. We may still each have our own opinion on whether Virgil looked weak or sounded hoarse or looked hoarse, but we have learned from each other to read the line remembering other lines in its near context, such as “là dove il sol tace,” or lines far away in the poem, such as those devoted to the femmina balba or the glorified bodies; we have learned to hear resurrection reverberate in the verse and to remember St. John the Baptist when we read it. Hollander’s essay illustrates an astounding tradition which for all its pedantry reflects a compulsion that Dante’s poem generates to understand it and indirectly reflects the greatness of the poem, whose meaning never seems exhausted.

The second essay, which is in large part taken from one published previously, deals mainly with the many and often disturbing misreadings of Virgil in the Divine Comedy. Hollander argues for the purposefulness of these misreadings or corrections and gives special attention to Inferno XX, where the character Virgil actually recants a passage in the Aeneid. Since the passage deals with the mythological foundation of Mantua, it is somewhat obscure why Dante chooses to correct Virgil so pointedly on this seemingly minor detail. In the Aeneid, Manto’s son is said to have

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founded Mantua; elsewhere Manto is represented as a virgin, while Virgil, in the Divine Comedy, describes her as childless. Hollander sees Dante's corrections of Virgil as constituting a rejection of him in some sense and sees the Manto episode as a key to the nature of that rejection. In order for the Aeneid to be read as truth it must be purged of the falsity its pagan author wrote into it. Virgil is in some sense a false prophet and Manto, as she appears in the Aeneid, is a false prophetess. Through the sterility of Manto, Virgil is separated from the origin he attributed to himself, and his poem symbolically disassociated from its author's guilt. Hollander sees the Manto episode as a central moment in a theme of contrast between divinization and God's wisdom which culminates in the episode of the Eagle in the Paradiso.

The final essay deals with what Hollander defines as tragic in the character of Virgil. This essay develops the main thesis of Hollander's book. In his own words from the introduction:

L'atteggiamento verso Virgilio che trovo espresso nella Commedia è, in ultima analisi, patrocinante e condiscendente, il modo di un cristiano di vedere un pagano. Il dramma a cui assistiamo nell'anima del nostro autore è nondimeno genuino, in quanto ciò che egli ha visto nell'opera di Virgilio è stato causa della sua conversione. . . . La tragedia di Virgilio risiede nella sua incapacità di trarre dai suoi propri testi una interpretazione analoga. Nel piano di Dio per la rivelazione letteraria, la grazia gli è stata negata. I travasamenti di Virgilio da parte di Stazio e di Dante sono quindi, teologicamente per lo meno, delle buone interpretazioni, mentre la comprensione stessa di Virgilio dei suoi propri scritti comportava un "travasamento" capitale, e cioè il non vedere il Verbo nelle sue proprie parole. (p. 11)

In my opinion, the fault of the book is precisely in this thesis, only half of which is supported by the careful attention to the text for which Hollander is to be credited. Specifically, Dante's attitude toward Virgil does represent "il modo di un cristiano di vedere un pagano," but it is the conclusion of a twentieth century American that this is "patrocinante e condiscendente" or even, as Hollander says elsewhere (p. 113), mutilating. Hollander and I agree that Dante consistently bends Virgil's text to a Christian meaning as much as we disagree on how to interpret such an attitude. I believe that Dante's homage to Virgil is all the greater because of the Christian truth he finds in Virgil's works; Hollander believes Dante practices a kind of purge on the text, changing and even ridiculing everything which is not explicitly accordant with Christianity. I disagree with many of Hollander's readings, but the theme of the disagreement is always the same and I will conclude by summarizing what I think is wrong in Hollander's thesis.

As I have said, there is no doubt that the nature of Dante's reading of Virgil is Christianizing. However, Hollander's next step is to conclude that if others (Dante, Statius), can read Christian meaning in the Aeneid or the Fourth Eclogue, then Virgil should have and failed by not doing so. If Statius could see the coming of the Saviour in Virgil's verses, why did Virgil not? The answer is simply that Virgil did not read the Word in his own text because the Word had not become flesh. Let us not forget that
Statius was not converted directly by Virgil’s eclogue but was led by it to take seriously the Christian teachings available to him.

Hollander rightly stresses the importance of the episode of the Eagle in understanding Dante’s representation of Virgil, but concludes: “La risposta di Dante alle dure parole dell’aquila è di rinunciare finalmente al suo desiderio di fare della sua ammirazione per la cultura pagana la fonte di una persistente convinzione dell’innocenza di questa” (p. 99). The Eagle does stress the gap between human understanding and God’s wisdom but, far from confirming that Virgil should have read the Word in his own writings, the Eagle denies that he could have:

Se la scrittura sovra voi non fosse, 
da dubitar sarebbe a maraviglia. (Par. XIX. 83-84)

For Hollander, the corrections of Virgil’s text point to where his personal guilt or failure is to be found and point us toward a negative reading of Dante’s portrayal of him. He cites Virgil’s own words, particularly “io fu’ ribellante,” as a confession of the guilt for which the pilgrim finally learns to reject him. I would argue that the guilt Virgil confesses is that of humanity, which “peccò tota nel seme suo” and that no other guilt excludes him from Paradise. Statius and Dante see revealed truth in Virgil because, and only because, Christ has brought that truth to earth, not because they are less guilty than Virgil. Without Christ everyone, even the wise and innocent Virgil, sees only darkness.

The question that remains is why, if Virgil has no personal guilt, does his wisdom and virtue not warrant the kind of salvation granted to Trajan or Cato or, most obviously, Ripheus, Virgil’s minor character to whom Christ revealed Himself before His incarnation? Hollander believes Dante intends this to point toward Virgil’s shortcomings; I believe he intends it to be a mystery. It is, after all, precisely on the subject of the salvation of Ripheus that the Eagle says:

E voi, mortali, tenetevi stretti
a giudicar, chè noi, che Dio vedemo,
non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti. (Par. XX. 130-32)

To compare Virgil to other humans such as Dante or Statius or Ripheus in order to judge him is, I think, to miss the point of the Eagle’s speech: that we cannot rationalize in our terms the justice of God’s impenetrable wisdom. It is also, I think, to miss the message of what Hollander calls Virgil’s tragedy. Virgil does fail, but he is guilty only of Adam’s sin and fails only because, without Christ, humanity fails. His tragedy is not that he was unable to gather Christ’s message from his own text, but that he did not have Christ’s words from which to gather it.

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