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Oracles and Exegetes in the *Comedy*

The present study intends to analyze Canto XX of the *Inferno* and to reveal – by the analysis of a single Canto – the problems related to divining, prophecy and textual interpretation, moreover the interconnection of all these.

According to the narrative of the *Comedy* we find ourselves in the fourth pit within the 8th circle of Hell, among the fraudulents, and specifically among the oracles and the magicians. In my analysis first I try to present the structural role of the opening tercet in the definition of the subject. Following this I try to give a definition to the concepts of prediciton, of scientific research and of prophecy, taking in consideration the contemporary scientific context – in particular the texts of Thomas Aquinas – and I will indicate that on the basis of the semantic strata of the first tercet, moreover of the conceptual definitions, the relator, i.e. Dante-narrator assumes the figure or personality of the prophet and of the erudite. After this I will analyze how the poetic illustration of divining/prophecy is affected by the paradoxical character of this same activity – presented by Dante –, i.e., in how (in which sense) will be paradoxical the presentation itself of the oracles. Finally I will try to grasp this same paradoxical character in the leading role of Virgil.

I. THE FIRST TERCET

The opening tercet of the Canto wedges as a sharp break into the main narration. After the closing verse of the preceding Canto – according to which *another valley was disclosed* to Dante-traveller (cf. *Inf.* XIX. 133) – we would expect that here it is the suspended narration which will continue. And in fact it happens so, but only in the second tercet, which also at the lexical level reconnects to the closure of the preceding canto in the sense that the traveller takes a look *into the bottom disclosed there* (v. 5) and discovers the group of the oracles which is moving forward slowly. The lexical reconnection stresses even more that for the extension of three verses we took distance from the main action and something else became relevant.



In fact the first tercet is a self-reflexive outlet of the narrator, in which the narrator egresses from the narrated time and speaks to the reader from the present time/tense of the text lying in front of him. In other words it is not the other-worldly story of the traveller which continues here, but the narrator presents us the history of the formulation of the *Comedy* (cf. *Inferno* I). Apparently the tercet claims only that in the history of the writing of the *Comedy* the author/narrator got to Canto XX of *Inferno*, and now he will have to draft it. But it is questionable why is necessary to do this and rightly here: it is evident that – in the process of reading – we are in the *Inferno* (the title can be read at the beginning of the volume) and it is also clear that we are in Canto XX (the number of this Canto is above these same verses), moreover the tercet – on the basis of its structure – could be the opening tercet of any Canto: only the word indicating the number of the Canto (*twentieth*) should be changed (cf. Carrai 2005. 51).

As we could say, such an insertion enhances the previously established expectation of the reader: let the reader be excited a little bit about what can be found in that deep valley. But in reality three verses are not enough to enhance the excitement, and in this case we could evaluate the speech of the narrator as a rhetoric tool without any relevant meaning (cf. Parodi 1907. 25).

We have to take in consideration that this locution removes not only the reader, but the narrator himself from the usual path of the narration. It is Dante-narrator himself who here reflects on which point is he in the writing of the one-time vision, what did he already achieved and what is still to be made. The self-reflection in only three verses directs our attention to the structure of the form of the entire text borning here and now, moreover to the fact that at the given moment of writing the following text-units (Cantos and main parts) are still not ready. Actually some kind of uncertainty is also perceivable with regard the structure of the work to be written: in fact the narrator uses the expression *canzone* (*song*) to indicate the whole of the *Cantos* of the *Inferno*, meanwhile later will be the term *cantica* (*main part*) which will indicate the main groups of Cantos of the three otherworldly realms (cf. v. 1–3, moreover Pertile 1991. 107–108; Baranski 1995. 3–5).

When the narrator says to have to write Canto XX, moreover he makes for the first time – in this work – a reference to the structure of his work to be written, in reality “makes a prediction”: first he indicates the following task, i.e. to poeticize the new subject, then he delineates the structure of the whole work. And with this he also promises to complete his pledge. At the same time this promise – as always – is a prediction, projection, prognosis of a future event.

This way the tercet – semantically, as well as dramaturgically – is perfectly integrated in the course and the logic of the story: the narrator directs our attention to the incompleteness of his own work and projects its completion rightly at the point where such an activity – the prognosis of the future – will be presented as a sin. In this manner an apparent parallel will be formed between the narrator and the sinners (the oracles) who will appear soon.

But this parallel is only apparent, because to know and to predict the future is not a sin in itself. On the contrary, to know the future it is a noble and useful activity, if we – human beings – take present the possibilities to do so. Because the narrator utilizes (or is allowed to use) rightly those possibilities which enable him to predict the future, his figure and his activity are not parallel, but are contrary to those of the oracles.

II. THE SCHOLAR, THE PROPHET AND THE ORACLE

According to the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, the future can be known in two ways: “there are two ways in which future things can be fore-known: [...] in their causes and [...] in themselves” (Aquinas, *ST* II II 95 1), i.e. (1) an event can be predicted when its causes can be seen already in the present, or (2) when we know from the future itself the coming event.

To make an inference from the causes to the still not materialized, but probably or necessarily realizing effect, takes part of the category of scientific knowledge, so it doesn’t have anything to do with divining. Who intends to know this way the future is said to be a scholar or researcher.

At the contrary, from the future itself only God is capable to know the future, because his eternal presence means also that for him every and any moment of the future is given as the present. It is obvious that the human being living in the present is not capable of such knowledge, nonetheless the divine providence can confer – as it did in fact during history (cf. *Inf.* II. 13–30) – to some chosen ones the mercy by which it reveals from the future itself the future to them. Naturally neither in this last case we would be allowed to claim that a chosen one could acquire knowledge about the future by divining. The man who can have an insight into the future by God’s mercy, and is also allowed to communicate his own vision to his fellow-beings, is called prophet.

Tertium non datur – there is no third way. So what can do the oracle? And how is possible that the sinners – who were not scholars, neither prophets – could really foresee certain future events?

Divining, according to Virgil’s classification (cf. *Inf.* XI. 52–59) takes part of the category of fraud. On the basis of our moral sensibility even today we judge as fraud the different species of prediction, astrology, magic, because those who make these activities always trick, deceive and wile themselves and their human fellows. However it is important to observe that in the age of Dante divining is condemned not exclusively from this approach. In fact the sin of the oracle is primarily not to deceive his too credulous and irrationally thinking fellow-beings, but it is his intention to usurp fraudulently God’s foresight (Isid. *Etym.* VIII. ix. 14). Fraud here consists in deceiving God, as Thomas Aquinas clarifies it: “if anyone presumes, without a revelation from God, to know or to foretell



in any way future things [...], then he is manifestly usurping to himself what belongs to God" (Aquinas, *ST II II* 95 1).

The oracle intends to possess divine knowledge by human means and capabilities, which is impossible: he wants to deify himself as a human being. This is clearly indicated by the etymology (in Italian) of the words "oracle", "predict" (*indivino, indivinare*), because in contemporary Italian (and already in Latin) these words preserve the meaning of "deification", "becoming God", "to be fused in God". However the participation in God is given only to the beatified/blessed and to some chosen ones – to the prophets –, by God's mercy, according to the plan of the providence.

As God's omniscience is unknowable – because it transcends human capabilities and reason –, the oracle is forced to be reliant in Satan's help. This is a common feature of all sacrilegious cults: "every case of divination makes use of the advice or assistance of demons [of Satan] in order to get precognition of a future event" (Aquinas, *ST II II* 95 3).

So, when someone – who is not a scholar, neither a prophet – would like to know the future, necessarily calls Satan as a help for his own activity, and in principle Satan can even help him, and thus some details of the future can be revealed to him. Therefore divining is a pact with Satan (cf. Baldelli 1977. 481).

III. THE NARRATOR AS A POETA DOCTUS [SCHOLAR-POET] AND AS A PROPHET

As we turn back to the narrator of Canto XX, we see that his faith in being able to finish his own work in the future, moreover his promise to do that, can be reconfirmed by reason and by divine revelation. On one hand, as a traveller assisted by divine mercy, he has already completed his own trip in the other world, where he was also authorized to draft what he has seen (cf. *Purg.* XXXII. 103–105; *Par.* XVII. 112–141; *Par.* XXVII. 64–66), thus he rightly can have confidence in God's further support; on the other hand he is conscious of his own poetic proficiency (cf. *Inf.* I. 86–87), on the basis of which it is logical that he feels capable to accomplish this great task. We have to add to this that Dante-traveller, during his pilgrimage in the other world – as the future Dante-narrator –, has received not simply an authorization, but an irrefutable mandate to describe what he has seen, also with some indications on its *modus operandi*, but the final form of this work – its structure, its phrases and rhymes – had to be formed by himself, by his previous and continuously evolving poetic experience, thus is comprehensible that here, at the beginning of his work, he is characterized by uncertainty.

So the first three verses of the Canto show us a narrator secure in his own capabilities and in his authority, who exhorts himself to accomplish the obligatory task. The tone of Dante-narrator shoving off the narrated time, but simultane-



ously watching to the whole work in the first stage of its writing, becomes of *prophetic character*, in sharp contrast with the figures of the oracles to be presented here.

Dante-narrator takes shape in the first three verses in such a way that the new subject, and the sinners to be presented by it, are – on the level of assertion – alienated from him, and already by this he anticipates his own judgement on them to be formulated later.

IV. PRESENTATION OF THE ORACLES

The peculiarity of the presentation of the oracles is that it shows the intrinsic contradictions of divining, magic and astrology. The oracle desires to acquire knowledge, which in itself is a correct tenor. The desire for knowledge, as it is claimed also by the often quoted incipit of *The Convivio*, it is a natural aptitude of mankind: “since knowledge is the ultimate perfection of our soul, in which resides our ultimate happiness, we are all therefore by nature subject to a desire for it” (“onde [...] la scienza è ultima perfezione de la nostra anima, ne la quale sta la nostra ultima felicitade, tutti naturalmente al suo desiderio semo subietti”; *The Convivio*, I. i. 1). To reach this kind of happiness, reason is also at man’s disposal, no matter the fact that not as pure intellect (which is characteristic in the case of the angels), but in a form which is integrated with and not separable from perception. Is rightly this human reason, what the oracle rejects when he desires to possess divine knowledge: the contradictory character of his life consists in the fact that he discards possible knowledge for the impossible one: he desires to acquire knowledge, but he rejects the given tools of knowledge and intends to use other tools. At the same time his sin is absolutely not tragic: it is not that he would dare also the impossible for a noble aim, it is more that he rejects reason to chase something which already in itself is over the human reason. Therefore the sin of divining is more comic, or even more “grotesque”, in which the aim and the tool are in an indissoluble contradiction with each other. The presentation of the Dantean other world’s oracles is defined rightly by this contradiction, and its description assumes a grotesque character when the comicality of the images (tears flowing down between the buttocks, the thick veneral hair on the back, the back clashing with the abdomen), moreover the deeply tragic nature of the corporal and spiritual distortions have their common effect. The description of the movement of the sinners looking and moving back, moreover of the position of their head is characterized by the figure of paradox – they look forward looking back, and they go forward going back –, by the same paradox which characterized also their life and which corresponds exactly to the sin committed by them: they wanted to understand, but they rejected reason; they desired to have divine knowledge, but they resorted to the devil instead of God.



The presentation of the oracles is not net by the paradoxical character exclusively on the ideal level and by the imagery, but this same paradoxical character penetrates also in the logic, the structure and the phrasing of the Virgilian speech, which describes all these. On one hand we can see the ordering of words with contrary meaning near each other: *he has made a breast of his shoulders* (*ha fatto petto de le spalle* [37]); *he would see too far ahead he looks behind* (*volse veder troppo davanti, / di retro guarda* [38–39]); *from male he turned to female* (*di maschio femmina divenne* [41]); *He that backs up to the other's belly* (*quel ch'al ventre li s'atterga* [46]). On the other hand we can observe the turning upside down of the time-level and of the logical structure of the syntax: We read on Tiresias that hitting a snake-couple he was transformed in a woman, and “then, previously” (*prima, poi*) he had to hit again that snake-couple to become a man again (cf. v. 43–45).¹ And becomes absurd as Virgil indicates Manto in the group of the oracles: when he wants make univocal who is talking about, he doesn't indicate a sign by which he could identify him, because he emphatically recalls the attention of Dante-traveller rightly to that body-part, which can't be seen by the pilgrim (cf. v. 52–54).

V. CHANGING THE FUTURE AND THE PAST

As the internal structure and the presentation of the world of the oracles is of paradoxical character, also the straight relationship of Dante-traveller to them is bothered by a contradiction. When he sees the group of the convoluted penitents, this spectacle makes him cry (cf. v. 25–27). Dante-narrator immediately stresses that the reason of the weeping is the reflection on the spectacle of the unnatural physical distortion, and the wit of the fact that the souls who are expiating here have lost one of the major gifts, their similarity to God. I.e. the traveller's weeping is not so much a consequence of his sympathy for these damned, but it is the consequence of an intellectual recognition: Dante-traveller sees clearly the deeply tragic nature of the scenery, which at first sight could seem to be comic. We have to take in account that in the Middle Ages the illustration of physical distortion, paralysis was always of comic character, that the vision of disabled, amputated persons basically caused laughter: that is the reason why these crippled people were shown on fairs and banquets. It has to be stressed as well that by the apostrophe to the reader (cf. v. 19–24) Dante-narrator has the same expectation from the reader: reading these passages will be fruitful, i.e. useful

¹ Note of the translator: the paradoxical use of temporal terms (in this case: “than, previously”) cannot be found in the verses in question in the English translation of the *Comedy* used by me – Sinclair (1948) –, and neither in Longfellow (1867).



in a moral sense for the reader, if he/she reflects on the horror (cf. v. 20) which is revealed for the two travellers of the other world.

But Virgil misunderstands the reason of the weeping of Dante-traveller and thinks that it is caused by pity. For that Virgil turns to him with an admonition and warns him that if he feels pity for these sinners, he becomes similar to them (cf. v. 27). Then he formulates exactly that *here pity lives when it is quite dead* (*qui vive la pietà quand' è ben morta* [27]), i.e. the adequate attitude is if we found our interpretation of the revealed image not on the pity toward the sinners, but on rationality devoid of pity, on the recognition of the justice of divine wisdom and judgement (cf. v. 28). Although Virgil has misunderstood Dante-traveller, this way he served a new characterization of the oracles. In fact when Virgil claims that Dante-traveller by his pity becomes similar to the oracles moaning their own destiny, undirectly identifies the true reason of these sinner's weeping: absurdly, they want to have pressure on divine justice. At least this seems to be the adequate interpretation of the debated verses 29–30: *Who is more guilty than he that makes the divine counsel subject to his will?* (*chi è più scellerato che colui | che al giudicio divin passion comporta?*).

This (interrogative) sentence is surely a statement with a general force, and indicates such a form of behavior which can characterize both the weeping traveller (misunderstood by Virgil), than the sinners. If pity or empathy would be the case, that would not justify Virgil's invective, because in other places of Hell he doesn't admonish Dante-traveller who feels pity or empathy for some sinner. Neither the weeping of the sinners – broken physically and spiritually – caused by self-pity would be a sufficient reason (here and elsewhere) for such a powerful invective. The whole scene suggests that Virgil's sentence reveals, as a definition, the sin of the oracles, who already in their earthly lifetime intended to exert pressure on divine omniscience, and also indicates that this endeavor of them is still active, even in the other world. In fact the weeping – in the other world – of the oracles is also an attempt to change judgement and the past, which is the foundation of judgement, as it was their desire – in their earthly life – to know and to have influence on the future.

VI. THE ORACLES OF ANTIQUITY AND THE FIDDLERS

In the fourth pit the travellers first meet four ancient oracles. The four oracles can be connected to four Latin poets and to their epic works: about Amphiarus wrote Statius (in the *Thebais*), about Tiresias wrote Ovidius (in the *Metamorphoses*), about Arruns wrote Lucanus (in the *Pharsalia*), and about Manto wrote Virgil (in the *Aeneis*; cf. Parodi 1907. 33–38). And are rightly these four Latin authors who are mentioned by Dante among the poets who “make poetry respecting the rules” (“Et fortassis utilissimum foret ad illam habituandam regulatos vidisse



poetas [...]” in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (II. vi. 7). That means that the presentation of the oracles at the same time is a dialogue with some representatives of ancient literature (cf. Bellomo 2013. 235).

In Latin literature (and in a general sense in ancient culture) oracles belong to the world of sacredness, they are the priests and the messengers of the gods, so their presentation usually shows the signs of a sublime style. When in the *Comedy* these same oracles appear more in a comic (or grotesque) manner, we are witnesses of a radical change in their role and their evaluation. That is comprehensible: the priests of the *false and lying gods* (*Inf.* I. 72) are obviously the servants of Evil, and their activity can be exclusively fraud and the temptation against God. However the main problem is that here Dante condemns one of the important and honoured “professions” of antiquity, the activity of divining, which is an organic part of a set of beliefs and of a culture. When Dante-narrator – in the name of Christianity – formulates some critiques on the mistakes of the ancient beliefs, we would expect that he would criticize the belief itself and not some specific form of it (cf. Güntert 2000. 278). In other words it seems that Dante doesn’t condemn the disease (the ancient beliefs), but the symptom (the activity of divining).

But if we try to analyze the characteristics of the presentation of the ancient oracles, we will note that Dante-author doesn’t say a word on the “professional” activity of the presented four oracles: on what, when and how they vaticinated. In Dante’s text we have knowledge only about the death of Amphiaras; the text doesn’t emphasize either the sin of Tiresias, because it reports on some events of his life which preceded his activity as an oracle; and about Arruns and Manto we get to know exclusively that they lived apart from society. All these characterizations drive our attention to some unexplainable and transrational event in the life or in the activity of these oracles. In fact it is evidently a transrational event if under the feet of someone the soil opens and he falls in Hell (that is the case of Amphiaras), or if someone beating snakes changes his own gender (that is the case of Tiresias), or if someone – avoiding security in a society – lives apart from his fellow humans in an underbrush (that is the case Arruns) or in a smelly swamp (that is the case of Manto). As if the presentation of these oracles would suggest that their sin was not simply the activity of divining as a “profession”, but this was a consequence of their life, lived with no righteousness. As if the practice of their “profession” would be the result of their conduct of life longing to transrationality, i.e. the pact with Evil.

The sin of the oracles therefore is not to have been the priests of the *false and lying gods*, because even before Christianity (without knowing the revelation) one could live an honest life, even by fully accepting and professing the *false* thesis of the *lying* religion (that is the case of the inhabitants of Limbo), but is to have established a covenant with Evil. In fact divining (i.e. the desire to know the future in an illegitimate way) – taking in consideration what we said about



this above – always requires the participation of Evil, independently from the belief of the oracle. So the vocation to be an oracle is really “only” a symptom, but it is not the symptom of ancient polytheism, but it is a sign of the intrigue of Evil which is present from the beginning. Christ said that “for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18,20), but also the contrary of this is true: if somebody alone tries to tempt God, he will be visited by Satan, even if the oracle doesn’t intend to pursue his own activity in the name of Satan. Therefore the ancient oracle is a tempter of God at the same way as the Christian oracle: it is not his belief or faith which makes him a sinner, but it is his life and the events of that which show his wickedness, and the result of this is his vocation to be an oracle.

After the presentation of the four ancient oracles follows the enumeration of further ancient and Christian oracles: Virgil presents Eurypylos, Calchas, Michael Scotus, Guido Bonatti, Asdente and some – not named – witches. They are simple felons: they have consciously chosen the covenant with Evil.

VII. VIRGIL AND THE APPROPRIATE INTERPRETATION

Canto XX of the *Inferno* is considered almost unanimously by Dante-scholars as one of the most contradictory and controversial texts in the *Comedy* (cf. Hollander 1980. 133; Güntert 2000. 277). One of the reasons of this is the presence of Manto, a protagonist of this Canto, but later we read about *the daughter of Tiresias* – who can’t be anybody else than Manto (cf. *Purg.* XXII. 113) –, that she is an inhabitant of Limbo. Many suggestions arised, but this contradiction still could not be resolved. One of the most simple – and therefore most attractive – explanation is that there could be an error in copying the text: because we don’t know Dante’s autograph texts, and the *Comedy* got to us only by copies (made much more later than the original text), it can’t be excluded that in this textual place of the *Purgatory* one of the first copyists made a mistake and the error was inherited in the later copies. In fact, if in *Purgatory* XXII. 113 instead of Tiresias we would read the name of an other mythological oracle of Thebes – for example that of Nereus –, the contradiction would be resolved (cf. v. 55).

The three remarks of Virgil in the Canto mean a still greater exegetic problem. First, in the Canto Virgil disserts a lot on the history of Mantua’s foundation, but the history traced here is in contradiction with what Virgil himself wrote – 1300 years earlier – in the *Aeneid*. Here we receive a scientific exposition according to which Mantua – on a moorland near the river Mincio – was founded by those men who lived in that area after the death of oracle (vaticinatress) Manto. They have chosen that place because it was secure, and the city was simply named after the first inhabitant of that area, Manto. The explanation is logical and credible. But in the *Aeneid* is claimed that it was Ocnos who founded Mantua, who is



the son of Manto and Tiberinus (the god of the river Tiber). This second one is obviously a legendary and mythical history of origin (cf. v. 55–96).

The second contradiction of the speech of Virgil is that it presents Eurypylus as an oracle, moreover it claims that it was Eurypylus who – with Calchas – established on the basis of a divine prophecy the most adequate moment for the Greek navy to approach Troy. Differently, according to the *Aeneid*, Eurypylus was not even an oracle, but a soldier, and the prophecy on the departure to Troy was intermediated exclusively by Calchas, who in fact was an oracle (cf. v. 106–112). It is particularly interesting that Virgil himself recalls our attention to these two contradictions, when he stresses in Canto XX that he relates the real story of Mantua to confute dim legends (cf. v. 97–99). Moreover he indicates Eurypylus to make clear for Dante-traveller, who knows by memory the *Aeneid*, that the appearing Greek sinner is the same about whom he – Dante – could read in the *Aeneid* (cf. v. 112–114).

The third controversial textual place is the strange denomination of the Moon: Virgil for this uses the expression *Cain with his thorns* (*Caino e le spine*), which can correspond to a contemporary popular belief, according to which the spots of the Moon depict Cain, who after the murder of his brother carries the weight of his own sin on the Moon (cf. v. 126). This legend will be confuted by the text itself on a later place (cf. *Par.* II. 49–51), moreover it is strange that Virgil says such a superstitious imbecility right among the oracles, i.e., among the sinners who don't care about rationality.

To solve the contradictions, according to one of the explanations Virgil, who after his death has already confronted himself with the truth of Christian revelation, in this speech countervails and corrects the deficiencies and the “lies” of his own old works (in connection to the first two contradictions). At the same time he uncovers himself (by the peculiar denomination of the Moon) and shows that he still could not transcend and overcome his own old superstitious beliefs, and – at least here – he can't be considered as a “wise advisor” (cf. Güntert 2000. 282).

And indeed Virgil himself claims that it is necessary to have a factual description of the history of the origins of Mantua, “thou let no false tale pervert the truth” (“la verità nulla menzogna frodi” [99]). I.e. here Virgil qualifies his own previous story – described in the *Aeneid* – as a lie. However we surely can claim that this remark doesn't mean at all that Virgil would qualify his own poetry as a mendacious discourse, because that would contradict with his own role of a leader and to the basic truth described in the *Aeneid* (cf. *Inf.* II). Maybe we can presume that certain places of the *Aeneid* would contain some false thoughts (cf. Barolini 1984. 214; Italia 2008. 35–355).

But maybe we deal here with a deeper problem. In fact Virgil doesn't intend to confute, but to confirm what he previously wrote in the *Aeneid*: that is the reason why he – in connection to Eurypylus – recalls the reader's attention to

the *coherence* between his old and actual texts. For us these texts seem to be contradictory, that is the reason why Virgil gives an explanation to this problem. I.e. he doesn't confute himself, but he explains how should we read the *Aeneid* (cf. Bellomo 2013. 237). At the beginning of Book II of the *Convivio*, where Dante explains the allegorical sense of the ancient author's writings, he states that in the works of these poets "this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction [lie]" ("questo è quello che si nasconde sotto 'l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna"; *Convivio* II. i. 3). And what else could be the foundation of Mantua by the son (i.e. Ocno) of the god of the rivers (Tiberinus) and the female oracle (Manto), than a beautiful fiction or lie? In Canto XX of the *Inferno* Virgil by his detailed account on the history of Mantua teaches Dante-traveller – who, as it was mentioned, knew by memory the *Aeneid* – to not interpret as a literally truth the mythical story of this city. The fable described in the *Aeneid* in reality expressed – even if beneath an allegorical veil – the truth: Mantua was founded by Ocno, i.e., it was not the mentioned female oracle, but the men who came later, who founded the city; Ocno was the son of the God of the river Tiber, i.e. the city has the advantage to have this river (and the moorland) for protection. We just have interpret the fable, and under the fiction (or lie) we can discover the truth.

That is valid also regarding the role of Eurypylus. It is possible that in the *Aeneid* Virgil didn't assert explicitly that Eurypylus would have been an oracle and he would have gone in search of a divining in connection to the time of departure of the navy, instead Virgil asserted that all this was the work of Calchas. Anyway, at the beginning of the *Aeneid* Virgil claims that Calchas had a companion, Eurypylus. This remark evidently means that also Eurypylus took part of that wickedness which was committed by Calchas, and so – even in this case – beneath the cloak of the fable the light of truth is revealed: one who is engaged with wicked people, becomes wicked himself.

So if these two remarks of Virgil present a reading-methodology, these introduce Dante-traveller (and the reader of the *Comedy*) to the method of the adequate interpretation. This way becomes logical the remark regarding the Moon, which can be considered also as a methodological digression, by which Virgil tests if Dante-traveller had apprehended the lesson. Here Virgil doesn't merely present a reading-method, but shows the method of giving an allegorical meaning (to some concept). In fact, to define the Moon by the terms *Cain with his thorns* it is univocally a beautiful fiction (or lie). It could also be the sign of some superstitious belief, but in that case we should attribute some unearthly and magical power to the Moon. But Virgil doesn't do that. He simply says that the Moon (*Cain with his thorns*) is already full and so it gives some light on the road of Dante-traveller. There is no any superstition and magic in the fact that the Moon lights by night and thus can help in the orientation (Bellomo 2013. 235).



Virgil, by analyzing two details of his own main work, first has shown how the allegorical reading works, then he has shown how an allegory has to be created, how the truth has to be hidden beneath the cloak of a fable.

So the Virgil of Canto XX is not the self-critical Christian figure of the once-Pagan poet. Virgil remained and remains for ever a Pagan poet, but even this way is able to teach the art of hermeneutics/exegesis to the Christian reader.

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