

## NEW LIGHT ON DANTE'S CONSTRUCTION OF GERYON\*

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This essay aims to improve our understanding of Dante's construction of Geryon in *Inferno* 16-17. First, I address the vexed question concerning the truth-status of the monster vis-à-vis that of the poem. After rejecting alternative interpretations, I defend the exclusively allegorical reading of Geryon and suggest that it should be seen as a conscious corrective reaction to Virgil's metapoetic construction of Fama in *Aeneid* 4. In the second part of the essay, I demonstrate an unappreciated wordplay between *Gerion(e)* and *giron(e)* and argue that this serves as a key to appreciating his allegorical nature. The latent anagrammatic wordplay underscores his symbolic mirroring of the structure of Hell and instantiates both the motif of hybridity and that of deception.

Keywords: Dante, Geryon, Virgil, *Aeneid*, Fama, Wordplay

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Of all the beasts in Dante's *Inferno*, none is as well-known and baffling as Geryon, symbol of fraud.<sup>1</sup> The description of him is marked by nothing if not excess, leaving the reader with the challenge of finding proportionate poetic significance. With the realization that source criticism, at least in isolation, is far from able to explain this creature – Dante's Geryon bears no real physical likeness to the Spanish giant with three heads and a trifold body who is known from the classical tradition – scholars have pursued other avenues of interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Of these, by far the most fruitful has been the emphasis on the beast's metapoetic aspects. This idea was

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\* I would like to thank Antonello Borra, Vittorio Höfle, Jieon Kim, Justin Steinberg, and *Bibliotheca Dantesca*'s two anonymous reviewers and editorial team for the invaluable comments and/or discussions that greatly improved this essay. Naturally, I bear full responsibility for any remaining shortcomings. I dedicate this essay to my mother Jieon Kim, who encouraged me to study Dante.

<sup>1</sup> While I use (Dante-)pilgrim to designate the character within the poem, I use 'Dante' *simpliciter* to refer to the poet.

<sup>2</sup> Geryon's geographical dimension is explored by Theodore J. Cachey Jr., "Dante's journey between fiction and truth: Geryon revisited," in *Dante: da Firenze all'aldilà: atti del terzo Seminario dantesco internazionale (Firenze, 9-11 giugno 2000)*, ed. Michelangelo Picone (Florence: Casati, 2001), 75-92, 79-89.

first raised by Franco Ferrucci<sup>3</sup> but has since received lengthy elaboration by subsequent scholarship. As Zygmunt G. Barański has emphasized, just as Geryon is the monster of all monsters, so too the *Commedia* is a *summa*, combining disparate genres and areas of knowledge into one encyclopedic whole. More specifically, Barański argued that the figure of Geryon metapoetically reflects two crucial aspects of the *Commedia*, namely, its hybridity and the question of its truth-status.<sup>4</sup> By now the metapoetic status of Geryon is a commonplace, even if significant details of its interpretation remain contested.

The present essay is intended as a further contribution to our understanding of Dante's metapoetic construction of Geryon. The essay is divided into two separate sections. First, I discuss the vexed question of the truth-status of the monster vis-à-vis that of the poem. After surveying previous interpretations, I argue that only an exclusively allegorical understanding of the figure of Geryon is plausible. I support this by demonstrating how Dante thereby correctively develops an intertextual model in the form of Virgil's Fama in *Aeneid* 4. Whereas Virgil assimilated his poetry's truth-status (at least in that passage) with that of Fama's utterances, Dante resists this consequence, while nonetheless imitating some of Virgil's reflexive poetic strategies. In the second part of the essay, which builds on the first, I explore the specific manner in which Dante constructs his narrative so as to signal to the reader its allegorical significance. I propose a previously unnoticed intratextual wordplay on Geryon's name that both helps to explain Dante's choice of this particular figure from the classical mythology and demonstrates the crucial role that linguistic self-instantiation plays in the poetic articulation of Geryon. This linguistic mimesis of content clarifies essential structures that are represented by the monster.

## I.

Perhaps the most difficult question regarding Geryon's metapoetic status concerns that of Geryon's truth vis-à-vis the poem's truth. That the issue of truth is of central concern for the poet is clear beyond doubt. He shakes us with the provocative claim that Geryon is a "ver c'ha faccia di menzogna" (16.124). But what does this statement exactly mean? Is Dante claiming the literal truth of

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<sup>3</sup> Franco Ferrucci, "Comedia," in *Il poema del desiderio: poetica e passione in Dante* (Milan: Leonardo Editore, 1990), 91-124, 99. Reprinted from an original 1971 essay.

<sup>4</sup> For the discussion of hybridity, see Zygmunt G. Barański, "The 'Marvelous' and the 'Comic': Toward a Reading of *Inferno* XVI," *Lectura Dantis* 7 (1990): 72-95, 75-85. On the issue of truth-falsehood, see *ibid.*, 85-87.

his vision? This position was championed most vigorously by Bruno Nardi in his famous if controversial essay ‘Dante profeta’, wherein Dante is understood to be a vatic poet recording what he sincerely believed to be truly inspired visions.<sup>5</sup> Robert Hollander also understood the claim of the verse to be formally one of literal truth, the crucial difference being that he considered the statement to be expressed with an ironic authorial ‘wink’.<sup>6</sup> This is a natural solution, *if* the plain sense of the verse in fact claims literal truth. And yet, as noted by Barański, “Dante almost seems to be recalling the definition he himself had given of [allegorical meaning] in the *Convivio* ... ‘una veritate ascosa sotto bella menzogna’ (II i 3)”.<sup>7</sup> In the *Convivio*, the distinction is made between the allegory of the poets and that of the theologians: the former, in contradistinction to the latter, negates the literal sense. In that text (unlike in the Epistle to Can Grande, if it is indeed by Dante),<sup>8</sup> Dante sides with the poets. In raising this point, however, Barański subsequently reverts to the position that Dante is still claiming a literal, and not merely allegorical, truth for his poetic creation.<sup>9</sup> An entirely divergent line of interpretation has been advanced by Teodolinda Barolini, Christian Moevs, and Theodore J. Cachey Jr. These three scholars problematize to a much greater degree the very notion of truth that is immanent within the claim.<sup>10</sup> *Inf.* 16.124 is read as a statement that the poem is a “lying truth,”<sup>11</sup> a “non-false error,”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bruno Nardi, “Dante profeta,” in *Dante e la cultura medievale: nuovi saggi di filosofia dantesca* (Bari: Laterza, 1942), 258-334.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Hollander, “Dante Theologus-Poeta,” *Dante Studies* 118 (2000): 261-302, 279-80: “One senses behind Dante’s passage an authorial wink, lest we take it for a nod: ‘I know you won’t believe this (why should you? – I don’t either), but the convention of my poem compels me to claim historicity even for such as Geryon.’”

<sup>7</sup> Barański, “The ‘Marvelous’ and the ‘Comic,’” 86.

<sup>8</sup> See Charles S. Singleton, “Dante’s Allegory,” *Speculum* 25 (1950): 78-86, 80: “the kind of allegory to which the example from Scriptures given in the Letter to Can Grande points is not an allegory of ‘this *for* that,’ but an allegory of ‘this *and* that,’ of this sense *plus* that sense.”

<sup>9</sup> To be sure, there are those who have persisted in reading Geryon straightforwardly as a mere allegory. See Sigmund Méndez, “La idea dantesca de la poesía como creación alegórica,” *Medievalia* 32-33 (2001): 57-69, 66-67, where he writes, “La mentira del arte sirve para mostrar, oblicuamente, la verdad” (67). A limitation of his otherwise compelling argument is that he does not engage with alternative proposals.

<sup>10</sup> See Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 178: “What the *Comedy* is claiming by claiming to be true or real is by no means obvious.”

<sup>11</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 213.

<sup>12</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, “Detheologizing Dante For a “New Formalism” in Dante Studies,” *Quaderni d’italianistica* 10 (1989): 35-53, 43.

a “fiction that IS true,”<sup>13</sup> and a “true lie”.<sup>14</sup> This reading is the one which most assimilates the veridical status of the poem and the beast. In what follows, I would like to argue that the allegorical reading, understood according to the position of the poets (see *Convivio* II, i, 3-4), whereby the literal meaning is fictionalized, is the only plausible interpretation of the passage. But first, the other proposed readings must be addressed.

Beginning with the interpretations brought forth by Barolini, Moevs and Cachey, it is arguable to what degree their designations of the poem's truth-status are mutually compatible (especially, “lying truth” and “non-false error”/“true lie”).<sup>15</sup> An equally serious objection is to what degree these terms are philosophically meaningful, and hence hermeneutically productive. A “poetic lie” that is simultaneously “true”<sup>16</sup> is too vague a concept even on its own terms, let alone as an elucidator of a particular text. But even when the terms are articulated at greater length, the case remains questionable. Moevs has provided the most sophisticated reconstruction of Dante's metaphysical picture that grounds this supposed epistemology.<sup>17</sup> Dante's medieval metaphysics, profoundly influenced by Aristotle and Neoplatonism, is understood as one where mere matter is unreal, but can only exist through form, and even then, only in a contingent manner. Geryon, in Moevs' interpretation, participates in this general irreality that is simultaneously a contingent form of being. I cannot offer in these pages anything like a full assessment of Moevs' rich account. Suffice it to say that in very rightly rejecting a materialistic realism as a reflection of Dante's worldview, he does not maintain a consistent distinction between whether Dante's medieval philosophy is an objective

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Endorsed by Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 184.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. “Title, Genre, Metaliterary Aspects,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'*, eds. Zygmunt G. Barański and Simon Gilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 79-94, 88.

<sup>15</sup> In Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, 214, the *Aeneid* is termed a “truthful lie” in opposition to the “lying truth” that is the *Commedia*. Justin Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 157 comments: “The line between a truthful lie and a lying truth is indeed a thin one.” So thin, in fact, that scholars have not been able to be consistent in applying one or the other to the text, which should raise concerns about the helpfulness and precision of these terms.

<sup>16</sup> See Cachey, “Title, Genre, Metaliterary Aspects,” 88.

<sup>17</sup> Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*.

idealist<sup>18</sup> or a subjective idealist one.<sup>19</sup> It is certainly the former, but over the course of his argument Moevs tends strongly toward the latter and arrives at a picture of Dante's thought that is too 'mystical' in the subjectivist-experientialist sense of the word most familiar to modern ears.<sup>20</sup> There is much more divinely established order and objective rational intelligibility to Dante's universe than Moevs allows. Indeed, it is the very presupposition of Dante's philosophical-poetic project.

If the general philosophical framework in which Moevs places Dante's thematization of Geryon is suspect on significant structural points, the more particular literary logic of the ending of *canto* 16 does not render easy Moevs' interpretation. According to Moevs, Dante's treatment of Geryon reflects "his understanding of all finite reality, of all human experience".<sup>21</sup> And yet there is no indication that Geryon is a stand-in for all of finite reality extending to the most mundane of daily realia. If anything, it is just the reverse. Geryon is a creature so extraordinary that the reader would not know how to relate it to anything in their worldly experience. Moreover, to claim that for Dante truth *is* fiction in some monistic sense is not reflective of the immediate context of the passage,

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<sup>18</sup> See his comments that form has no existence apart from Intellect and "nothing exists apart from God" (Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 71). The 'objective idealist' position is elegantly expressed in *Inferno* 11.99-100, which will be discussed later in a different context.

<sup>19</sup> See his conclusion that "This is the sunrise of revelation on the horizon of the human soul through which one enters the Empyrean, fully free, and sees the entire cosmos as a limited whole, wholly contained within one's own being" (Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 185).

<sup>20</sup> There have of course existed rationalistic mystics like Meister Eckhart (whom some in fact prefer not even to call a mystic) who show little to no interest in describing mystical experiences from a phenomenological perspective. This makes puzzling the claim in Christian Moevs, "Dante and Eckhart on Creation and Participation," *Medieval Mystical Theology* 27 (2018): 129-42, 129 that "Eckhart ... would be troubled by the modern term ['mystic'], which marginalizes the direct experience of God to a suspect (or heretical), incomprehensible few." While Eckhart is claimed by Moevs as a close analogue to Dante's thought, tellingly the rationalism of Eckhart is given little acknowledgement. And Eckhart's notion of indistinct union with God does not lead him to doubt the fundamental difference between truth and falsehood, justice (see esp. *Predigt* 6) and injustice. Moevs' readings of Eckhart are very arguable, which is consequential to the degree that he reads 'Eckhartian' ideas into Dante. The claim in Moevs, "Dante and Eckhart on Creation and Participation," 130 that for Dante as for Eckhart the essence of Christianity "is to plumb the infinite depths of one's 'I' ... It is to know, from direct experience, that one transcends or contains all space and time, the entire cosmos" seems to be antithetical to the true spirit of detachment where the godly person is so unconcerned with himself or even with willing to do God's will that God acts through him without his even noticing (*Predigt* 52). This hyper-subjectivistic idea of mysticism colors Moevs' entire reading of Dante.

<sup>21</sup> Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 184.

which is concerned with instituting hierarchical differentiations between these categories.<sup>22</sup> It is highly counterintuitive that one would employ the expression “with a face of” to make an assertion of identity. By the same token, Geryon would somehow equal a just man because he possesses his face. For these and other reasons, I judge the attempts at ambiguating if not collapsing the boundary between truth and falsehood to be unsuccessful on conceptual and textual grounds. This is not to mention that there are separate arguments that offer a more compelling solution.

If we cannot accept that, for Dante, Geryon is a truth that is at once a fiction in the sense discussed above, is Geryon then to be understood as a literal truth? I here understand this as functionally equivalent to the claim that Geryon is both a literal truth and an allegory. Despite Charles Singleton’s comment that “The allegory of the *Divine Comedy* is, for me, so clearly the ‘allegory of the theologians’ (as the Letter to Can Grande by its example says it is) that I can only continue to wonder at the efforts made to see it as the ‘allegory of the poets,’”<sup>23</sup> the answer must be negative. Of course, that we do not believe in the existence of Geryon is inessential. It is all the more a question of Dante’s credulity, including with respect to that of his contemporary readers. Furthermore, and more decisively, the text, as we have already seen, does not force us to understand the claim as one of literal truth but rather inclines us to read it as making an exclusively allegorical claim. Singleton’s claim that only the *Convivio* attempts to follow the allegory of the poets, while the Epistle to Can Grande represents the position of the *Commedia*,<sup>24</sup> does not render justice to the fact that *Inf.* 16.124 pointedly evokes the words of the former. To be sure, I agree with Singleton that not all should be mechanically allegorized in the *Commedia* to the detriment of literary meaning. But even if there is much theological allegory in the *Inferno*, this is fully compatible with the episode of Geryon being marked as a poetic allegory, where the symbolic value is really the only one that can truly be taken seriously. The solution I propose would be that Dante views the *Commedia* as always having allegorical truth, but only partial literal truth. Dante’s view of his poem would then not be so different from a church-father like Origen’s view with respect to the

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<sup>22</sup> Pace also Cachey, “Dante’s journey between fiction and truth: Geryon revisited,” 92 on “the revolutionary destabilization of ... the categories of the true and the fictional ... informed by Dante’s metaphysical conviction that all determinate form, including the physical world is relatively unreal.” He builds on previous work by Christian Moevs, “Is Dante Telling the Truth?,” *Lectura Dantis* 18-19 (1996): 3-11.

<sup>23</sup> Singleton, “Dante’s Allegory,” 81.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

sacred Scriptures.<sup>25</sup> Geryon is the most fantastical of all his poetic creations, so he is the ideal case for where to admit that not all can be taken literally at face value. But by making this concession only in the most extreme case, he leaves open how much else on the literal level may be fictional too.

Aside from the more generic arguments of Singleton, the poetically allegorical reading has been judged incompatible with the lines that follow (i.e. 16.127-132).<sup>26</sup> This objection, however, can be met. Dante does swear that he saw the beast ascending to the seventh *cerchio* with his own eyes (16.127-132). And yet, the specific nature of the oath must be given due attention. As Justin Steinberg has emphasized, the oath breaches the normal procedure, whereby an external authority is invoked as the guarantor of the promise. In this case, Dante swears by the *Commedia* itself, whereby the poet's truth is guaranteed by the poem's very words.<sup>27</sup> Taking a broader view, one can observe the following sequence: (1) an introductory claim of exclusive allegorical truth as opposed to literal truth (16.124),<sup>28</sup> (2) a reflexive promise whereby the following words are to be judged true as guaranteed by the *Commedia*, and (3) the claim to have literally seen Geryon. The final claim is true on the basis of the *Commedia*, which explicitly (see 1) does not only contain literal truth. What Dante would appear to suggest through this rhetorical chain, therefore, is that the claim to have literally seen Geryon (16.130) need not, on further reflection, be taken literally. Once a text has granted place for the non-literal, even emphatic statements of literal truth can, because they occur within the same text, be themselves sublated. By swearing on the text and still undermining its literal truth-value, Dante makes an *a fortiori* argument that also elsewhere in the poem there may be literal falsehood under the guise of confident first-person narration.<sup>29</sup> Dante works with the tension between the allegorical and

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in Jean Pépin, *Dante et la tradition de l'allégorie* (Montréal: Inst. d'études médiévales, 1970), 66, with reference to *In Johann.* X, 5, 20. See also *De Principiis* IV, 2, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Barański, "The 'Marvelous' and the 'Comic'," 86.

<sup>27</sup> Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law*, 157-59.

<sup>28</sup> It is not circular to suppose that the poetically allegorical claim is the verse's default meaning, since the point in Barański, "The 'Marvelous' and the 'Comic,'" 86 is that this natural meaning is only subsequently shown to not fit the context, where Dante makes a claim to have literally seen Geryon. I argue that instead of determining the meaning of the verse based on what follows, we should read what follows in light of the default meaning of the verse.

<sup>29</sup> Just to make my own opinion clear, I think that Dante is, for example, warning us not to assume that all his other monsters *really* exist exactly as depicted in the *Inferno*, even though he would probably be quite confident that his structuring of Hell captures a profound reality of how the afterlife is ordered. To address an extreme but not

the literal, but in such a way that the former ultimately triumphs as the dominant category.

The consequence of this is that *within* the narrated story-plot Geryon is a literally existent being (to put it bluntly, one cannot ride on the back of an otherwise empty allegory, which is not to say that riding on the back of a beast cannot bear allegorical significance). And yet on a higher meta-level, Dante the poet wants us to realize that the story itself is to be taken only allegorically. It is a fiction (that still, like all fiction, contains truths that are literally true *in it*),<sup>30</sup> but one that, in this case, points symbolically to essential truths that, in Dante's view, capture objective structures of reality. In this way, the objection to the allegorical interpretation can be met. The pilgrim's encounter with Geryon is an allegorical one, and Geryon himself is, from Dante's broader perspective, a poet's allegory of fraud. I would additionally suggest that, for Dante, Geryon is a perfect allegory not despite but on account of his ontological fantasticality. Precisely because his existence is on some level a fraud, he serves all the more as its representative symbol.

The exclusively allegorical nature of Geryon is further supported by considering how Dante receives and develops a similarly metapoetic passage in Virgil's *Aeneid*. In so doing, one finds a deeper context for Dante's thematization of the question of truth. It is true that the following analysis of Dante's interaction with Virgil will presuppose the allegorical reading of Geryon defended above. However, it also reinforces it in a non-circular manner by demonstrating the coherence of this reading with what else is known of Dante's attitude toward his Virgilian model. It would not be surprising if Dante were inspired by the famous Fama of *Aeneid* 4, a brilliant poetic creation that was to inspire a rich reception

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unrepresented position, it is completely excessive to assume, on the basis of Dante's granting of fiction in his poem, that even Hell itself may be just an allegory. I admit, however, that there are many intermediate cases where the question cannot be easily solved. Could Dante himself have been expected to provide a definitive answer on every point?

<sup>30</sup> See David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978): 37-46, where this is explained. This is very different from a 'true fiction' where the truth-qualification applies from the perspective external to the story. Failure to appreciate this point is presumably what resulted in the claim of Barolini, "Detheologizing Dante," 43 that "the *Commedia* is ... not a fiction that pretends to be true, but a fiction that IS true ... not polarized as either a *theologus* or a *poeta*, Dante encompasses the aporias and contradictions of a prophetically inspired poem ... within the rigorous embrace of paradox". Barolini's position is also – it seems – not to be equated with the claim that the poem is an instance of a fiction that within its fictional plot includes some material that is also factually true. This is a regular occurrence in historical fiction (and while this does not apply to the Geryon episode, it does apply to the poem at large) and does not itself qualify as paradoxical or strictly contradictory.



history.<sup>31</sup> As far as I can see, there are no extended verbal parallels to confirm an intertextual interaction here.<sup>32</sup> But even a rather superficial comparison between Fama and Geryon reveals a remarkable overlap. Both creatures receive the most elaborate descriptions of all the monsters in their respective works. Without claiming that their very distinct shapes are the same, one can observe that both are large, grotesquely hybrid,<sup>33</sup> and able to fly. But, most importantly of all, both share a deeply tenuous relationship with the truth. Fama is, as the name indicates, the goddess of rumor, fickle and unreliable while also so irresistible to many. These striking combinations of characteristics make it likely that Fama was one source of inspiration for Dante. There is one further aspect of Fama that, in my view, clinches the idea that we have a conscious reworking of Virgil's monster on the part of Dante: Fama, like Geryon, can coherently be read in a metapoetic manner.

Building on the proem of Hesiod's *Theogony* wherein the Muses tell Hesiod that they speak many falsehoods like truths but also know how to speak truth (*Theogony* 27-28), Virgil has Fama sing of truth and falsehood (*facta atque infecta*) in equal measure (*Aen.* 4.190).<sup>34</sup> The doubled elision in *fact(a) atqu(e) infecta* arguably instantiates the indistinguishable blurring of truth and falsity in Fama's utterances. But Virgil introduces his account of Fama with a report of her birth: "parent Earth, stirred to anger against the gods, bore her last, as they say (*ut perhibent*), sister to Coeus and Enceladus ... " (*Aen.* 4.178-180).<sup>35</sup> Servius already commented astutely on the use of the phrase *ut perhibent*: "Whenever he says something fabled (*fabulosum*), he usually introduces the phrase 'it is

<sup>31</sup> See Philip Hardie, "'Why is Rumour Here?' Tracking Virgilian and Ovidian Fama," *Ordia Prima* 67 (2002): 67-80 and Philip Hardie, *Rumour and Renown: Representations of Fama in Western Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Of course, not all of Dante's allusions to the classical poets depend on detailed verbal echoes.

<sup>33</sup> See *Aen.* 4.181-183: *monstrum, horrendum, ingens, cui quot sunt corpore plumae, / tot vigiles oculi supter (mirabile dictu), / tot linguae, totidem ora sonant, tot subrigit auris*. I cite Virgil according to the edition of Mario Geymonat (ed.), *P. Vergili Maronis Opera* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008). The revisionary suggestion of Robert R. Dyer, "Vergil's Fama: A New Interpretation of *Aeneid* 4.173ff.," *Greece & Rome* 36 (1989): 28-32 – in fact attributed to Mathilde Hajek – that *tot vigiles oculi supter* ... refers to the humans below on earth can be dismissed. It not only blunts the force of *mirabile dictu*, it also spoils the pointed contrast with the depiction of Polyphemus in *Aen.* 3.658 (*monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum*), where the single and extinguished eye of the Cyclops is matched by the absurdly numerous and alert eyes of Fama.

<sup>34</sup> *pariter facta atque infecta canebat*.

<sup>35</sup> *Illam Terra parens ira inritata deorum / extremam, ut perhibent, Coeo Enceladoque sororem / progenit* ...

rumor'. So, it is then remarkable that when he speaks about Fama/Rumor herself, he says 'as they say'." (ad loc.).<sup>36</sup> The phrase *ut perhibent* is equivalent to another common Virgilian phrase *ut fama est*, which makes its application to the birth story of Fama 'remarkable' (*mire*). Just as Virgil prepares to describe this monster *par excellence*, this emblem of half-truths, he hints that his very narration is a *fama*, the most natural (if not perhaps strictly necessary) implication being that it too is, in equal measure, true and false. The metapoetic implications of this have been teased out in more detail by modern Virgilian scholarship,<sup>37</sup> but it is crucial that Servius, whom Dante knew,<sup>38</sup> provides the core of this realization even if he does not articulate it very concretely. He notices the reflexivity in using an expression synonymous with *ut fama est* in introducing Fama. I therefore propose reading the end of *canto* 16 and the opening of *canto* 17 with these metapoetic dynamics in mind. Geryon is the beast of deceit and fraud, and, just as he ascends, the poet explicitly reflects on the truth of his own poetry. In each instance, we have a metapoetic reflection on veracity anticipating a description of a deceptive *summum monstrum*.

The differences are no less significant than the similarities. While Virgil distances himself from his own account of Fama by placing the responsibility of the narrative in the mouths of unnamed others ("as they say"), Dante asserts emphatic ownership of his poetic creation (*Inf.* 16.127: "ma qui tacer nol posso"). Yet Dante is not only more direct, he also decisively changes the content of the Virgilian framing. Virgil, for his part, on this reading leaves us with the notion that his poetic description participates in the same balance of truth and falsehood as Fama. His poetry mirrors the unreliability of Fama in an act of partial fictionalizing of which Fama

<sup>36</sup> *quotienscumque fabulosum aliquid dicit, solet inferre 'fama est'. mire ergo modo, cum de ipsa fama loqueretur, ait 'ut perhibent'.*

<sup>37</sup> See Primit Chaudhuri, *The War with God: Theomachy in Roman Imperial Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 68 ("Fama becomes mere *fama*") and Antonia Syson, *Fama and Fiction in Vergil's Aeneid* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 47, although I disagree with the dichotomy expressed in her remark that "instead of undercutting the poem's description, adding *ut perhibent* would ascribe to the monstrous goddess a share in the poet's work". If Fama has a share in the poetic work, the description of Fama is still *ipso facto* called into question. This is precisely the productive tension that Virgil is creating. For a very erudite survey of *ut fama est* and synonymous expressions in Virgil, see Nicholas Horsfall, *The Epic Distilled: Studies in the Composition of the Aeneid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 111-34.

<sup>38</sup> For Dante's engagement with Servius, see Erich von Richthofen, "Traces of Servius in Dante," *Dante Studies* 92 (1974): 117-28 and, very recently, Vincenzo Vitale, "Pagan Gods as Figures of Speech: Dante's Use of Servius in the *Vita Nuova*," *Italian Studies* 76 (2021): 219-29.

herself becomes the immediate object. What Virgil presumably wanted to say is that his Fama captures the imprecise, frightful, and horrid essence of rumor, even if it is not a picture that is intended to be reliable in any details. This would not be so far from an allegorical understanding. But he expressed this merely as an even co-presence of literal truth and literal falsehood, which could just as well mean that half the details of his description of Fama are accurate, while the other half are not.

I suggest that Dante was deliberate in avoiding this ambiguity, as a result of his deeper and more reflective appreciation for different levels of meaning.<sup>39</sup> Dante acknowledges that his Geryon is not a historical reality but shows more subtlety in his reflection. Instead of literal truth set against literal falsehood, we have – as argued above – allegorical meaning (true) paired with literal meaning (false). Dante has introduced a hierarchy of meanings that is not present in his classical model. And in expressing that his *Commedia* has a higher claim to allegorical truth, he simultaneously elevates his poem above both Geryon and Virgil. This coheres with his tendency elsewhere to set his own poetic truth in opposition with that of Virgil; were Dante not strongly committed to an allegorical truth of his poetry, it would be hard to understand his criticisms of falsehood in Virgil's poetic work. Moreover, in making clearer than Virgil that his *monstrum* does not participate in literal truth, he further proves his own superior concern for being truthful about what can or cannot be taken literally.<sup>40</sup>

To recapitulate, while there are other reasons to support the allegorical reading of Geryon, it has the additional consequence of yielding an elegant intertextual interaction with Virgil that is

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<sup>39</sup> This is not to say that Virgil himself did not appreciate allegory (he was very familiar with allegorizing interpretations of Homer), only that he did not apply this insight here, a lapse that Dante aimed to correct.

<sup>40</sup> The best exemplification of this is in *canto* 20 where Dante's Virgil tells Dante-pilgrim to trust no other version of Mantua's origin in order that "la verità nulla menzogna frodi" (*Inf.* 20.99). The lie that is being referred to is none other than the aetiological story as found in the *Aeneid*. This agonistic dynamic between Dante and Virgil – on which see further Robert Hollander, "Dante's Misreadings of the *Aeneid* in *Inferno* 20," in *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante's Commedia*, eds. R. Jacoff and J. T. Schnapp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 77-93 – can be appreciated in its broader context when we consider that the very passages in *canti* 16 and 17 on truth and lies to which *Inf.* 20.99 alludes, themselves already set up an antithesis between the *Commedia* and the *Aeneid* in their attitudes toward truth. *Canto* 20 then provides a practical demonstration of this more general differentiation. To end on this point, I will say that while Dante views his poetry as epistemically superior to Virgil's, the agonistic relationship on this aspect is by no means incompatible with his profound sympathy for Virgil. See sensitive reflections on this problem in Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law*, esp. 86 and 163-6.

consistent with other well-established forms of engagement with Dante's primary poetic model. And the poem's allegorical construction of Geryon demonstrates that Dante's *Commedia* cannot justly be considered an alter-Geryon, who, although allegorized, does not himself allegorize. For Geryon's vice consists in providing self-serving falsehoods with no further levels of meaning, whereas the *Commedia*, while also presenting literal falsehoods, does so for the purpose of revealing higher, divine, truths in the form of allegory. An appreciation of this essential asymmetry should discourage any easy equation of the poem and the beast.

In the second part of this essay, I would like to reflect on how Dante articulates his allegory of fraud. While the Geryon episode is not to be taken as a mimetic representation of actual facts, it does still represent higher, more abstract truths.<sup>41</sup> I would be remiss if I only stated this conclusion without providing any positive elaboration of what truths or realities it in fact symbolizes. What follows is my attempt.

## II.

If I do not here focus on the obvious allegorical symbolism of, e.g., the just face with the otherwise horrendous body (an allegory of hypocrisy), it is because this and other examples have been so often noted beforehand. For the purpose of this argument, I will focus on one specific aspect of Geryon that has significant bearing for our appreciation of the creature's allegorical nature: his name.

The expressive density of the Geryon episode is to be found not merely in the vibrant ecphrasis of the beast, not simply in the plethora of similes employed especially in *canto* 17, but also in the still finer details of the poetic language. The rhetorical density of the *canto* is widely acknowledged and celebrated, and its use of synecdoche, metonymy, catachresis, and other rhetorical devices has been documented in detail.<sup>42</sup> Susan Noakes has claimed that paronomasia is the dominant rhetorical figure throughout the episode.<sup>43</sup> Whether it is the most prevalent type or not, its prominence can hardly be doubted. The pilgrim's enigmatic *corda* is reprised by the beast which it summons, a monster marked by its own

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<sup>41</sup> See Vittorio Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 252: "Fiction, however, is not necessarily fraudulent. While its inventions do not correspond mimetically to reality ... its meaning can nonetheless provide truthful insight."

<sup>42</sup> Consult the excellent essay by Paolo Cherchi, "Geryon's Canto," *Lectura Dantis* 2 (1988): 31-44.

<sup>43</sup> Susan Noakes, *Timely reading: between exegesis and interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 56-67.

serpentine *coda* (emphasized by position in 17.1; see also 17.9, 25, 84 and 103). Noakes also detects a combined verbal and conceptual link between *note* and *notando* in 17.127 and 131.<sup>44</sup> These examples would both deserve ample consideration, but in these pages, I would like to instead draw our attention to what appears to be the most important case of wordplay in the episode, insofar as it concerns the very name of Geryon. As far as I can tell, this observation has been entirely ignored by modern scholarship as well as by the early commentary tradition.<sup>45</sup>

Geryon is the guardian of the eighth *cerchio*, the Malebolge, yet we encounter him when he comes up, lured by the cord, to meet Dante-pilgrim and Virgil, while they are still in the seventh. Geryon's figuration as a symbol of fraud and hypocrisy clearly links him to the sins that characterize the circles that follow. But the fact that we meet him in *canto* 16 while still in the seventh *cerchio*, where the majority of the action in *canto* 17 also takes place<sup>46</sup> encourages us to consider whether this pluriform beast may not also be related, in some way, to this circle. The seventh *cerchio* marks an important shift from the previous ones. Not only is it the first circle of Lower Hell, as Virgil tells us, "in tre gironi è distinto e costruito" (*Inferno* 11.30). As Dante-pilgrim and Virgil traverse this *cerchio*, we never lose sight of this tripartite division (see 13.17: "sappi che sè nel secondo girone," 14.5: "lo secondo girone dal terzo," 16.2: "de l'acqua che cadea ne l'altro giro," 17.38: "esperienza d'esto girone porti"). This interest in sub-circles becomes more and more insistent as we proceed through the *gironi*, and it reaches its climax in the third *girone*. During his conversation

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 58-67.

<sup>45</sup> Noakes, *Timely Reading*, 58 connects the name Geryon only with the Greek γῆρυς, 'voice'. I have not seen the observation that will follow made in any of the works cited throughout this essay, as well as not in Glauco Cambon, *Dante's Craft: Studies in Language and Style* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 80-105 (the chapter which is heavily concerned with wordplay in the Geryon episode), Roberto Mercuri, *Semantica di Gerione: Il motivo del viaggio nella 'Commedia' di Dante* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1984) or David Robey, *Sound and Structure in the Divine Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). One of the earliest interpreters, Graziolo Bambaglioli, comments on *Inferno* 17.97: *Nam auctor vocat hanc bestiam Girion, quia quidam demon est in alio girone qui vocatur Girion et habitat ibi cum fraudulentis suis*, "For the author calls this beast 'Geryon', since there is a certain demon in another circle who is called Geryon and who dwells there with his fraudulent fellows." The Latin text is cited from Graziolo Bambaglioli, *Commento all' "Inferno" di Dante*, ed. Luca Carlo Rossi, (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 1998), 127. The reference to a certain other demon named Geryon is, as far as I can tell, obscure. It might be thought, in light of the proximity of *girone* and *Girion*, that some sort of verbal derivation was implied, but this cannot be securely demonstrated and is not a necessary implication of the passage.

<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Dante-pilgrim still has to see the usurers after Geryon has already appeared.

with his teacher Brunetto Latini in *canto* 15, Dante-pilgrim invokes the wheel of Fortune (15.95: “però giri Fortuna la sua rota”). This brief but significant remark anticipates the more robust engagement with circular form in the opening of the next *canto*, where the three Florentines form a grotesque wheel out of their own bodies (16.21: “fenno una rota di sé tutti e trei”). While this pose has occasioned much commentary, for present purposes, it is important to emphasize that it reflects, on the small scale, the fascination with combining threes and circles that defines the entire infernal *cerchio* in which they are located.

While Geryon's ascent begins at the end of *canto* 16, we do not hear the beast's name until *canto* 17, where it is mentioned twice (17.97: “e disse: ‘Gerion, moviti omai ...’,” 17.133: “così ne puose al fondo Gerione”).<sup>47</sup> Much falls into place once we perceive the echo that this name *Gerion/Gerione* provides with the language of *giro/giron/girone* that dominates these *canti*. *Gerion* (which best reflects the Latin *Geryon*) is a perfect anagram of *girone*, but the other forms too function to create clear cases of paronomastic wordplay. The relevance of this wordplay is not difficult to perceive. Geryon's body is marked with *rotelle* (17.15) and his famously spiral and rotating movement (17.98: “le rote larghe,” 17.116: “rota e discende,” and 17.125: “lo scendere e 'l gitar”) embodies the idea of circles and circling. But more still, as noted above, the motif of circles figures prominently in the very *cerchio* in which Geryon meets Virgil and the pilgrim. The connection between the name of the monster and the structure of the seventh *cerchio* is confirmed by a further correspondence. If there is one consistent description of Geryon in the classical mythology, it is that he is triform. The epithet was so characteristic that it could recognizably be employed in place of the name, as in, for instance, Virgil's *Aeneid* 6.289 (“three-bodied shade”)<sup>48</sup> or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 9.184–185 (“the triple form of the Spanish shepherd”).<sup>49</sup> Hence, following the grand sequence of several *canti* that divides a *cerchio* into three *gironi* and contains three people who form a circle out of their bodies in the third *girone* (which itself contains three groups of sinners, the violent against God, nature and work), and faced with finding a monster to culminate this section, could Dante have found a more promising candidate than *triformis Geryon*? This intricate connection of circles and threes that gives form to *canti* 12–17 is encapsulated in the simple epithet and name of

<sup>47</sup> And, again, in *Inferno* 18.20 (and *Purgatorio* 27.23).

<sup>48</sup> *tricorporis umbrae*.

<sup>49</sup> *pastoris Hiberi / forma triplex*.

this mythological creature. It was this, I posit, that inspired Dante to give pride of place to Geryon at this point in his poem – having done so, he could then let his creativity depart from the classical sources.

We may justifiably ask why Dante thought it fitting to connect Geryon so strongly with the seventh *cerchio*. Geryon, as scholars universally recognize, is more than a guardian of a single circle. The arguments above demonstrate that his links are much more polyvalent. Geryon has frequently been seen as a symbol of hell as a whole. It is debated whether we should read the serpentine lower body and the scorpion tail as two distinct parts, thereby resulting in a quadriform beast.<sup>50</sup> It appears preferable to see what is still a tripartite division of the creature, with the final, lowest part experiencing an internal subdivision, corresponding then to the three divisions of hell (incontinent, violent, and fraudulent), with the last division containing simple fraud in the eighth *cerchio* and treachery in the ninth. What Dante has done is to concentrate this basic tripartite structure within the seventh circle as a form of *mise en abyme*. Thus as the poem reaches its intensely self-reflexive center, Geryon, in embodying the structure of the seventh circle, could simultaneously be seen to embody the macrostructure of Hell in its entirety.<sup>51</sup> That a monstrous guardian should serve as a physical icon of the circling of Hell is not without parallel. One need only mention Minos, whose “coiled tail replicates in a specular *mise en abyme* the very structure of the realm he serves”.<sup>52</sup> What is present in the case of Geryon, and absent in that of Minos, is the intimate harmony that is brought about between the structural macroform and the linguistic microform. His name already suggests his allegorical identification with Hell at large.

There is perhaps a more pointed explanation as well for Dante’s association of his monster with the seventh *cerchio*. As noted briefly, the last group that we meet in this circle are the usurers. It seems more than tempting to connect Geryon with the sin

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<sup>50</sup> See James C. Nohrnberg, “The Descent of Geryon: The Moral System of Inferno XVI-XXXI,” *Dante Studies* 114 (1996): 129-87, 135.

<sup>51</sup> This form of *mise en abyme* must still be distinguished from metapoetic mirroring of the literary work, for here Geryon is only mirroring Hell, which is the major content of the poem but not the poem itself. See Carlo Ginzburg, “*Mise en abyme*: A Reframing,” in *Tributes to David Freedberg: Image and Insight*, ed. Claudia Swan (Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2019), 465-80, 473-76 where the conceptual lenses of the *mise en abyme* are explicitly employed to analyze Geryon’s relationship to the poetic work.

<sup>52</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, “Minos’s Tail: The Labor of Devising Hell (*Aeneid* 6.431-33 and *Inferno* 5.1-24),” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 132-50, 146.

of usury insofar as Dante-pilgrim visits them while Virgil is simultaneously negotiating with the beast. There is the obvious link that usury, which can be interpreted as a form of theft, is the sin that offers a transition to the world of fraud. Additionally, the usurers also rise and fall on Fortune's wheel, which can be linked to the same motif of Geryon's circling discussed above.<sup>53</sup> But there is one aspect, in particular, that deserves closer attention: usury is associated with disordered mimesis. In *canto* 11, we hear how "natura lo suo corso prende dal divino 'ntelletto e da sua arte ... che [referring to natura] l'arte vostra quella, quanto pote, segue" (11.99-100, 103-4). Art follows nature, but nature in turn is not simply a raw datum; it, in turn, depends on a higher, divine art.<sup>54</sup> The usurer's fault consists in disregarding this ordered relationship between nature and true art/craft, whose function when properly conceived is to imitate the former (11.109-111). By linking Geryon and usury, Dante suggests the importance of the issue of mimesis as something that sheds light upon both the character and the poetic depiction of Geryon. The fraudulent character of Geryon associates him with the vices of the usurers. On a poetic level, Dante – so I argue – shows his masterful control over the degree to which his own art mimics the nature of the monster. And, to that effect, his art shows that its highest allegiance is to the divine truth that is reflected even through a character as corrupt as Geryon. We can now turn to this question in more detail.

The specific poetic technique that Dante has used to effect this thematic framing, namely wordplay, is not an isolated phenomenon, as we drew attention to earlier, and, as such, deserves consideration as a poetic strategy in its own right. Dante's choice of this anagrammatic and paronomastic wordplay is artfully reflective of twin aspects of the creature. The first of these is the beast's hybridity. It may not at all be obvious what wordplay has to do with hybridity, but comparative evidence from elsewhere in the poem can be mustered to make the case for a link. *Inferno* 13 has attracted special attention for the proliferations of onomatopoeia,<sup>55</sup> puns,<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 156-59.

<sup>54</sup> For philosophical contextualization of this claim, see e.g. Méndez, "La idea dantesca de la poesía como creación alegórica," 57-8 and Gregory B. Stone, "Sodomy, Diversity, Cosmopolitanism: Dante and the Limits of the Polis," *Dante Studies* 123 (2005): 89-132, 92-98.

<sup>55</sup> See Leo Spitzer, "Speech and Language in *Inferno* XIII," *Italica* 19 (1942): 81-104, 92.

<sup>56</sup> *Inferno* 13.58-60: "Io son colui che tenni ambo le chiavi / del cor di Federigo e che le volsi, serrando e diserrando, sì soavi," *soavi* has been understood plausibly as a



mimetic syntax constructions,<sup>57</sup> and other forms of wordplay. In this way, it provides a natural *comparandum* with the rhetorical presentation of Geryon in *canti* 16-17. Dante, on the one hand, imitates the rhetorical excess of the damned suicide Pier delle Vigne, who was famous for his overwrought prose. On the other, as Leo Spitzer has brilliantly argued, this artificial distortion of language reflects the motif of monstrosity and hybridity that dominates the thirteenth *canto* (including in the form of hybrid monsters like the Harpies, who share with Geryon the combination of a flying beastly body and a human face).<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, in *canto* 24.100-102, Vanni Fucci's fiery disintegration prior to metamorphosis is likened to the speed of writing an *O* or an *I*. As analyzed by D. L. Derby Chapin, Dante breaks down the name of Io – the famous lover of Jove turned into a cow – into its separate letters to express the disintegration of identity in the process of corporeal transformation.<sup>59</sup> Here again Dante plays with the elemental building blocks of letters to express not hybridity but the nonetheless related phenomenon of metamorphosis – tellingly, in describing the sin of fraudulent theft. In light of these strong precedents, there could be no more suitable a candidate than Geryon, who, of all of Dante's monsters, is most polymorphic and resistant to stable description, to have his very name express this sense of hybridity via its scrambling of the letters of *girone*. This link between the verbal dynamics of *canto* XIII and Geryon has been partially anticipated by Barolini, who speaks of “the monster's knotty surface, reminiscent of the knots of discourse that imprison Pier della Vigna”.<sup>60</sup> The connection that Barolini makes *en passant* does not flesh out the complete picture, however, since just as relevant is the monster's knotted name.

The second reason for Dante's sophisticated use of wordplay is to reflect on the theme of deception. Barolini is one scholar who has drawn much attention to Geryon as a symbol of the mendacity of all semiotic systems.<sup>61</sup> We can surely agree that language has the

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pun on Frederick II's hereditary land of Swabia (*Soave*). Also, the repeated *fede* (see 13.21, 62, 74) plays on Federigo (13.59).

<sup>57</sup> 13.72: “ingiusto fece me contra me giusto.” The word *contra* separates, both on the level of syntax and sense, the two selves described in antithetical terms.

<sup>58</sup> Spitzer, “Speech and Language in Inferno XIII.”

<sup>59</sup> D. L. Derby Chapin, “IO and the Negative Apotheosis of Vanni Fucci,” *Dante Studies* 89: (1971) 19-31.

<sup>60</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 63.

<sup>61</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, “Narrative and Style in Lower Hell,” *Annali d'Italianistica* 8 (1990) 314-344, 315 and Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 63, 68. See also Cachey, “Title, Genre, Metaliterary Aspects,” 88.

potential to be as much a vehicle of truth as of fraud.<sup>62</sup> In a self-instantiation of this principle, Geryon's own name deceptively conceals its own true significance and thematic referent. The name itself could thus be said to consist of a face that masks the real import behind it.

The name Geryon is thus crucial in underlining those aspects of the beast that bear allegorical significance. First, it suggests the comparison between his bodily form and movement with the circling structure of Hell. But also, it perfectly represents in linguistic form Geryon's hybridity and deceitfulness. To clarify this latter point, Dante's use of linguistic concealment should not be understood as a relativization of any truth claim, an acknowledgement that his poem's stance toward speech is just like that of Geryon. As Noakes writes, "paronomasia is the trope that best exemplifies the kind of inversely fraudulent poetic language with which Dante wishes to identify himself by establishing an inversion relation between pilgrim [I would change this to 'poet'] and beast".<sup>63</sup> Dante's subtle use of linguistic play is a form of trickery that, nevertheless, faithfully demonstrates to the reader in what the essence of deceit may consist. Or, to reframe this in terms of Dante's earlier mentioned categories, we have here an instance of art following the nature that it represents. And such exquisite mimesis of content, even when the content is deceit, cannot in the final analysis be called deceitful, for deceit consists in deliberately failing to represent reality and its structures. Thus, Dante does not subvert but, in a manner that is only superficially paradoxical, proves his commitment to truth at the very moment of reflexively borrowing features of his beast of falsehood. The self-instantiating nature of Geryon's name makes him an all more compelling and, in this sense, a true allegory.

### *Conclusion*

This essay hopes to have clarified significant aspects of the metapoetic nature of Dante's construction of Geryon in *Inf.* 16-17. First, it has hopefully successfully defended the allegorical nature of Geryon as well as provided a compelling argument for how the veridical relationship between the poem and the monster should be understood. While both Geryon and the *Commedia* can provide literal falsehoods, it is only the latter that presents falsehoods in such

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<sup>62</sup> For more general discussion on the (positive and negative) ethical dimensions of language in Dante, see Zygmunt G. Barański, "Dante's Biblical Linguistics," *Lectura Dantis* 5 (1989) 105-43, esp. 107-10.

<sup>63</sup> Noakes, *Timely Reading*, 65.

a way as to point to higher metaphysical and moral truths. It has furthermore suggested that Dante hereby transcends what were likely perceived limitations in Virgil's thematization of Fama in *Aeneid* 4. Ironizing or equivocating readings of Dante's truth-claims fail to do justice to our poet's self-conscious attempts to elevate the truth of his own work above that of his pagan model. And, despite their claims to the contrary, attempts to salvage the literal sense of Geryon do not, in the long term, productively enlarge but rather only obscure any notion of what it would mean for the *Commedia* to be a poem philosophically concerned with truth.

Building on these results, this essay has explored the way in which Dante brilliantly composes his narrative in order to shed light on the allegorical content of the episode. The name Geryon becomes, in this new reading, a key to unlocking much of his allegorical potential. This itself should provide stimulus for further study of paronomasia in Dante's poetry.<sup>64</sup> In this context, the fundamental role of formal linguistic instantiation of the poetic content was demonstrated. In the proposed case of wordplay instantiating hybridity and deception, it is not the concrete choice of playing on *Gerion* and *giron* that is strictly mimetic. Rather, the fact that Dante chose a form of wordplay that is by nature concealed and dependent upon the rearrangement of letters embodies the nature of a fraudulent composite beast.<sup>65</sup> While, on the one hand, participating in the riddling character of deception, the self-instantiation in fact practically serves to reveal the beast's true nature.

To conclude, Dante is committed to precisely analyzing the nature of falsity and deceit in a way that is truthful to its essence. If

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<sup>64</sup> Brian Striar, review of *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets*, by Frederick Ahl, *Lectura Dantis* 5 (1989): 149-51 encouraged scholars to be more receptive of the possibility of wordplay and other linguistic games in Dante, although he very counterproductively framed this in terms of a dichotomy between exclusive interest in formal delight and concern for serious content (151). As is hopefully now clear from this essay, formal devices as seemingly insignificant as anagrammatic wordplay can be deeply tied to broader thematic issues.

<sup>65</sup> Vittorio Hösle, "Wie kann Sprache malen? Formen der Sprachmalerei in der Dichtung," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 50 (2020): 673-99 has recently offered a categorization of different forms of linguistic instantiations of content (*Sprachmalerei*). Following his categories, we have here an example of the fifth category, or "Malerei durch sprachliche Eigenschaften zweiter Ordnung." He compares the use of a hidden Virgilian acrostic in a passage dealing with concealment in the form of an ambush. While it would require a separate investigation to lay out the evidence in detail, Dante employs the whole gamut of ways in which language instantiates content. For a study of violent syntax instantiating physical divisions, see Mirko Volpi, "Il canto della divisione: sintassi e struttura in *Inferno*, XXVIII," *Rivista di Studi Danteschi* 11 (2011): 3-37.

Geryon is an allegory of fraud, the entire poetic construction of this allegory is carried out *sub specie veritatis*.