Challenging the Gods

Dante’s City of Dis and Virgil’s Pit of Tartarus and their roles in Christian theology

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*The Aeneid*, Virgil

Book Six, Lines 637 – 670, (Fagles 200 – 201)

Aeneas

Suddenly glances back and beneath a cliff to the left

he sees an enormous fortress ringed with triple wall

and raging around it all, a blazing flood of lava,

Tartarus’ River of Fire, whirling thunderous boulders.

before it rears a giant gate, its columns solid adamant,

so no power of man, not even the gods themselves

can root it out in war. An iron tower loos on high

where Tisiphone crouching with bloody shroud girt up,

never sleeping, keeps her watch at the entrance night and day.

Groans resound from the depths, the savage crack of the lash,

the grating creak of iron, the clank of dragging chains.

And Aeneas froze there, terrified, taking in the din;

“What are the crimes, what kinds? Tell me, Sibyl,

what are the punishments, why this scourging?

Why such wailing echoing in the air?”

The seer rose to the moment: “Famous captain of Troy,

No pure soul may set foot on that wicked threshold.

But when Hecate put me in charge of Avernus’ groves

she taught me all the punishments of the gods,

she led me through them all.

Here Cretan Rhadamanthus rules with an iron hand,

Censuring men, exposing fraud, forcing confessions

When anyone up above, reveling in his hidden crimes,

Puts off his day of atonement till he dies, the fool,

too late. That very moment, vengeful Tisiphone armed

with lashes, springs on the guilty, whips them till they quail,

with her left hand shaking all her twisting serpents,

summoning up her savage sisters, bands of Furies.

Then at last, screeching out on their grinding hinge

the infernal gates swing wide.

…

This duty you’ve undertaken. We must hurry now.

I can just make out the ramparts forged by the Cyclops.

There are the gates, facing us with their arch.

There our orders say to place gifts.”

At that,

Both of them march in step along the shadowed paths,

Consuming the space between, and approach the doors.

Aeneas springs to the entryway and rinsing his limbs

With fresh pure water, there at the threshold,

Just before them, stakes the golden bough.

*Inferno*, Dante Alighieri

Canto 8, Lines 64 -130, (Durling 129 – 133)

There we left him, I tell no more of him; for my

ears were now struck by a shrieking that made me

open wide my eyes, intent on what lay ahead.

My good master said: “Now, my son, we approach

the city whose name is Dis, with the weighty citizens,

the great host.”

And I: “Master, already I discern its mosques there

clearly within the moat, as red as if they had just

come out of the fire. “

And he said to me: “The eternal fire that burns

within it makes them glow red, as you see in this lower

Hell.”

Now we arrived within the deep moats that

Fortify that unconsolable city; the walls seemed to me

To be of iron.

Not without first making a large circle did we

Reach a place where the pilot loudly cried: “Get out.

Here is the entrance.”

At the gate I saw more than a thousand that had

Rained down from Heaven, who were saying angrily:

“Who is he there that without death

goes through the kingdom of the dead?” And my

wise master made a sign that he wished to speak

with them secretly.

Then they restrained somewhat their great disdain

And said: “You come alone, and send him away, who

so boldly entered this kingdom.

Let him return alone along his foolhardy path; let

him try if he can; for you will remain here, who have escorted him across so dark a territory.”

Think, reader, if I became weak at the sound of

Those cursed words, for I did not believe I would

ever return here.

“O my dear leader, who more than seven times

have kept me safe and saved me from deep peril that

stood against me,

do not leave me,” I said, “so undone; and if

passing further is denied us, let us retrace our

footsteps quickly together.”

And that lord who had led me there, said: “Do not

fear. for our passage no one can prevet, it is granted

by such a one.

But here await me, and strengthen your weary

spirit, feeding it with good hope, for I will not leave

you in the underworld.”

Thus my sweet father goes off and abandons me

There, and I remain in dobut, for “yes” and “no”

quarrel in my head.

I could not hear what he proffered them; but he

hardly stood with them there, before they vied to run

back inside.

They closed the gate, those adversaries of ours, in

my lords face, who remained outside and turned

back to me with slow steps.

His eyes were on the ground, his brow shorn of

all boldness, and he was saying, as he sighed; “Who

has denied me the sorrowing houses?”

And to me he said: “You, though I am angered, do

not be dismayed, for I will overcome this test,

however they scurry about inside to prevent it.

This overweening of theirs is not new; they used it

once before at a less secret gate, which still cannot be

barred:

above it you saw the dead writing. And already,

on this side of it, there comes down the slope,

passing through the circles without a guide,

such a one that by him the city will be opened to

us.”

*“they did me an even greater honor, for they made me one of their band, so that I was sixth among so much wisdom”.* (Durling 75)

Dante did not simply aspire to become a poet of unmatched skill and renown. He declared himself to be one. Just as Virgil managed to capture all of Roman theology, history, and thinking in his preeminent work The Aeneid, Dante so to hoped to encapsulate the religion, sprit, and intellectualism of his time in the Inferno. Virgil is his guide not only in style and content, but also textually. Dante as a narrator relies on Virgil to safely and quickly pass him through the various rings and levels of hell, explicitly revealing *Inferno’s* foundations in The Aeneid. This obvious basis in a preeminent work of western cannon legitimizes Dante’s writing and ideas by giving him him a widely accepted literary platform to work from. Many of the obstacles and situations encountered are not drawn from Dante’s personal imagination, but from *The Aeneid*. It is in these situations, which appear almost to be almost mimicking Virgil’s work, that subtle and important differences shine through. These differences are the crux of Dante’s thinking and reconstruction. It becomes quickly apparent that he does not seek to emulate Virgil, but to reconstruct him in a modern and Christian light.

This rewriting process is clearly seen in compared interactions of the protagonists with the City of Dis and the Pit of Tartarus. The City of Dis is an obvious reworking of the hellacious fortress Aeneus witnesses during his descent into the underworld. Both structures are described as large, ringed with fire, and covered with iron. Tartarus holds the Titans, the very gods who attempted to overthrow and usurp the Olympians. Dis contains “more than a thousand that had rained down from Heaven” (). Each fortress imprisons those who sought to challenge the gods and acts as their eternal punishment and retribution. Each city is an obstacle, a place where the pure and pious protagonists are unwelcome and barred from passage. Yet the textual treatment of these two cities is starkly different. By layering an analysis of the Dis on top of an analysis of Tartarus, Dante’s sharply Christian themes come through all the clearer.

Tartarus is solid. It walls are “solid” and “adamant”, its tower is iron and tall, its ruler even has an “iron hand”. The reader is bombarded with rock and metal imagery that vividly demonstrates the citadels strength and immutability. The diction is short, hard, and halting. A terse description of the gate as “columns solid adamant” leaves the reader jarred by the lack of verb or punctuation. The atmosphere is industrial, biting. All of which serves to underscore the permanence of the fortress such that “no power of man, not even the gods themselves can root it out in war”(). This is an important theological point as it reveals gods that are not omnipotent. The Titans and the sons of Aloeus are held in this pit not by the power of the Olympians, but by some otherworldly force that not even the Olympians themselves could throw down. Despite the divinely inspired nature of his quest, Aeneus, a pious and pure soul, is unable to even lay a foot on the threshold of Tartarus. Instead he must pass around it and leave its depths unexplored. Virgil explicitly points out that the Olympians power seems to have no relevance here. The Roman gods are revealed to be flawed and limited.

Besides imprisoning the titans and other evil deities, Tartarus acts as the final destination for evil, cruel, and wicked men. In an almost biblical sermon, Sybil lays out Tartarus as the place of “censuring men, exposing fraud, forcing confessions”(). However, it is revealed that the sin is not so much the actual fraud or deception as it is the lack of atonement for it. The paragon of a fool is described as a man who is “reveling in his hidden crimes” and “puts off his day of atonement till he dies”(). The focus on revealing and paying for your sins, is further emphasized when a “vengeful” Tisiphone whips the sinners mercilessly until the enter Tartarus. This punishment is one that would be reserved for common criminals or petty thieves in retribution for their crime. It is implied that if the man had previously suffered for those sins, he would be saved from vengeance of the lash. The emphasis on purification through confession or atonement for wrongdoings is reinforced physically when Aeneas has to bathe in “fresh pure water” before he is allowed pass Tartarus and enter Elysium. Water as physical cleaning as a metaphor for confession and mental cleansing is reinforced again and again the Aeneid. Just River Styx bars the entrance to the underworld, the literal washing away of the dirt of Tartarus allow Aeneus to metaphorically shirk his sins and join the saved. Despite being a pre-Christian text Virgil strongly associates the idea of confession and atonement with piety.

Tartarus is noisy. In the course of thirty lines there are “thunderous boulders”, “groans from the deep”, the “crack of the lash”, a “grating creak of iron”, the “clank of dragging chains”, and the “screeching” of the gates. These sounds are guttural and all instinctually painful, almost evoking a cringe from the reader. The intensity the din is itself so overwhelming that it causes Aeneas to freeze in terror. These inhuman sounds both overwhelm and are the antithesis to reasoned speech and verbalism. Consistently through the text Aeneas’s ability to speak saves him and his crew from death. Human speech is what allows him to implore the gods for help and summon Venus to his rescue. It is what allows him to urge his men forward after shipwrecks and setbacks. Virgil’s illustration of Tartarus as creating a din so raucous that it reduces a man screaming and drowns out all reasoned thought gives us a clear picture of the afterlife as being viscerally dehumanizing. Sinners are deprived of their speech, their connection to the divine, and their humanity.

Despite the limitations of his gods and being faced with a truly inhuman racket, Aeneus never loses faith in what appears to be his faultless guide. In the face of the towering furnace of Tartarus, Sibyl “rose to the moment” and deftly lead Aeneus around the side of the citadel. Sibyl is divinely guided and operates according to a set of “orders” that she follows through the underworld. Aeneus being a pious soul is able to “march in step” () with Sibyl and carry out the rites that grant him access to Elysium. While Virgil does present a theology based on limited deities, Aeneas embodies unquestioning loyalty to the gods. It is obvious that salvation only comes through devotion, piety, and loyalty. By showing a devotion to his divine guide and by strictly following her rules, Aeneus is acting as the epitome of a Roman citizen. Sybil and Aeneus’s lockstep marching physically demonstrates the harmony between being a good Roman citizen and piety.

Dante uses this vivid description of the city of Tartarus, of its impenetrable iron walls, its hellacious din, and the underlying philosophy of atonement as the foundation for his city of Dis. However, this city has significant differences from the prison Aeneus encounters. Primarily, it is much less intimidating. The staggering iron and rock imagery is nowhere to be found in this passage. The word iron is only mentioned once in the entire description. Rather it is described as a series of fiery mosques. Most closely associated with Islamic witchcraft and devil worship, Dis is a far cry from the immovable power that governed Tartarus. When Dante expresses trepidation about approaching Dis he is rebuked, “Do not fear, for our passage no one can prevent, it is granted by such a one”(). This is a sharp theological rebuke of Virgil’s Tartarus. Dante posits that no power no matter how mighty or intimidating is beyond the power of his God. No fortress is so intimidating or so immutable as to resist the power of Gods will. Unlike the Olympians, who are inhibited by their limited power, Dante’s Christian deity is quickly revealed to be omnipotent.

Unlike Tartarus, Dis is not a city of vengeful punishment. It is described as unconsolable. The focus is on pride, distain, and regret. This city is filled with the “thousand that had rained down from Heaven”(). It only contains those souls that have actively stood in opposition to God and his mandate. Dis does not encompass every sinner. The common sinner and human soul are dealt with elsewhere in the rings of hell. Rather Dante has specifically selected fallen angels to fill this city to emphasize what he believes to be the most important Christian trait, a wholehearted and unquestioning acceptance of God and his mandate. The heavy focus Virgil puts on cleaning and purifying oneself of sin is almost completely ignored and its importance dramatically diminished next to the focus put on the faithful acceptance of the word of God. In fact, we see a split between textual Virgil and the narrator when the narrator doubts Virgil’s ability to enter the city and through him the divine power Virgil carries with him. Virgil chastises him “You, though I am angered, do not be dismayed”(). The duo’s salvation rests not in the narrator’s ability to confess, but rather in his eventual trust and faith in his guide and his God.

As the narrator approaches the city, he is greeted by a “shrieking that made [him] open my eyes wide”(). This noise while sharply reminiscent of the overwhelming din of Tartarus, is relatively muted and tame. The cacophony is only mentioned once. Instead of overwhelming and driving away the protagonists, the narrator and Virgil are able to approach the fortress and dialogue with its residents. Both *The Aeneid* and *Inferno* exalt the power and humanizing nature of speech. Unlike Sybil however, Virgil is confidant that divine power will allow him to enter city and uses his voice to challenge the citadel’s roar. He is using his humanity, his ability to connect to the divine to challenge the power and hate that fills the City of Dis. Once again God’s omnipotence and a pure faith in it is brought to the fore as the key trait that allows the faithful surmount any challenge.

It is within this challenge of Dis’s power however, that we Dante’s most substantial rebuke of Virgil’s theological ideas. Virgil, the narrator’s guide, approaches the fortress and attempts to pass the gate by his own power, but instead, “They closed the gate, those adversaries of ours, in my lord’s face, who remained outside and turned back to me with slow steps”(). His words and his arguments were not sufficient to gain entrance. They simply lack the power. Just as *Inferno’s* Virgil is denied the ability to live in either Paradise or Hell, so to is his written work unable to contain theological truth. It simply lacks the necessary deference and faith in a Christian god to be considered wholly legitimate. Virgil returns from the gate dejected and beaten. “His eyes were on the ground, his brow shorn of all boldness, and he was saying, as he sighed; ‘Who has denied me the sorrowing houses?’“(). The guide is revealed to us as limited and human. Virgil is forced to wait for an angel sent from Heaven to clear the way. His power comes not from his innate prose or ideas, but from the divine blessing he carries with him. It is in Dis’s physical rejection of Virgil’s power that that Dante makes the case for the theological superiority of his own work.

The relationship between the narrator and Virgil in the text is also highly indicative of the relationship that the *The Aenied* has with *Inferno*. After witnessing the trusting lockstep relationship that Aeneus and Sibyl have, the inequalities and tension between Virgil and Dante jump out at us. The narrator consistently refers to Virgil as his “lord” or his “sweet father”, not as an equal, but as child would. Dante sets up his narrator as the recipient of Virgil’s knowledge and expertise, just as intends for the Inferno to build upon the work of *The Aeneid.* However, this relationship is also clouded with doubt and uncertainty. When Virgil is approaching the gate Dante feels that “my sweet father goes off and abandons me there, and I remain in doubt,” (). Unlike Aeneas’s blind pious faith in Sibyl, Dante questions and has strong doubts about the strength of Virgil. *Inferno* questions and doubts the claims of the *The Aeneid* in much the same way. These doubts prove to be valid as Virgil is seen to be weak and vulnerable, as the author provides a visual illustration of the fragility of Virgil’s ideas. The textual Dante is instead asked to rely on Heaven and a divine plan. His faith is put in God, not in his archaic guide.

Tartarus gives us the image of the unconquerable of a hellacious din of twisted steel and rock that immovable and unconquerable by all who try. Dis is a city shrouded in spite and hate; it represents a conscious objection to the divine and pure. Tartarus is avoided. Limitations are acknowledged and divine guidance is accepted. Dis is challenged by the paragon of ancient intellectualism. It however, remains undefeated. Only in the securing of a divine intervention are the gates cast open and our protagonists are let through. By understanding the nature in which Tartarus was portrayed and presented in the Aeneid, a much clearer picture of the intentions of this text is gained. Instead of simply an individual’s personal failure at the gates of Dis, an entire philosophy of a limited deity is being challenged and superseded by belief in omnipotence. The emphasis on atonement and confession is replaced by a focus on unquestioning devotion to the Christian God. The layering of these analyses not only deepens the readers understanding the setting and motives of the text, but also brings the theological and philosophical arguments surrounding omnipotence and the nature of faith in the sharp clear focus.

Works Cited

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