Virgil's High Tragedy

Dante's Divine Comedy directly supplies its readers with the supposedly truthful story of the poet's journey through the Inferno, Mount Purgatory, and the ten Heavens. Though it does not give primacy to this second narrative, the poem also provides an extended story of Virgil's trip through Hell and Purgatory, revealing much about Virgil as a character doomed to limbo and the nature of his *Aeneid*. As we read of Virgil's travels across sixty-four cantos, it is hard not to question why the morally sound writer of a Christian-salvific text must be damned, and if it is truly the case that by his lack of baptism "and for no other fault, [he is] lost" (Inf IV) from grace forever. One may very well wonder if there is some manifest difference between Virgil and the souls of the elect. While his lack of baptism and knowledge of Christ may be placed as causes for this possible difference, a lack of direct textual evidence of the nature of this caused difference is troubling, and herein I undertake to determine if such a difference may be found at all. This difference, which I take to be Virgil's lack of understanding of Christian paradoxes, comes out of both Virgil's characterization compared to Beatrice's, and though Virgil's seven failures throughout the Comedy, which I take to be the following: failed passing through the gate into Dis (Inf VIII), failure to distrust the Malebranche (Inf XXI), failed bargaining with Cato (Purg I), failure to ignore the song of Casella (Purg II), failure to understand the nature of Purgatory (Purg), failure to embrace Statius (Purg XXI), and the failure to realize the manner in which Beatrice will reveal herself to Dante (Inf, Purg). The special status of these two sorts of evidence is nothing subversive or arbitrary, it is simply that these are the only indications in the text, aside from words about the inhabitants of Limbo in general, that could hope to shed light on why Virgil is damned while some others are not.

Virgil's failures in the Comedy may be classed into two categories which I will call the pervasive and the occasional. The pervasive failures are those that are shown to be unique and characteristic of Virgil. These will be failures unadopted by others, and perhaps even acknowledged as mistakes by the character of Dante. The occasional failures are those to which both Virgil and elect souls are susceptible, meaning these cannot contribute to understanding Virgil as a damned soul, or those that result from Virgil's status as a damned soul, as these do not reflect traits that would have led to his damnation, or failures that Virgil overcomes, as if this caused him to be damned then his triumph over them should lead to salvation. First, the occasional failures will be identified and discarded with, as they do not help with the arguments herein, then the pervasive nature of the other failures will be defended, and only then can faults in Virgil's nature be determined.

The first occasional failure occurs during the movement into Dis, when the inhabitants "denied [Virgil] the abodes of pain" (Inf VIII) by refusing to open the gates. Virgil is left to the mercy of souls with equivalent status to himself, and thus has no power over them. It is such a situation that Virgil describes it as a "fight" that he "must win" (Inf IX), but a problem that is likewise resolved by an angel merely "with a little wand … and there was no resistance" (Inf IX). Here there is no fault from Virgil that would reflect upon his character before death, but only upon his status which grants him no respect from or power over the fallen angels guarding the gates of Dis, thus making this an occasional failure.

His next such failure is being "rapt and attentive" (Purg II) to Casella's singing. Even if we do not accept Hollander's reading that Dante expresses "approval of a positive feeling" (p. 43) from Casella's song, it is quite evident that this fault does not belong to Virgil alone. For both Virgil, Dante, "and that folk who were with him appeared content as if naught else touched

the mind of any" (Purg II). So even if Virgil may be said to have failed to "strip off the slough" (Purg II) and not move up the mountain with sufficient haste, he may not be said to be guilty of a pervasive fault.

Thirdly there is the dealing with Cato at the base of Mount Purgatory. Virgil, in trying to appease Cato, mentions that he lives in the same circle of Hell as Cato's once beloved Marcia, and requests: "For love of her, then, incline yourself to us: let us go on through your seven realms," (Purg I) and then proceeds to offer to speak of Cato's kindness to her once back in Hell. Here, as Hollander notes (p. 20), Virgil attempts a *captatio* in much the same manner as did Beatrice when requesting Virgil aid Dante (Inf II), but Virgil fails to realize that praise among the damned has no value to an elect soul such as Cato. Decisive proof for the occasional nature of this failure comes not for another eight cantos when Virgil is questioned by the angel guarding the terraces, and Virgil responds merely with "A heavenly lady" (Purg IX) instead of any attempts at flattery. Hollander (p. 187), Singleton (p. 187), and Lombardo (p. 355) all agree that this situation is a recollection of the encounter with Cato, showing that Virgil has understood his fault and learned from it. We can then safely rule this fault as occasional, as Virgil corrects it yet remains damned.

Virgil's final occasional failure is his lack of understanding of the nature of Purgatory. This is shown by his lack of knowledge of its geography—his frequent asking questions of the sort "Now who knows on which hand the hillside slopes" (Purg III)—and more particularly with his failure to understand Purgatory's temporal nature—as when he responds to Sordello with "he who wished to climb by night, would he be hindered by others, or would he not climb because he had not the power?" (Purg VII). This failure is quite apparently occasional, as Dante is equally ignorant to the structure of Purgatory. Here it may be noted that of Virgil's seven failures, four are acceptable and three (if upcoming arguments hold out) are damning. The four and three

nature seems to perfectly reflect Virgil's status regarding virtues, as he possesses the four cardinal virtues but lacks the three theological. This parallelism per se need not hold up to immense scrutiny, but as it will be shown the three pervasive failures of Virgil each demonstrate an insufficient understanding of a unique theological virtue that Virgil lacks.

Now the simplest to establish pervasive failure is Virgil's dealing with the Malebranche. Upon reaching the fifth bolgia of circle eight, Virgil spots the Malabranche in the distance, and tells Dante that he will handle the problem, as he claims to "know about things here and [to have been] in a like fray once before" (Inf XXI). Virgil negotiates safety from the Malebranche using a "variation on the formula of adjuration" (Singleton p. 373) that he has successfully used many times, but the Malebranche do not respect the divine nature of Virgil's mission and they deceive him with a misleading promise. Here Virgil completely believes the Malebranche and beckons Dante to rejoin him, but Dante is unconvinced, saying: "If you are wary as you are wont, do you not see how they grind their teeth and with their brows threaten harm to us?" (Inf XXI). Dante's call for wariness was quite right, though it went unheeded by Virgil. Not only was this fault recognized by Dante at the time, who with timidity fell passive against Virgil's assuredness, but inhabitants of bolgia six also saw immediate fault in Virgil's actions. Those friars, spirits damned for sins far worse than Virgil's, mocked him for not knowing that the devil "is a liar and the father of lies" (Inf XXIII). Here we see that both Dante, our protagonist who numbers among the elect, and the jovial friars, souls damned for faults other than Virgil's, both knew better than to trust the Malebranche, in whose promises Virgil had too much faith. This then is Virgil's first pervasive failure.

I take Virgil's second pervasive failure to be his denial of Statius' desire for embrace. Unlike the previous five failures, this event may very well seem to be one of Virgil's successes.

By failure here, I do not mean Virgil's apparent blatant falsehood when rebuffing Statius with "Brother, do not so, for you are a shade and a shade you see," (Purg XXI) for it seems apparent that Virgil was making a deeper claim. I likewise agree with Hollander's claim (p. 447) that clearly their status as shades poses no physical limitation on their ability to embrace, as evidenced by Virgil's embrace of Sordello (Purg VII), but this fact could not reasonably have been lost on Virgil, who likely means something else by his statement. Hollander explains the failed embrace as Virgil's view of embracing as not being a "fitting gesture in this higher realm" (p. 447), but this seems to ignore why Virgil would make the claim the way he did; though if Hollander is correct here, Virgil will soon be shown to be at fault in much the same way as I take him to be. A more fitting explanation of Virgil's response to Statius' attempted embrace is Lombardo's take that Virgil is stressing the "equality between himself and Statius" (p. 393). Virgil then seems to think that due to their equality, as shades and perhaps also as poets, embrace and admiration is not fitting.

Within a few cantos we are shown that Virgil may be wrong to see fault in Statius' admiration and desire for embrace. While on the seventh terrace, Dante meets Guido Guinizzelli, one who Dante names as his poetic "padre" (Purg XXVI) in the emphatic rhyme position in much the same way that Statius refers to the *Aeneid* as "mamma" (Purg XXI). Here Dante is left in awe and dumbfounded, but does not "draw nearer to him, because of the fire" (Purg XXVI). We may reasonably assume that Dante then wishes to approach and attempt to embrace Guido Guinizzelli (though in a manner destined for failure, as with the failed embrace of Casella (Purg II)), but that he is prevented from doing so due to the external environment, not due to a belief in the inappropriateness of the act. But this itself may be unconvincing, for even though Guido made no statement as to the inappropriateness of the affection, Dante did not attempt as

significant an action as did Statius. The full force of proof comes not for another thirty-one cantos, when Dante finishes speaking on the nature of faith (Par XXIV).

After giving satisfactory answers on the nature of faith, the light of Saint Peter "encircled" (*cinse*) Dante three times, in the way a rejoicing master "embraces his servant" (Par XXIV). Here Saint Peter, moved by love and admiration in much the same way as Statius, is said through simile to embrace Dante; here it is unnatural to not move beyond the weaker claim of Lombardo that this is merely "a kind of embrace" (p. 490), but instead fully acknowledge that this is the *only* sort of embrace possible between a light and a body, and that here Saint Peter embraces Dante without reservation. With this approval by Saint Peter, we gain a full damnation of Virgil. For even in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, as opposed to Virgil's presumption under Hollander's reading, it is appropriate to embrace. And even one as lofty as Saint Peter, who sits next to the virgin Mary in the highest circle of the celestial rose (Par XXXII), may demonstrate love and admiration to one as lowly as the living Dante, so surely Virgil's thought, under Lombardo's reading, that equals moved by love ought not embrace is wholly shown to be faulty. Here then is Virgil's second pervasive failure, resultant from his lack of understanding of demonstrations of love.

Finally we come to Virgil's belief, which he shows many times throughout the Comedy, that with "beautiful eyes" Beatrice will "come rejoicing" (Purg XXVII) to Dante, "smiling and happy, on the summit" (Purg VI) of Mount Purgatory. Virgil is quite right to believe that Beatrice will appear at the top of the mountain, she surely does this, but neither happily nor with smiling eyes. For not only are Beatrice's eyes hidden under a "white veil" (Purg XXX) for nearly two cantos, she arrives with clear admonition, scorning "Dante" (Purg XXX) with her first words. This fault clearly belongs to Virgil alone, though argument could be made for a failure of

Dante in being convinced by Virgil, and this can be numbered as the third and final pervasive failure without dissent. What remains to be shown is what these three faults say about Virgil's status as one of the damned.

The failure of trusting the Malebranche is a failure of appropriation of faith, and this is prima facie so. For Virgil took Malacoda's word both as "evidence of things not seen," (Par XXIV) quite literally since Virgil did not see the bridge that Malacoda falsely claimed remained standing, and as the "substance of things hoped," (Par XXIV) since Malacoda's claims were taken as truthfully reflecting the physical structure of the fifth bolgia. The definition embedded though quotations above is the true nature of faith as given by Dante in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, and clearly a reliable metric for determining that Virgil's failure is an issue of faith. But the faith that Virgil has is not in the Malebranche per se, for he is wary of them at first encounter, but in the power of his formula of adjuration and the trust in the Malebranche's station as agents in divine order. The Malebranche, though devils, enforce the will of God through their punishment of the barraters. By reasonable account, they should be trustworthy agents and fall in line with Virgil, at least after he provides his formula, but the nature of Hell is fundamentally paradoxical in this way. God appoints the Malebranche to their task, the Malebranche fulfill the task to which they are appointed, but the Malebranche do not fall in line with professed divine will. Virgil, using pagan logic, understands them only within the reasoned order one might try to impose on God's world, but that simply will not do. In a way, this reflects a failure of understanding a central Christian paradox: the existence of evil. This paradox is obviously known to Virgil (for he scorns many of the sinners of the Inferno as evil-doers) but the full force of it is not intuited by him. He does not see, as the elect of Heaven do, how and why evil exists, and its place in the divine order.

The failure to embrace Statius is a failure to appropriately demonstrate love, or in other words, a failure of understanding charity. The episode of meeting Statius is ripe with talk of love; it is the extreme "measure of the love that burns in" (Purg XXI) Statius for Virgil that leads him to attempt the embrace. But Virgil either feels that such a demonstration of love is improper in the high realm of the terraces of Purgatory, or he feels that expressing glorifying love to one not higher in status is improper. In the example given to show Virgil's fault in this instance, we also see his fault has to do with understanding demonstrations of love. Time and time again in the *Paradiso*, circling and singing of the lights is linked with expression of love, and while *amor*e per se is not used in this instance (Purg XXIV), Saint Peter is said to be spinning around Dante due to divine pleasure and rejoicing in Dante's success. While Hollander's reading does not take us to the next point, the more probable reading of Lombardo shows that again Virgil's failure is due to a lack of understanding of a Christian paradox, here with regards to demonstrations of love to those with varying status.

Virgil, when dealing with Statius, expresses that love of another should not be gratuitously shown to those of equal (and presumably also to those of lower) status, and this issue of appropriation of love with respect to status is deeply at issue in the *Paradiso*. One of the first theological questions raised by Dante is if the souls presented in the Heaven of the Moon "desire a more exalted place" and to make themselves "more dear" (Par III) to God. But he is reassured that the "power of love quiets" (Par III) their will, and they have all their desires precisely satisfied, with God's love coming to all souls just as it ought. This theme also arises in the Empyrean when Dante sees the souls divided by their character across discreet rings of the celestial rose, yet paradoxically all equally partaking in the love and light of God. Virgil would understand the physical and structural interpretation at issue here, the division of the celestial

rose into rings which mirrors the nature of his infernal home, but he does not understand the nature of Christian love as a force that both acknowledges yet paradoxically ignores status. So here we see Virgil's second pervasive failure as an instantiation of his failure to understand yet another Christian paradox: the paradox of appropriation of charity.

Finally we come to the failure to properly anticipate Beatrice's arrival, and we anticipate finding a failure to understand a central Christian paradox as the cause of this as well. This final instance is graced with far more explicit support, through contrasts between Virgil and Beatrice, that serve both to fully prove Virgil's ignorance concerning a third paradox and, through thematic resonance, to backwards reinforce the conclusions reached thus far. First, after eight pages of discussing failures of Virgil, a look at one of his successes will be useful. Very frequently, even more so than he fails to predict how Beatrice will arrive, Virgil correctly characterizes Beatrice as "a soul worthier than I to guide you," (Inf I) and one who can answer those questions that Virgil cannot. While Virgil may spend a moderate amount of time answering questions about natural order, compared to Beatrice he barely speaks on such subjects at all. In each of the Heavens Beatrice is answering theological questions for Dante, sometimes multiple, or heightening his understanding in some meaningful way. So here we see a contrast in their ability to convey Christian truth, and similarly in their understanding of such truths. Here Virgil is shown to understand Beatrice as a more knowledgeable version of himself; Beatrice is saved so she gets the deeper knowledge that he does not. Virgil, "that fount which pours forth so broad a stream of speech," (Inf I) would in this way take Beatrice to similarly be a fount, but one that pours forth a significantly broader stream. Here, and this is the cause for his failure to realize how Beatrice will appear, Virgil misses a key and paradoxical aspect of Beatrice's divine character.

A key difference between Beatrice and Virgil, and a rejection of the idea that Beatrice is merely a fount, is shown in the following beautiful set of paired lines from *Inferno I* and *Purgatorio XXX*:

"…Why do you not climb the delectable mountain,
the source and cause of every happiness?"
"Are you, then, that Virgil, that fount
which pours forth so broad a stream of speech?"
I answered him, my brow covered with shame. (Inf I)

"…How did you deign to climb the mountain?
Did you not know that here man is happy?"
My eyes fell down to the clear fount,
but, seeing myself in it, I drew them back to the grass,
so great shame weighed on my brow. (Purg XXX)

In both lines, the newly appeared guide scolds Dante for failing to ascend to divine grace, rhetorically asks if he knows that the mountain is a place of happiness, and then in both third lines Dante looks towards a fount, in one case Lethe and in the other case Virgil, who is a fount through metaphor. In the first case, Dante looks to the fount (Virgil) and feels ashamed that he disgraced such an exemplary poetic sage. This then causes that shame to be shown on his brow. In the other instance, Dante looks away from Beatrice towards the fount (Lethe) and then at sight of himself recoils, causing shame to again appear on his brow. Not only are these lines linked strongly in the English, but in the Italian they both contain the same *monte-fonte-fronte* rhyme words.

This pulling away from the fount in *Purgatorio*, on the surface, can be seen merely as Dante not being able to look at his image due to shame, (Singleton p. 746) and interestingly as an Ovidian reference to the story of Narcissus, (Hollander p. 634) but given the strong structural parallelism between the encounter with Virgil in *Inferno I*, it is also correct to view this as a rejection of looking only to the fount and ignoring the "point of [Beatrice's] speech" (Purg XXXI). Virgil is merely a fount, a source of inspiration and knowledge, and a fount in which

Dante sees himself. At the beginning of the poem, Dante is completely lost, but after feeling shame at ignoring the teachings of Virgil he is able to metaphorically drink from the fount of Virgil's knowledge and strengthen his intellect. Beatrice, however, is more than just a fount, and she is quite right when she tells Dante to move past Virgil and "weep for another sword!" (Purg XXX). For after learning all he can from Virgil, Dante needs to be rebuked by Beatrice, then go through a Christian transformation through confession and contrition. In line with this reading, Beatrice's words are called a "spade" (Purg XXX) and her speech has a "punta" (Purg XXXI), both in the emphatic rhyme position. That is not to say Beatrice's voice is merely a *spade,* in the way that Virgil's is merely a *fonte*. In the *Pardiso*, after Beatrice has been satisfied with Dante's contrition, the following is said of her speech: "Such was the rippling of the holy stream which issued forth from the Fount from which springs every other truth" (Par IV). So we have that Beatrice functions both as a *spade* and as a *fonte*, while Virgil (who is only a *fonte* himself) assumed Beatrice would merely function as a *fonte*.

Virgil's hope for Dante, and his conception of Christian hope, is one in which the saved soul is greeted by a merciful happy deity. But, paradoxically, both God and Beatrice (who symbolizes Him here) are merciful but also just. Beatrice cannot simply grant Dante's desires, she needs him to first experience penitence, receive absolution, and only then will she function as a source of happiness and knowledge for him. This paradox, one of how the divinity can be both just and merciful, is central to Christian theology, tangentially approached by several questions in the *Paradiso*, and completely not understood by Virgil. This then marks the third reason for Virgil's failures—hoping that salvation is a purely enjoyable experience—due to his failure to understand yet another Christian paradox.

Collecting the argument thus far: Virgil's three pervasive failures (failure to distrust the Malebranche, failure to embrace Statius, and the failure to realize the manner in which Beatrice will reveal herself to Dante) are each caused by Virgil's failure to understand an innately paradoxical aspect relating to a cardinal virtue (place of evil in divine plan, indifference of divine love with respect to status, and the merciful yet just nature of God). This failure of understanding is what sets Virgil apart from the elect and is a fundamental failure of his, which suggests that he is incapable of ever understanding these paradoxes, either due to a defect of his character or due to his current state as an inhabitant of the timeless chasm. This then is a total account of why Virgil is not one of the elect, but one that begs the question of how a man who fails to understand fundamental Christian paradoxes could write the *Aeneid*, an epic poem that both Dante and Statius claim has salvific powers (Singleton p. 338).

The importance of the *Aeneid* as holding Christian truth cannot be overstated. Limbo is strongly in accord with the description of the underworld in *Aeneid VI* (Inf IV), a scene from the *Aeneid* is used in the third terrace of Purgatory as an example of the vice (Purg XVII), and the only pagan character in the *Paradiso* is Ripheus who Virgil describes as "a man uniquely just among the Trojans" (Aeneid II). It is evident that, in life, Virgil both had some knowledge of the order of the Inferno, sufficient knowledge of vices to scorn wrath in line with Christian truth, and similarly to have sufficient knowledge of virtues to note the unique justness of Ripheus. Not only this, but the *Aeneid* is praised as a "divina fiamma" (Purg XXI) by Statius. So clearly Virgil was not horribly off the mark with his understanding of morality and the order of the world.

Holding off on the issue of Ripheus for a moment, all the apparent divine knowledge of Virgil makes perfect sense within Dante's framework given the conclusions reached above. Virgil is a character that, aside perhaps from "the Master of those who know" (Inf IV), holds

more knowledge about the world than any other non-elect presented in the Comedy. Virgil is cast as an ancient sage and poet, one who studied the world and paid attention to philosophical discussion on virtues and vices (given his frequent ability to discourse on complicated topics and to cite passages from The Philosopher above). Furthermore, in life, Virgil held true knowledge about the order of some of the underworld. This seems to be the poem's strongest instance of a poet that "perhaps in Parnassus dreamed of this place," (Purg XXVIII) except instead of being gifted divine vision of the Garden of Eden, Virgil was given visions of Limbo and the order of Hell. This reading is not given much explicit support in the text, but given Matelda's suggestion that through divine revelation some ancient poets saw visions of the Garden, it seems simplest to believe Virgil's similarly unexplainable knowledge comes from a similar source. From this knowledge of Christian truths, which are frequently frustrated by confusions surrounding paradoxes, and from divine vision into the nature of the afterlives, though visions only of the infernal realm, Virgil was then able to compose an epic that frequently approaches Christian truth in an asymptotic manner; Virgil can more or less speak correctly on these issues, but sometimes through accident and often incompletely.

The incompleteness resulting from Virgil's confusion over Christian paradoxes is evident even in Virgil's successful salvations. Statius, who says to Virgil that "You it was who first sent me toward Parnassus to drink in its caves, and you who first did light me on to God," (Purg XXII) tried to learn Christian truth from the *Aeneid*. In many important ways he did, and the *Aeneid* led him to receive baptism and to seek revelation through Christ. But when Statius paid too great heed to the *Aeneid*, he was led to failure. In trying to understand how to act virtuously, Statius looked to Virgil's line in *Aeneid III*: "To what do you not drive the appetites of mortals, O accursed hunger of gold?" (Purg XXII). This correctly taught Statius to avoid avarice, but he

then fell to the opposite sin of prodigality, a sin not warned against by Virgil because he only understood partial truths. Virgil did not discern the, perhaps paradoxical, sin of overspending, and only warned against greed as an act of hoarding. The failures of the *Aeneid* to accurately demonstrate complete Christian truth is again reflected in the *Paradiso,* when Dante questions "If our greatest muse merits belief" (Par XV). Dante clearly sees Virgil as a man who has knowledge of some important theological truths, but a knowledge that is fundamentally incomplete, and that fails whenever pushed to extremes; this sort of failure is of course never found with the knowledge possessed by Beatrice. Due to Virgil's resonance with Christianity, both from an approximately correct understanding and occasional divine inspiration, his *Aeneid* is able to inspire its close readers to seek further sufficient truth from the Bible. Virgil's texts themselves are not shown to ever be sufficient material for salvation. Dante required the *spade* of Beatrice after the *fonte* of Virgil, and Statius sought baptism and secret theological study after the *Aeneid* inspired him. Statius then was quite right in saying that Virgil is "like one who goes by night and carries the light behind him and profits not himself, but make those wise who follow him," (Purg XXII) for the light that comes from Virgil's works illuminate other truer works from which one can be saved, works to which Virgil did not give sufficient attention to achieve his own salvation.

The case of Ripheus' salvation, insofar as it reflects upon Virgil's damned status, seems quite simple to resolve, but needs brief special attention due to a strange interpretation presented by Hollander. He frames it as a question of "How could a minor figure of Virgil's poem have caught the attention of God, while Virgil himself failed to?" (p. 497) and compares this to the prayers of Gregory for Trajan's salvation, and contrasts it against the failed prayers by Saint Paul for Virgil's salvation. The comparison of those two prayers is quite reasonable and could

certainly lead to interesting discussion. It is shown that in Dante's world, as early as the third canto of *Purgatorio*, that the divine will can be swayed through prayer, and while Hollander rightly notes "we cannot weigh God's intent, only recognize it" (p. 497), it is reasonable to at least compare cases where prayer is shown to work or fail. But that is not the case with Rihpeus. Virgil made no call to the divinities to exalt his minor character, he merely noted his remarkably just nature. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that God noticed Ripheus as a Virgilian character, for it is completely reasonable to infer that God noticed Ripheus insofar as he was a virtuous Trojan warrior, and for this virtue gave him whatever inspiration was needful for his ability to be rescued during the harrowing. We can then ask the more reasonable question 'How could a minor figure of Trojan history who caught the attention of God be recognized as important by Virgil, who himself lacked full knowledge of theological virtues?' Here we remove the agency of Ripheus' salvation from Virgil—who in order to be active in this endeavor would have had to sway God's will through reason rather than prayer, something Dante gives no indication is possible—and instead class this among the other cases of Virgil, through either divine inspiration or his asymptotic understanding of Christian truth, happening to make a remarkably accurate claim. Virgil need not have understood divine justice to make the claim he did, he certainly made no solid prediction of Ripheus' salvation, he only needed to have a vague intuition as to the value of qualities that Ripheus possessed.

In Dante's world, Virgil was a poet graced with remarkable inspiration who took study of natural morality very seriously. However, he failed to pay attention to faith, hope, and charity as special virtues, and he never untangled mysteries surrounding their nature. This, solidified by his failure to seek answers for these mysteries through Christ, is the cause of his eternal damnation. This failure prevented Virgil from writing a "poema sacro" (Par XXV) in the way that Dante did,

and for this reason he only ever gets to refer to his poem as “l'alta mia tragedìa” (Inf XX). This in no way means the *Aeneid* is not an immensely powerful Christian text, for it is uncontestably a “divina fiamma” (Purg XXI) which can kindle piousness among the unconverted and help to direct them towards God.

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