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VANNI FUCCI AND LAOCOON: SERVIUS AS POSSIBLE  
INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN VERGIL AND DANTE

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That Dante in his depiction of the seventh bolgia of Circle Eight (*Inferno* 24-25) was particularly reliant upon the *Aeneid* for plot materials and classical analogies is indicated by the poet's inclusion of Cacus among Vanni Fucci's tormentors: another figure of murderous bestiality, like his progeny in crime 'Vanni Fucci bestia' himself, guilty of a notorious sacrilegious theft, the savage, fire-breathing monster is, with little debate, drawn principally from *Aeneid* 8.185-275.<sup>1</sup> Yet in examining the traditionally cited sources for the seventh bolgia (and the Vanni Fucci episode in particular: *Inf.* 24.79-25.33), while one encounters nearly every relevant notice of serpents and metamorphoses in ancient Latin literature (e.g., Ovid, Lucan, Pliny, even the *Georgics*), a very serious omission is apparent.<sup>2</sup> Absent from the catalogue, except for one or two

<sup>1</sup> For the Cacus legend elsewhere, see especially the accounts in Vergil's contemporaries, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Roman Antiquities* 1.39-42), Livy 1.7.3-15 (with the very useful notes of R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy Books 1-5* [Oxford 1965] 55-61), and Propertius 4.9; see also Servius, *In Aeneidos* 8.190, and Charles S. Singleton's notes on *Inf.* 25.25-29, in his ed. (Princeton 1970) 2.431-34. Cacus' most infamous crime, fully recounted by Vergil and mentioned by Dante, was his rustling of several cattle from Hercules' herd and the subsequent denial of guilt. Throughout the passage Vergil emphasizes Hercules' divinity, and hence the sacrilegious nature of the theft; see especially 201: 'auxilium adventumque dei.' The act was Cacus' undoing, for the god finally assaulted his lair on the Aventine and slew him. That the monster inhabited a cave on the Aventine is peculiar to Vergil's account (*Aen.* 8.231: 'lustrat Aventini montem'—cf. Ovid, influenced by Vergil, *Fasti* 1.543-86, 5.643-50); others place him on the Palatine, a distinction further suggesting the *Aeneid* as Dante's primary source here (*Inf.* 25.26: 'sotto' l' sasso di monte Aventino'). For the man-beast quality of Cacus (reduced to a centaur by Dante), cf. *Aen.* 8.194 ('semihominis Caci facies') and 267 ('pectora semiferi'); Vanni Fucci describes himself as a beast emergent from the den (*Inf.* 24.124-26, quoted below): for the sanguinary character of both 'monsters,' Singleton, in his note on *Inf.* 25.27, compares Dante's 'di sangue fece spesse volte laco' with *Aen.* 8.195-96, 'semperque recenti / caede tepebat humus' (of Cacus' precinct). Regarding the general question of Dante's indebtedness in this portion of his work to the *Aeneid*, see D. L. Derby Chapin, who, from the point of view of technique alone, has observed, 'The dependence of Dante on Virgil is particularly stressed in *Inferno* xxiv' ('ro and the Negative Apotheosis of Vanni Fucci,' *Dante Studies* 89 [1971] 26). For the text of Dante, Singleton's ed. has been employed throughout; for Vergil we have used R. D. Williams' Macmillan text (London 1972-73) 2 vols., and for Servius the standard ed. is now that of E. K. Rand, A. F. Stocker, et al. (Lancaster, Pa. 1946—).

<sup>2</sup> For the traditional sources of the episode consult, among others, the editions of Singleton, 2.414-34; Manfredi Porena and Mario Pazzaglia (Bologna 1966) 260n.-66n.; Daniele Mattalla (Milan 1960) 1.453n.-65n.; Natalino Sapegno (Florence 1955) 1.273n.-82n.; Ercole Rivalta (Florence 1946) 1.229n.-36n.; C. H. Grandgent (Boston 1933) 1.216n.-23n.; and G. A. Scartazzini (9th ed.; Milan 1929) 197n.-204n. See too the following discussions of the episode: William Warren Vernon, *Readings on the Inferno of Dante* (2nd ed.; London 1906) 2.251-300; Arnaldo Cosco, 'Vanni Fucci e la bolgia dei ladri,' *Lettere italiane* 4 (1952) 92-104; Edoardo

no more than perfunctory observations, is any reference to probably the most celebrated victim of reptilian torture in all Western literature: Laocoon. Another glance at that justly famous passage from the *Aeneid* (2.201-27) will perhaps cast some new light not merely upon the Vanni Fucci episode but upon the complex nature of Dante's literary debt to Vergil as well.<sup>3</sup>

Laocoon, ductus Neptuno sorte sacerdos,  
sollemnis taurum ingentem mactabat ad aras.  
ecce autem gemini a Tenedo tranquilla per alta  
(horresco referens) immensis orbibus angues  
incumbunt pelago pariterque ad litora tendunt; 205  
pectora quorum inter fluctus arrecta iubaeque  
sanguineae superant undas, pars cetera pontum  
pone legit sinuatque immensa volumine terga.  
fit sonitus spumante salo; iamque arva tenebant  
ardentisque oculos suffecti sanguine et igni 210  
sibila lambebant linguis vibrantibus ora.  
diffugimus visu exsanguis. illi agmine certo  
Laocoonta petunt; et primum parva duorum  
corpora natorum serpens amplexus uterque  
implicat et miseros morsu depascitur artus; 215  
post ipsum auxilio subeuntem ac tela ferentem  
corripiunt spirisque ligant ingentibus; et iam  
bis medium amplexi, bis collo squamea circum  
terga dati superant capite et cervicibus altis.  
ille simul manibus tendit divellere nodos 220  
perfusus sanie vittas atroque veneno,  
clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollit:  
qualis mugitus, fugit cum saucius aram

Sanguinetti, *Interpretazione di Malebolge* (Florence 1961) 173-223; in *Lecture dantesche*, ed. Giovanni Getto (Florence 1962), both Umberto Cosmo, 'Canto xxiv' (447-66) and Attilio Momigliano, 'Canto xxv' (466-88); in *Nuove letture dantesche* 2 (1966-67), both Aleardo Sacchetto, 'Il Canto xxiv' (257-79) and Ettore Paratore, 'Il Canto xxv' (281-315); Aldo Vallone, 'Vanni Fucci,' *La Divina Commedia nella critica*, ed. Antonino Pagliaro (Messina 1967) 1.294-99; and Glyn P. Norton, 'Contrapasso and Archetypal Metamorphoses in the Seventh Bolgia of Dante's *Inferno*,' *Symposium* 25 (1971) 162-70.

<sup>3</sup> Helpful studies of the relationship between Dante and Vergil include Domenico Compagnoni, *Virgilio nel medio evo*, ed. Giorgio Pasquali (Florence 1967) 1.239-91, and 'Dante e Virgilio,' *Atene e Roma* 5 (1924) 149-64, rpt. in *Dante nella critica*, ed. Tommaso Di Salvo (Florence 1965) 99-101; Edward Moore, 'Dante and Virgil,' *Studies in Dante* (Oxford 1896; rpt. New York 1968) 1.166-97; Philip H. Wicksteed, 'Dante and the Latin Poets,' *Dante: Essays in Commemoration, 1321-1921*, ed. Antonio Cippico et al. (London 1921; rpt. Freeport, N. Y. 1968) 157-87; H. Theodore Silverstein, 'Dante and Vergil the Mystic,' *Harvard Studies in Philology and Literature* 14 (1932) 51-82; J. H. Whitfield, *Dante and Virgil* (Oxford 1949) and 'Virgil into Dante,' *Virgil*, ed. D. R. Dudley (New York 1969) 94-118; Louis Tenenbaum, 'Classical Influences in the *Commedia*: Dante's Use of Classical Antiquity in the "Purgatorio,"' *Bucknell Review* 15 (1967) 26-34; Robert Hollander, 'Dante's Use of *Aeneid* I in *Inferno* I and II,' *Comparative Literature* 20 (1968) 142-56; and Rocco Montano, 'Dante and Virgil,' *Yale Review* 60 (1971) 55-61.

taurus et incertam excussit cervice securim.  
at gemini lapsu delubra ad summa dracones  
effugiunt saevaeque petunt Tritonidis arcem,  
sub pedibusque deae clipeique sub orbe teguntur.

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At least two scholars have been reminded of the Laocoon episode by Dante's description of the thieves' punishment in *Borgia Seven*:

con serpi le man dietro avean legate;  
quelle ficcavan per le ren la coda  
e'l capo, ed eran dinanzi aggroppate. (Inf. 24.94-96)

William Warren Vernon thought the passage reminiscent of Vergil's 'ille simul manibus tendit divellere nodos' (*Aen.* 2.220).<sup>4</sup> Daniele Mattalla suggested that within Dante's description 'è forse un ricordo del terrificante involuppo laocoon-teo'<sup>5</sup> portrayed by Vergil in 215-16. Other verbal and rhetorical similarities might be added. Aeneas' exclamation as he begins to relate his chilling story, 'horresco referens' (*Aen.* 2.204), is paralleled in the *Inferno* by 'la memoria il sangue ancor mi scipa' (24.84), recited by Dante the Poet as he recalls his descent into the snake-infested trench. Dante's startled reaction at first sight of a snake attacking the sinner Vanni Fucci,

Ed ecco a un ch'era da nostra proda,  
s'avventò un serpente . . . , (Inf. 24.97-98)

calls to mind the initial appearance of the twin serpents in the *Aeneid*: 'ecce autem . . .' (2.203). In addition, the hissing onomatopoeia so evident in Vergil (e.g., 'sonitus spumante salo': *Aen.* 2.209)<sup>6</sup> may be echoed in Dante's

e vividi entro terribile stipa  
di serpenti, e di sì diversa mena  
che la memoria il sangue ancor mi scipa. (Inf. 24.82-84)

and

s'avventò un serpente che'l trafisse  
là dove'l colle a le spalle s'annoda. (Inf. 24.98-99)

When focusing specifically upon the Vanni Fucci-Laocoon relationship, one is bound to note, too, the remarkable similarity in the nature of the suffering that each undergoes. Laocoon, we recall, is beset by two serpents who encircle his neck, torso, and shoulders:

bis medium amplexi, bis collo squamea circum  
terga dati superant capite et cervicibus altis. (*Aen.* 2.218-19)

Vanni Fucci, after he has offered 'le fiche' to God, is likewise bound by two snakes about the very same parts of his body:

una li s'avvolse allora al collo  
. . .  
e un'altra a le braccia, e rilegollo,  
ribandendo sé stessa sì dinanzi. (Inf. 25.5, 7-8)

<sup>4</sup> Vernon, 2.273n.

<sup>5</sup> *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Mattalla, 1.455n.

<sup>6</sup> The entire passage is exceptionally sibilant: note especially lines 204, 207, 210-12, and 215.

It seems difficult to believe that Dante, who, as Rocco Montano reminds us, 'knew the *Aeneid* by heart,'<sup>7</sup> did not have Vergil somewhere in mind when describing a scene in which a character is attacked by two serpents in such a manner.

Although resemblances between the two episodes are apparent enough, the omission of the Laocoon passage by Dante commentators as a possible source for the poet's treatment of Vanni Fucci is perhaps understandable since the two figures at first glance seem so entirely different in character. On the one hand is Vanni Fucci, a sacrilegious thief and blasphemer *extraordinaire*, a personage whose monstrous crimes, which include plundering the treasury of San Iacopo from the church of San Zeno in Pistoia, have motivated Dantists to strain for appropriately pejorative phrases in their efforts to describe him. For De Sanctis, Fucci 'è l'ultima degradazione dell'uomo';<sup>8</sup> more recent scholars have labeled the sinner 'un vero gigante del male' (Arnaldo Cosco)<sup>9</sup> and even 'un titano del male' (Aldo Vallone).<sup>10</sup> Laocoon, on the other hand, appears altogether innocent. Indeed, Neptune's ostensibly devout priest is one of the most perceptive Trojans, a character in whose praise Lessing could write, 'Virgils Laokoon,' even when he is screaming in anguish, 'ist eben derjenige, den wir bereits als den vorsichtigsten Patrioten, als den wärmsten Vater kennen und lieben.'<sup>11</sup>

Despite Lessing's unqualified sympathy (and it has been shared by other readers over the centuries),<sup>12</sup> one must question whether Laocoon was to Vergil and his audience as guiltless as he seems in his brief appearance in *Aeneid* 2, and, as importantly, whether or not Dante in his understanding of this passage perceived Laocoon as an unjustly punished innocent. The priest's destruction seems the result solely of his loud and prophetic rejection of the wooden horse as a Greek trick and his wise insistence that the monster not be admitted into Troy ('quidquid id est, timeo Danaos et dona ferentes': see 40-56). Deceived by Sinon's fabrications, and then misconstruing the meaning of the ominous assault on Laocoon and his sons, the Trojans conclude that the priest was destroyed by Minerva out of anger over the sacrilege he had earlier committed, hurling his spear into the flank of the 'sacred' horse (50-53, 228-31)—a judgment that is clearly erroneous.<sup>13</sup> Still, if Laocoon's only flaw is his wisdom and the obstacle it provides to the accomplishment of his nation's inexorable fate, then the au-

<sup>7</sup> Montano 551.

<sup>8</sup> Francesco De Sanctis, *Lezioni e saggi su Dante*, ed. Sergio Romagnoli (Turin 1955) 451.

<sup>9</sup> Cosco 104.

<sup>10</sup> Vallone 296.

<sup>11</sup> From *Laocoon* (1766) in G. E. Lessing, *Werke*, ed. Albert von Schirring (Munich 1970) 6.29.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., for example, the notes of James Henry, *Aeneidea* (Dublin 1878; rpt. New York 1972) 2.115-25, quoted in part below; and Roger A. Hornsby, *Patterns of Action in the Aeneid: An Interpretation of Vergil's Epic Similes* (Iowa City 1970) 59, on 'Laocoon, the innocent victim' who 'represents the worthiness of Troy.'

<sup>13</sup> The wooden horse is sacred only within the context of Sinon's elaborate fabrication: the sole hint of Minerva's agency here is in the fact that the serpents flee to her shrine on the citadel (whence Laocoon had first appeared). Later, in the vision granted Aeneas by his goddess-mother, she appears along with Neptune, Juno, and Jupiter, taking part in Troy's destruction (608-18), but in no particular connection with the horse.

dience can only be shocked and indignant over a divine force that is at once unjust and absurd. Such is not the stuff that tragedy is made on, not by ancient standards at least: tragic figures are not superhumanly perfect, and tragic circumstances are never totally undeserved. Yet Laocoon was, in fact, the subject of a now lost play by Sophocles, and there is no doubt that the Augustan Age audience was familiar with the Sophoclean tradition.<sup>14</sup> If Vergil does not explicitly answer the question, 'Why Laocoon?', his audience nonetheless had some awareness of the reasons.<sup>15</sup> The poet intended in his account of Laocoon's fall not merely to shock by a novel depiction of an unfamiliar and unjust action, but rather—in a wholly classical and Aristotelian manner—to elicit their fear and pity in recollection of the well-established tradition of a guilty and quite human Laocoon.

There is a great deal of confusion among our sources for the tradition of Laocoon's crime and punishment, but in general the clearest and most creditable is the fourth-century Vergilian commentator Servius, whose account is recognizably consistent with Vergil's and with what is known of Sophocles.<sup>16</sup> Servius, in his note on *Aeneid* 2.201, cites as his own principal source Euphorion, a poet from the third century B. C. who seems to have developed the Sophoclean tradition, and to whose work Vergil was very often indebted for his subject material.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For the eight short fragments of Sophocles' *Laocoon* and a discussion of the myth of the priest and his guilt, see A. C. Pearson, *The Fragments of Sophocles* (Cambridge 1917) 2.38-47. Regarding the availability of Sophocles' tragedy to Vergil's audience, see n. 19 *infra*.

<sup>15</sup> Despite Henry W. Prescott, *The Development of Virgil's Art* (Chicago 1927; rpt. New York 1963) 310: '[To the Roman reader] . . . just why Laocoon, rather than anybody else, should address the sea god [and subsequently meet with destruction] would still be left very vague.' But Prescott fails to acknowledge the Sophoclean tradition and the commentary of Servius (discussed below).

<sup>16</sup> So Pearson, *The Fragments of Sophocles* 2, especially 41. The most exhaustive analysis of the Laocoon myth remains that of Carl Robert, 'Excurs I: die Laokoonsage,' in *Bild und Lied* (Berlin 1881) 192-212. Useful summaries, together with criticism and modification of Robert's conclusions, can be found in Pearson 38-41; W. F. Jackson Knight, 'Vergil's Troy' (1932) in *Vergil: Epic and Anthropology* (New York 1967) 85-89; and R. G. Austin, ed., *P. Vergili Maronis liber secundus* (Oxford 1964) 44-51, and especially 94-108, with additional bibliography; cf. also E. Bethe in Pauly-Wissowa's *Real-Encyclopädie*, s.v. 'Laokoon (1).' Though once considered spurious (as by J. W. Mackail: see Austin 44f.), Vergil's Laocoon story (*Aen.* 2.40-56, 199-233) has been the object of careful study in this century: besides Knight and Austin, see H. Kleinknecht, 'Laokoon,' *Hermes* 79 (1944) 66-111; B. M. W. Knox, 'The Serpent and the Flame,' *American Journal of Philology* 71 (1950) 379-400; Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford 1963) 246-49; Michael C. J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, Mass. 1966) 17-27; Antonio de Marino, 'La fine di Laocoonte e l'uccisione di Priamo nell'Eneide,' *Vichiana* 4 (1967) 92-94; H. Steinmeyer, 'Die Laokoonszenen in Vergils Aeneis,' *Allsprachliche Unterricht* 10 (1967) 5-28; Kenneth Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid: A Critical Description* (Ann Arbor 1968) 114-18; J. Mir, 'Laocoontis embolium,' *Latinitas* 17 (1969) 96-112; Hornsby, *Patterns of Action in the Aeneid* 59-63.

<sup>17</sup> See the article 'Euphorion (2)' in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard (2nd ed.; Oxford 1970) 417. Pearson, *The Fragments of Sophocles* 2.40, agrees essentially with Robert's conclusion that 'the circumstances of Laocoon's guilt, as given by Servius [Euphorion], were also derived from Sophocles.' Cf. Knight, 'Vergil's Troy' 87-89.

post abscedentibus Graecis, cum vellent sacrificare Neptuno, Laocoon Thymbraei Apollinis sacerdos sorte ductus est, ut solet fieri cum deest sacerdos certus. hic piaculum commiserat ante simulacrum numinis cum Antiopa sua uxore coeundo, et ob hoc inmissis draconibus cum suis filiis interemptus est.

When, after the withdrawal of the Greeks, they [the Trojans] wished to sacrifice to Neptune, Laocoon, priest of the Thymbraean Apollo, was selected by lot, as is the usual practice when a regular priest is lacking. This man had committed a sacrilege in copulating with his wife Antiopé before a statue of the god [i.e., Apollo], and because of this he was slain together with his sons by serpents sent for the purpose.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, even though Vergil himself does not go into these details, the Augustan Age had inherited from Sophocles-Euphorion a widely recognized version of the Laocoon myth in which the serpents' victim was the regular priest not of Neptune but of Apollo, a god he had seriously offended by his sexual transgression.<sup>19</sup>

For James Henry (who ignores Servius' explanation) a guiltless Laocoon, 'devoured alive . . . while he was in the very act of sacrificing,' was symbol of Troy's religion and her gods.<sup>20</sup> But the priest's symbolic function can be more precisely defined: Laocoon is symbol of Troy herself, particularly in her religious attitudes and her behavior toward the gods. On the symbolic level, and in these terms, Laocoon is again far from innocent. If the dramatic reversal of Laocoon's function from that of sacrificer (201-02) to that of sacrificial victim (223-24) intentionally foreshadows Troy's own tragic peripeteia in this book,<sup>21</sup> then the priest himself must somehow share Troy's guilt. As harbinger of doom (40-56) and, more importantly, as one 'selected by fate as priest to Neptune' ('ductus Neptuno sorte sacerdos': 201), the character represents both the inevitability

<sup>18</sup> Hyginus, a far less creditable source than Servius, has a slightly different version, in which Laocoon's offense against Apollo was his marriage itself, counter to the god's wishes, and the begetting of sons (*Fabulae* 135). In both versions the subsequent death of the sons is understandable (cf. Tiberius Donatus on *Aen.* 2.230); and in each the essential point, that Laocoon had committed a sacrilege (of a sexual nature), is the same.

<sup>19</sup> Both Sophocles and Euphorion (not to mention others, now lost, who might have further developed the tradition) were doubtless available to both Vergil and his audience, since Servius could still cite them, probably at first hand, in the fourth century (e.g., *In Aen.* 2.201, 204). It seems quite mistaken to suggest that 'Laocoon's old sin and guilt are irrelevant' (Knight 87, summarizing Robert), or that 'the point is obscure and trivial' (T. E. Page, ed., *The Aeneid of Virgil: Books I-VI* [London 1894] on 201), when the Roman audience could hardly have dismissed the well-known story from their minds entirely.

<sup>20</sup> *Aeneidea* 2.115 and 124.

<sup>21</sup> Troy, of course, suffers an abrupt (if only apparent) reversal in her fate, a situation dramatized through the poet's creation of an intense irony in the first third of the book: with the fall of night (250-53) there is a sudden shift from jubilation over the Greeks' supposed departure and Troy's consequent spiritual renaissance to the nightmarish horror of the city's incineration and final death throes. Laocoon's equally abrupt and final peripeteia is generally noticed by commentators: see, for example, the notes of Tiberius Donatus, Austin, and John Conington, ed. (London 1884) on 223; for its symbolic function, see Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* 24. The notion of reversal in this sequence is carefully emphasized by Vergil through verbal repetition, sound effect, metrical structure, and especially in the *taurus* image of 223-24, where Laocoon, who had been sacrificing a great bull in 201-02, is, in the anguish of his own screams, compared with a sacrificial bull.

and the suddenness of Troy's fall, a fall destined because of offenses against the gods, including Juno, Minerva, and Neptune himself.<sup>22</sup>

The agency of this last deity in the destruction of both Laocoon and Troy has been too often minimized. It is crucial to our understanding of *Aeneid* 2 to recall that Aeneas' supernatural vision of the Olympians' physical assault upon his city opens with an awful glimpse of the savage, unrelenting Neptune, 'the Earth-shaker' (608-12):

hic, ubi disiectas moles avulsaque saxa  
saxa vides, mixtoque undantem pulvere fumum,  
Neptunus muros magnoque emota tridenti  
fundamenta quatit totamque a sedibus urbem  
eruit.

Here where you see scattered heaps of destruction, and stones  
ripped from stones, and the billowing of dust and smoke,  
Neptune shatters the walls and foundations, shaken by  
his powerful trident, and uproots all the city from its  
seat.

The god's hostility in the *Aeneid* derives in large part from the perjury of Laomedon, the legendary founder of Troy who had faithlessly promised rewards to Neptune for his labor in constructing the city walls: Vergil reminds his audience of this story just thirteen lines later when he refers to the city as 'Neptune's Troy' ('Neptunia Troia': 625).<sup>23</sup> But the god's animosity is further clarified by turning once again to Servius, who (with Euphorion still his source) explains the mystery of why it was that a priest had specially to be chosen on the morning of Troy's last day to offer sacrifice to Neptune. The city, for the ten years of the war, had been entirely without a priest of Neptune: the Trojans had murdered the former priest for his failure to secure the sea-god's destruction of the Greek fleet as it first sailed against Troy.<sup>24</sup> Finally, Neptune can only have taken offense at the perfunctory selection of the *sacrilegus* Laocoon for this sudden reinstatement of his cult.

The Sophocles-Euphorion tradition makes Apollo ultimately responsible for Laocoon's destruction—Vergil's audience would remember this. But the poet, through his characteristic method of 'transference and integration,'<sup>25</sup> broadens

<sup>22</sup> On *ductus sorte*, see Tiberius Donatus: 'non sine arbitrio divino.'

<sup>23</sup> He recalls the legend more explicitly later at 4.542 and 5.799-811; cf. Horace, *Odes* 3.3.21-22.

<sup>24</sup> Servius, *In Aen.* 2.201 (this statement immediately precedes the passage quoted above in explanation of Laocoon's guilt): 'Laocoon ut Euphorion dicit post adventum Graecorum sacerdos Neptuni lapidibus occisus est quia non sacrificiis eorum vetavit adventum.' It is a neat and purposeful irony that in legend both the original priest and his temporary successor bore the name Laocoon, on which see below. Servius *auctus* (from Aelius Donatus?), on 204, records another ancient interpretation, according to which Neptune himself sent the serpents, angered over the neglect of his cult since the time of Laomedon: 'alii dicunt quod post contemptum semel a Laomedonte Neptunum certus eius sacerdos apud Troiam non fuit; unde putatur Neptunus etiam inimicus fuisse Troianis, et quod illi meruerint in sacerdote monstrare.'

<sup>25</sup> For an unusually perceptive analysis of Vergil's integrative use of sources, particularly in the composition of *Aeneid* 2, see ch. 4 of Knight's 'Vergil's Troy,' especially 77: 'Vergil

the scope of responsibility and, demanding of his audience a familiarity with the important theme of Laocoon's guilt, simultaneously magnifies the significance of the entire episode. On the symbolic level, Vergil's Laocoon represents Troy, her religious offenses, and in particular her perfidious, arrogant, and blood-defiled relationship with Neptune; on the personal level, Laocoon was himself guilty of a gross sacrilege for his scandalous behavior in the temple of Apollo. If the Trojans were ignorant of Laocoon's offense,<sup>26</sup> they should have been conscious of their own: the perjury of Laomedon and the slaying of Neptune's former priest (also named Laocoon, so that his temporary successor was, both for themselves and for the god, a reminder, even in name, of the heinous *piaculum*). Thus the fateful selection of the tainted priest as a makeshift functionary in this eleventh-hour attempt to regain the god's benevolence and to direct his forces against the homeward-sailing Achaeans was not merely an ill-conceived and futile act (the more so as the Greeks had not in fact ever set sail), but one that must have added further insult to the ample injuries already dealt Neptune, who clearly plays a part—passive though it may seem—in the punishment of Laocoon.

The *gemini dracones* are directed from Tenedos (by Apollo, as those familiar with Sophocles-Euphorion would know),<sup>27</sup> the offshore island where the siblings Agamemnon and Menelaus ('gemini Atridae': 415) were lying in wait with the Greek army; thus, as commentators have generally recognized, the serpents can symbolize the human agency of the imminent disaster.<sup>28</sup> But their more immediate provenance is the ironically tranquil deep (203), domain of Neptune: this god's role in the action as avenger of the irreverent and even murderous sacrileges committed against his majesty by Laocoon / Troy must be purposefully suggested by the miraculous appearance of these monsters out of the calmed sea at the precise instant of the priest's sacrifice to him.<sup>29</sup> The fierce and indignant lord of the seas ought certainly to be regarded as no less responsible for the

quite ruthlessly, but yet with a sharp economy of material, transfers and transmutes references of every kind, and constructs new combinations of them in the service of his grand poetic vision.'

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Servius, *In Aen.* 2.201, who remarks after explaining Laocoon's *piaculum* (and departing now from Euphorion), 'historia quidem hoc habet, sed poeta interpretatur ad Troianorum excusationem, qui hoc ignorantes decepti sunt' (i.e., regarding the true reason for the priest's punishment). There is a kind of tragic irony in the fact that, while the Trojans erroneously ascribe Laocoon's suffering to his sacrilegious treatment of the horse, the audience is aware that the priest is indeed guilty of sacrilege, though of an entirely different sort.

<sup>27</sup> Even in Homer, Apollo was associated with the island of Tenedos: see *Iliad* 1.38 and 452.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the notes of Henry and Williams on 203; Tiberius Donatus comments *ad loc.*, 'potuimus hoc signo praevidere manifestam imminere perniciem; significabant enim hostis venturos a Tenedo, et maximos duces et geminos.' Cf. especially Knox, 'The Serpent and the Flame' 382-84, and Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* 24.

<sup>29</sup> Among those who have sensed Neptune's part here are Servius *auctus* (see n. 24 *supra*); Tiberius Donatus (on 203: 'ipse Neptunus sacerdotem suum sacrorum sollemnium gerentem in ipso adhuc actu constitutum, mactantem ingentem taurum . . . nec iuverit aliquo auxilio et magis eius hostibus, hoc est geminis anguibus, quo facilius pervenirent, placidum praebuerit mare'); Charles Knapp, ed., *The Aeneid of Vergil . . . and the Metamorphoses of Ovid* (rev. ed.; Chicago 1928) on 201; and especially Kenneth Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid* 117 (see n. 30 *infra*). For Neptune's sojourn at an undersea cavern near Tenedos, see *Iliad* 13.32-38.

catastrophe than Minerva, at whose shrine the serpents instinctively seek protection. The monsters' conscious flight toward (and their presumed miraculous disappearance at) the 'citadel of savage Tritonis' ('*saevaeque petunt Tritonidis arcem*': 226) neatly, and quite intentionally, balances their equally sudden appearance out of the sea and the uncanny determination of their assault upon Laocoon ('*illi agmine certo / Laocoonta petunt*': 212-13).<sup>30</sup>

Whether or not one accepts the view that Vergil expected of his audience both a familiarity with the tradition of Laocoon's guilt and a general understanding of his use of symbol, it is enough for our purposes that at least Servius 'thought that Vergil understood that Laocoon really died for . . . [his] sin,'<sup>31</sup> and that a reader of another age who depended principally upon Servius for an *explication de texte* would also readily interpret the priest's punishment in terms of his guilt.

One striking similarity now evident between Vanni Fucci and Laocoon as further defined by Servius is indeed the guilt of both characters in committing sacrilegious acts. Following the teaching of the *Summa Theologica* (2-2.86.6), Dante presents thievery as inextricably bound up with sacrilege. For St. Thomas Aquinas theft is a mortal sin because it is contrary to charity, which consists principally in the love of God and secondarily in the love of our neighbor. Moreover, the most heinous form of theft according to Aquinas is, of course, that which entails sacrilege—i.e., the theft of something sacred. Thus it is that Croce sees Vanni Fucci not only as a man who breaks human laws but also as one who is 'in battaglia contro Dio e le leggi divine.'<sup>32</sup> Dante singles out Fucci for unique treatment, therefore, because the Pistoiese is not just a *ladro* but a *ladro sacrilego*. As Ludovico Castelvetro noted in the sixteenth century, this sinner 'è punito . . . per sacrilegio secreto.'<sup>33</sup> In her valuable discussion of the Malebolge, Joan M. Ferrante found Fucci specifically among the 'thieves of holy things,' those who treated 'what has sacred meaning as if it were terrestrial'<sup>34</sup>—a description that applies with equal validity to Laocoon's behavior in the temple of Apollo.

<sup>30</sup> Servius *auctus* mentions sources that minimize Minerva's part in relation to Neptune's (*In Aen.* 2.201): 'quod autem ad arcem ierunt serpentes: vel ad templum Minervae, aut quod et ipsa inimica Troianis fuit, aut signum fuit periturae civitatis' (the statement immediately follows that quoted in n. 24 *supra*). But most commentators still persist in crediting Minerva exclusively with Laocoon's death, a view that seems quite at odds with Vergil's intent; a recent example is Hornsby, *Patterns of Action in the Aeneid*, who describes Minerva without qualification as 'the goddess whose agents are the serpents' (59). Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid* 117, is much nearer the truth when, with regard to the serpents' movement from the sea to the goddess' shrine, he insists that 'the reader could hardly expect a clearer symbolic statement of the fact that Minerva and Neptune have joined forces against Troy.' Of course, the intentionally ironic effect of the monsters' disappearance on the citadel is to reinforce the Trojans' fatal error in believing that Minerva had sent them, offended by Laocoon's desecration of the horse.

<sup>31</sup> Knight, 'Vergil's Troy' 88.

<sup>32</sup> Benedetto Croce, *La Poesia di Dante* (9th ed.; Bari 1958) 94. For Dante's indebtedness to Aquinas with regard to the subject of theft, see Allan H. Gilbert, *Dante's Conception of Justice* (Durham, N. C. 1925) 100.

<sup>33</sup> Robert C. Melzi, *Castelvetro's Annotations to 'The Inferno'* (The Hague 1966) 44.

<sup>34</sup> 'Malebolge (*Inf.* xviii-xxx) as the Key to the Structure of Dante's *Inferno*,' *Romance Philology* 20 (1967) 462.

It was certainly because Vanni Fucci conducted his life in a subhuman manner that Dante emphasizes his bestial nature in the sinner's famous self-introduction:

'Vita bestial mi piacque e non umana,  
 sì come a mul ch' i' fui; son Vanni Fucci  
 bestia, e Pistoia mi fu degna tana.' (Inf. 24.124-26)

Likewise it may have been Vergil's intent in his comparison of Laocoon with a bull to stress not just the priest's peripeteia, but also the ineluctable truth that man is animal, by nature removed from god, and hence ever prone to error. It was in the temple that Laocoon surrendered to the ultimate animal instinct, copulating with Antiope 'ante simulacrum numinis'—thus it is quite fitting that he should die like an animal at the altar, his priestly raiment defiled once more, this time by his own blood and the serpents' deadly venom:

perfusus sanie vittas atroque veneno,  
 clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollit:  
 qualis mugitus, fugit cum saucius aram  
 taurus et incertam excussit cervice securim. (Aen. 2.221-24)

In both cases the intended message might well have been (to quote De Sanctis on Fucci) ' . . . o animale, tu eri uomo però, ed hai abdicato alla tua natura e fattoti animale.'<sup>35</sup> Lastly, it may be worth noting that the beast-image in each instance is emphasized through enjambment, with both *taurus* and *bestia* coming *para prosdokian*.

One finds an interesting likeness, too, in the narrative strategies employed in the presentation of the two characters. In either case a sacrilegious act is committed within the poem proper (viz., the impious priest's sacrificing to Neptune after ten years of neglect; the Pistoiese's offer of 'le fiche' to God), recalling for us a similar misdeed that was perpetrated, at a time antecedent to the poem, in a sacred place of worship (viz., the fornication in Apollo's temple; the theft of the treasury of San Iacopo), and thus serving to confirm in the reader's mind the contemptuous impiety of both sinners, impiety that cannot be allowed to go unpunished.<sup>36</sup>

The punishments thereupon inflicted on both Laocoon and Vanni Fucci are, furthermore, similar in appearance and in effect as well. Attilio Momigliano could as easily have had in mind Laocoon's punishment when he wrote of Fuc-

<sup>35</sup> De Sanctis 451. *Bestia* may actually have been Vanni Fucci's nickname: see Singleton on line 126.

<sup>36</sup> For a slightly different view of Laocoon's double-offense, cf. Pearson, *The Fragments of Sophocles* 2.41: 'That Laocoon had sinned against Apollo, as stated by Servius, is probable enough; but it is difficult to conceive him as merely the passive victim of destiny throughout the whole course of the action. In other words, the early transgression is too remote to serve as a dramatic justification for the περιπέτεια; one would rather suspect that Laocoon by some fresh demonstration of ββρις proved that the time was ripe for divine vengeance. To have hurled a spear at the wooden horse is in itself not enough to convict him of impiety (*Aen.* 2.229ff.); but the circumstances of the act may well have been such as to stamp it with the mark of reckless arrogance. Laocoon, the μάντις, was perhaps a scoffer who ridiculed the notion of divine interference.'

ci's, 'Il serpe è lo strumento di Dio, della sua giustizia così illuminata ed esatta.'<sup>37</sup> The snakes, tightly entwined about the neck and middle of the sinners, render each at once defenseless and incapable of committing yet another sacrilege either through word or physical act.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, there is in each episode the attachment of a national guilt to the ungodly deeds performed by the transgressors. Laocoon becomes the symbol of impious and arrogant Troy, whose destruction both depends upon and is anticipated by his own death. Vanni Fucci himself has words of scorn for his native Pistoia—a city born, according to tradition, out of the blood and wickedness of the Catilinarian conspirators<sup>39</sup>—and seems to view his own animalistic career as a natural and fitting product of his environment: '... son Vanni Fucci / bestia, e Pistoia mi fu degna tana' (*Inf.* 24.125-26). Dante subsequently underscores this municipal guilt when Fucci's raised 'fiche' move the poet to lament,

Ahi Pistoia, Pistoia, ché non stanzi  
d'incenerarti sì che più non duri,  
poi che'n mal fare il seme tuo avanzi? (*Inf.* 25.10-12)

Now that the affinity between Dante's Vanni Fucci and Vergil's Laocoon as explained by Servius has been suggested, a final obvious problem must be confronted: Was the Italian poet familiar with Servius? Dante scholars who have taken up the question seem to be in universal agreement that he was. According to Domenico Comparetti—who notes, incidentally, that the Laocoon episode was among those passages from the *Aeneid* which most often served medieval students as themes for poetic and rhetorical exercises—Servius was not only, among Vergil's commentators, 'usatissimo nelle scuole del medio evo' but also a celebrated and respected literary figure in his own right: 'Come fra i grammatici Donato, e fra i poeti Virgilio, così fra i commentatori Servio domina nelle scuole, quale satellite del grande poeta . . .'<sup>40</sup> Paget Toynbee reiterated Comparetti's finding that Servius' commentary on Vergil 'was, of course, almost as familiar to medieval students' as the poet himself, and further concluded that Dante was 'doubtless acquainted' with the famed commentator.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, H. Theodore Silverstein and Ernst Robert Curtius separately and for entirely different reasons assumed that Dante read and drew from Servius;<sup>42</sup> and Edward Moore has, after considerable study, added his conviction that Dante was indebted to

<sup>37</sup> Momigliano 476. The use of a snake in connection with the execution of divine will is not unique with Dante here. For example, the celestial 'messo' who comes to rescue Dante and Vergil at the gates of the city of Dis is likened to a 'biscia' from whom 'le rane' flee (*Inf.* 9.76-78).

<sup>38</sup> Laocoon must be silenced because, in addition to his own sacrilege, his monitory speech represents the chief obstacle to the fulfillment of Troy's fate.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Singleton's note on *Inf.* 25.12.

<sup>40</sup> *Virgilio nel medio evo* 1.69, 157, and 185-88.

<sup>41</sup> *Dante Studies and Researches* (London 1902; rpt. Port Washington, N. Y. 1971) 281-83.

<sup>42</sup> Silverstein, 'On the Genesis of *De Monarchia*, II, v,' *Speculum* 13 (1938) 326-49; Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (London 1953; rpt. Princeton 1973) 358n.

Servius for 'information supplementary to that which the bare text of Virgil would have supplied.'<sup>43</sup>

If, then, the conclusion is correct that Dante's understanding and subsequent use of the *Aeneid* was conditioned by his familiarity with Servius, then surely his perception of the Laocoon episode was informed by the additional material provided by the commentator. It also seems not unreasonable to suppose that Dante in contemplating the fierce punishment visited upon the *sacrilegus* Laocoon might well have exclaimed as indeed he did regarding the fate of Vanni Fucci and those other wretched thieves in Bolgia Seven:

Oh potenza di Dio, quant'è severa,  
che cotai colpi per vendetta croscia! (*Inf.* 24.119-20)

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<sup>43</sup> Moore, 1.189. Moore argues, for instance, that Dante's conception of Achilles as a figure who died for love (*Inf.* 5.66) and Antenor as a traitor to his country (*Inf.* 32-33 and *Purg.* 5.75) are derived from Servius' notes on *Aen.* 3.322 and 6.57 for Achilles, and line 242 for Antenor.