

Pseudosimile in Dante's *Inferno*:
Subverting the Linear Narrative of the 'Saved Pilgrim' by
Reevaluating Eric Mallin's "False Simile in Dante's *Commedia*"

Noah I. Fishman
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Princeton University

Professor Simone Marchesi

Summary:

Pseudosimile in Dante's *Commedia* is a rhetorical and poetic device employed to orient us to the technical construction of the text. Though pseudosimile has much to say about the mechanics of Dante's efforts in expressing the essentially inexpressible, we may find that a different approach to pseudosimile provides a more disruptive conclusion to the *Inferno*'s inconsistencies than Mallin does in his undeviating narrative of a pilgrim's progress on his way toward salvation. By conflating classicism, religion, poetics, rhetoric, and history, Dante builds a commentary in the *Inferno* reflecting the stasis of the fundamental nature of human intellectual prowess and progress through the ages. Human experience is restricted by what we can know; this reality undercuts the exalted journey presented by the *Commedia*.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with Princeton University's Honor Code.
- Noah I. Fishman

Simile and Pseudosimile in the *Inferno*

There can be no doubt about the importance of simile as a rhetorical device in providing a sense of narrative progress in Dante's *Inferno*. The simile more fully explicates the physical challenges of 'the pilgrim's journey,' to borrow a term from Eric Mallin. In many cases, the simile works to highlight and mediate friction in the reader's experience of the text. Consider, for example, canto VI. Dante, having fainted, regains his senses in the present tense ("I am in the third circle") and is immediately presented with the problem of describing Cerberus, that mythical three-headed doglike monster (*Inf.* VI, 7). In quick succession the reader is presented with three short similes: Cerberus "barks from three gullets like a dog," the rain makes the sinners "howl like dogs," and Cerberus ingests the earth "as a dog that yelps with craving grows quiet while it chews its food, absorbed in trying to devour it" (VI, 14, 19, 28-30). Dante the pilgrim, disoriented and unsure of how to communicate, employs these three similes to describe the monster and the contrapasso of the sinners in the most dog-like terms. With the reader thus oriented, the rest of the canto continues comfortably in the past tense, filled with dialogue and description. We leave the scene with an image; perhaps less "accurate" than what our pilgrim could see and wanted to convey, but definitely more immediately relatable.

Above and beyond the standard simile, which highlights a thing's notable features by comparing it to something else, Richard Lansing writes that there is a particularly unusual grammatical and rhetorical construction that permeates the poetry of Dante's *Divina Commedia*: "They are, to use [Manfredi] Porena's useful terminology, 'pseudosimiles'... The purpose of the pseudosimile is not to establish precision of correspondence between two entities but to create in the image of the simile a sense of the universal and the generic in human experience. When Dante likens himself to one

who feels this or that emotion, he confirms the existence of a universal experience with which all men are familiar” (Lansing, 29-31).

To put it in the more succinct words of Eric Mallin, who cites Lansing frequently in his paper “False Simile in Dante’s *Commedia*,” the basic functionality of the pseudosimile is that it “compares a thing, person, or emotion with itself” (Mallin, 15). That is to say, the function of the pseudosimile is to call attention to itself as a rhetorical form as a way of bringing the reader’s attention to the very medium through which Dante communicates.

This understanding of the pseudosimile brings Mallin to his thesis: In his paper, well cited throughout Hollander’s edition of the *Inferno*, Mallin argues that “even though Dante mounts to the summit of Purgatory... his language—the record of the journey—is still that of a mortal man... In this respect the false simile is paradoxical: an obviously inadequate linguistic form metaphorically expresses the distance from likeness better than a more traditional comparison could. The inexpressibility of Dante’s marvelous experience is the provenance of every false or failed simile in the poem” (Mallin, 26). To put it more concisely, Dante saw things that no mortal has the ability to process and understand. Thus, the false simile encapsulates Dante’s lack of ability to express what he saw, and heightens the reader’s attention to the unavoidable distance between man and god. “[The false simile] functions... as a record of perception, which, in Dante’s poem, is necessarily a record of the soul’s progress” (Mallin, 19). As a poem fueled by Christian thought and inquiry, this conclusion makes a great deal of sense, though it leaves certain important questions unanswered.

Defining the Pseudosimile

For the purposes of analysis, and for better understanding Mallin’s thesis, I wanted to refine the definition of pseudosimile by employing stricter criteria. I will focus here on

similes in the *Inferno* that are delivered in the voice of the narrator as he describes himself or some other person, and not similes used by one of the shades or monsters of hell. More strictly, the pseudosimile should compare Dante or another character to a functionally identical counterpart, so that it is clear that very little is gained in terms of descriptive clarity. This is to ensure that the pseudosimile was not immediately necessary, in that it doesn't draw an otherwise obscure historical, natural, or literary comparison that would otherwise be lost on the reader. For example, I would disagree with Lansing that Farinata's discussion of prophecy in *Inf.* X, 100 is truly a pseudosimile: "We see, like those with faulty vision, things at a distance." Farinata's comparison seems to simply be an appropriate use of simile, since the obtuse concept of only being able to look into the far future is very practically aided by the useful comparison to those who have visual impairment in the form of farsightedness.

Reading the text through the lens of this definition of the pseudosimile had intriguing consequences. For example, in the first lines of the poem, "I came to myself in a dark wood," we do not find an explicit pseudosimile, but we *do* see a vision of Dante the character embodying both the seeker *and* the object of his own searching. This reflexive instinct is the backbone of pseudosimile, and is at the heart of the text as a whole in many ways. By rereading the text through the lens of this definition of pseudosimile, recording each instance of a pseudosimile chronologically (see Appendix B), certain preliminary patterns began to emerge. There is, for example, a noticeable arc in the complexity and nature of the pseudosimiles. In cantos I-II, Dante delivers the similes with a flourish of color, and the redundant nature of the pseudosimile is slightly obscured by his rhetorical panache. For example, "And like one who rejoices in his gains but when the time comes and he loses, turns all his thoughts to sadness and lament, such did the restless beast make me" (I, 55-7).

By the end of canto II, however, the employment and tone of the pseudosimiles seems to shift. Dante, having learned of the divine providence of his journey, begins in earnest “as one made resolute,” and concludes with a declarative and authoritative thought: “I entered on the deep and savage way” (II, 142). The subsequent pseudosimiles through the end of canto XV of the *Inferno* move to a more bare-bones, economical and concise form, often treating Dante’s fear, observations, or otherwise passive station as a recorder of what he saw on his journey. The bulk of these similes are short, and equate the character to the exact way we’d expect him to be, often in the same line or stanza. For example, “I dropped like a man pulled down by sleep” (III, 136), “He stopped, like a man intent on listening” (XI, 4), and “I kept my head bowed, like one who walks in reverence” (XV, 43-5).

The final stretch of pseudosimiles, from XXI to the end, gains a sudden sense of complexity and confusion. These similes are present through Malebolge, crescendoing to the famously bewildering simile at XXX, 136-141 (Mallin, 28-30). And as the reader follows Dante in his descent through Cocytus, we are given a final transparent pseudosimile, pertaining to Virgil: “‘Hold on tight, for by such rungs as these,’ said my master, panting like a man exhausted, ‘must we depart from so much evil’” (XXXIV, 83-4).

Mallin’s Conclusion: The First Step of Our Journey

Given Mallin’s conclusion, that pseudosimile provides evidence toward the thesis that the *Commedia* documents a pilgrim’s journey towards shedding a life of sin and finding the straight path, we can use the compiled list of chronological pseudosimiles to arrive at evidence that supports Mallin’s thesis. During the first two cantos, Dante has not yet entered the underworld, and his pseudosimiles are laden with poetic descriptions of a man lost, struggling, and alone. As he begins his journey to express the inexpressible,

Dante gradually tests the limits of the pseudosimile, and the rhetorical form begins to falter. The pseudosimiles get shorter, and then more convoluted. As Dante passes through Malebolge, his experiences outstretch the descriptive capacity of the rhetorical form. The false simile no longer functions and crumbles: By the final simile (XXXIV, 83-4), we can observe that Dante leaves Virgil exhausted as he ascends toward the stars on his Divine journey.

Mallin asserts that the poem is meant to highlight a paradox between the text as a construction and the poet's effort to treat the relationship between human and the divine in inexpressible terms. However, as a historical, political, and philosophical work, the *Inferno* has more to offer than a linear narrative of a soul on its way to salvation. I present that if we accept Mallin's conclusion, this creates a problem for the *Inferno*, as it ignores the communicative rift between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet. By the end of the *Inferno*, Dante the character has left Dante the author, and the rest of his readers, behind. In this lifetime, we are similarly confined to the world of the text and the page, limited by what we can understand given what we have the capacity to know.

Though Mallin shows us that pseudosimile has much to say about the mechanics of Dante's efforts to express the essentially inexpressible, we can use the progression and development of Dante's pseudosimiles to arrive at a different claim. I want to assert an alternative conclusion. Dante's pseudosimiles function beyond the immediate layer of narrative progress. With all of the biblical text, philosophical work, and classical material at Dante's disposal, he shows us that he can only get the reader so close to arriving at a vision of the universe that extends beyond our corporeality; Dante the character's progress in fact undercuts humanity's own stasis. As beings with finite intellects limited to the senses, we are bound by what we can understand. The reality of the text as an extension of humanity, of recorded history, as a product of human enterprise undercuts the exaltation of the comedy, highlighting the reality of our limited

existence. The *Inferno* confines us to what we can do, feel, read, and record in our lifetimes.

Revisiting Mallin

The use of the pseudosimile at specific moments in the text implies that Dante is only unable to express himself in the passages where he employs them. However, the broader implication of Mallin's thesis is that Dante is *constantly* at odds with his inability to express his divine journey. Mallin writes that Dante, in his condition, is "a man divided; he is like someone in his exact condition, or unlike anything other than himself.. The reader should wonder why Dante bothers to couch this self-definition in terms of similitude" (Mallin, 16). This suggests that although it is indeed a rhetorical manifestation of Dante's struggle, the pseudosimile extends beyond the surface of the narrative.

There is enough evidence throughout the text to show that Dante faces an unreconcilable conflict between realms of the finite and eternal, such as his physicality and weight in interacting with the landmarks of hell, like Phlegyas's boat (VIII 25-7), the rocky cliffs in XI and XII (XII 28-30), and the jagged boulders of Malebolge (XXIV 25-30).¹ As Dante grows bolder, he makes deals with characters (Ugolino, XXXII 133-139), notes the icy winds he feels on his skin, (XXXIII 103-105) comments on language barriers (Ulysses, XXVI 1-90), and so forth. These observations highlight the self-conscious nature of the text without any explicit need for pseudosimile, suggesting a deeper purpose for the rhetorical device.

¹ Interestingly, though perhaps unrelated, these four cantos all feature images of Dante physically standing and struggling with hell's landscape at approximately the same lines in the canto (between 25-30). Additionally, by studying the use of pseudosimile, XXI and XXIV are almost identical in their thematic material and chronology at least through lines 45.

Mallin insists that “The first three similes of the *Commedia* suggest in their reflexive and redundant form (A is like A) a kind of stasis, a perceptual inability to carry over the notion of the self to the other, from the figure to the ground against which it set, and most importantly, from the copy (man) to the Exemplar (God)” (Mallin, 17). With the opening four similes, Dante compares himself to 1) a swimmer who has escaped from deep water, 2) a gambler who has wagered everything and lost it all, 3) a person who has changed their mind, and 4) a flower that blooms with the morning sun (I 22-27, 55-7, II 37-40, 127-30). Do these similes *truly* suggest a redundant form? These early similes are where Dante compares himself to things most unlike himself, as he is not exactly a swimmer, nor is he a gambler or a flower. Perhaps Dante’s initial sin is to be literary in this way, to try to disguise himself in the pride and vanity his own prose, or to pull the reader’s attention from the reality of the pilgrimage he presents. As he enters hell, he drops the pomp and circumstance with regard to pseudosimiles, serving straight “A is like A” comparisons without any embellishment or descriptive zest.

To reiterate his thesis in terms of man’s distance from God, Mallin writes that the pseudosimile shows how Dante, the pilgrim, engages in a ‘false seeing’ which prevents him from “recognizing himself as an *imago Dei*, which is the root of the spiritual crisis that engenders the poem... he is cognitively trapped within himself, within his sin and fears. He cannot fully apprehend the light of God” (Mallin, 18). If this is the case, then it is so with all of humanity, not just the poetic Dante in the *Inferno*. Mallin ultimately argues that our likeness to God, “which is ineffable, is not achieved until that last vision of the communal image in the divine; thus, the false simile, a marker of unlikeness, persists until the last canto of the *Paradiso*” (Mallin, 35). The *Inferno*, therefore, is simply the first step in a journey to salvation. Mallin’s concluding remarks are that “The poem dissolves the unlikeness of humanity in the final glory that sees *our* image, ‘la

nostra effige,' in the transcendent mirror. A silent, ideal simile concludes the poem: 'I became, and we can all become, like the holy light of God.' Here is the point towards which the entire *Commedia*, and every last saved soul, moves" (Mallin, 32).

The Paradox of Dante's Divine Salvation

This arrival at the dissolving of the unlikeness between man and God presents a paradox. Dante's pseudosimiles point to moments at which the reader, otherwise uninterrupted in his experience of a scene, is forced to acknowledge the dimensional nature of the author Dante's use of himself as a character. It reminds that, lest the reader forget, the *Inferno* is a text being constructed from outside. Dante's "destined journey," which is "so willed where will and power are one," only applies to the world within the pages of the text itself (V, 22-24). If the *Commedia* is a pilgrimage of inexpressible difficulty, covering the inexpressible distance between man and God, what are we left to gain as readers? What, by the end of the *Inferno*, has been expressed? Despite the adventure of Dante the pilgrim, Dante the poet most likely did not go to heaven and become united with *Pater noster* while writing the text of the *Commedia*, and he likely did not expect his readers to believe that he did.

Where does this leave us? Let us visit canto IX, where what appears to be the angel Michael, doubling as the pagan god Mercury, descends to open the gates of Dis. The account of the story is preceded by Dante's disclaimer:

O you who have sound intellects,
consider the teaching that is hidden
behind the veil of these strange verses.

(*Inf.* IX, 61-3)

Dante needs no pseudosimile to show us that we are about to experience an account with troubling implications: Virgil covers Dante's face with his hands to protect from the Gorgon, though they are supposedly headed to Purgatorio with divine assistance; the angel descends, with a long simile describing the sound as it travels across the waves; Virgil uncovers Dante's eyes, and what he sees across the water is delivered in another simile; the angel condemns the sinners, opens the gates with ease, then delivers a challenging question: "What profits it to fight against the fates?" (IX, 97); finally, he departs, with Dante commenting that "He seemed pressed, spurred on by greater cares than those of the man who stands before him" (IX, 100-102).

Is the implication that as long as man fights his fates and continues to sin, he will never know salvation? That there are things we can never know? What, indeed, is "the teaching that is hidden behind these strange verses" just beyond the surface of the text? Dante's *Commedia* may explore the question of divinity and mortality, but its pedigree is as political, philosophical, poetic, rhetorical, tragic, and comic as it is religious. By challenging the reader to parse out the message hidden behind the story of Michael's descent, through the fog of Dis, the thousands of sinners, and the disguise of paganism, Dante may be asserting that we can only know what we have experienced. It is, in fact, Dante the poet who designed and communicated the arrival of the angel, who told us to take note of his special entrance, and who departs before becoming any more real. Perhaps the angel is Dante himself, clearing the path for his character to continue, but reminding the reader that only human intellect itself can tie mythology, Christianity, philosophy and politics together. After all, only thirty lines after Dante delivers "O you who have sound intellects," the angel delivers "O outcasts of Heaven" (IX, 60, 90). No matter how sound our intellects, we are bound by what we cannot know.

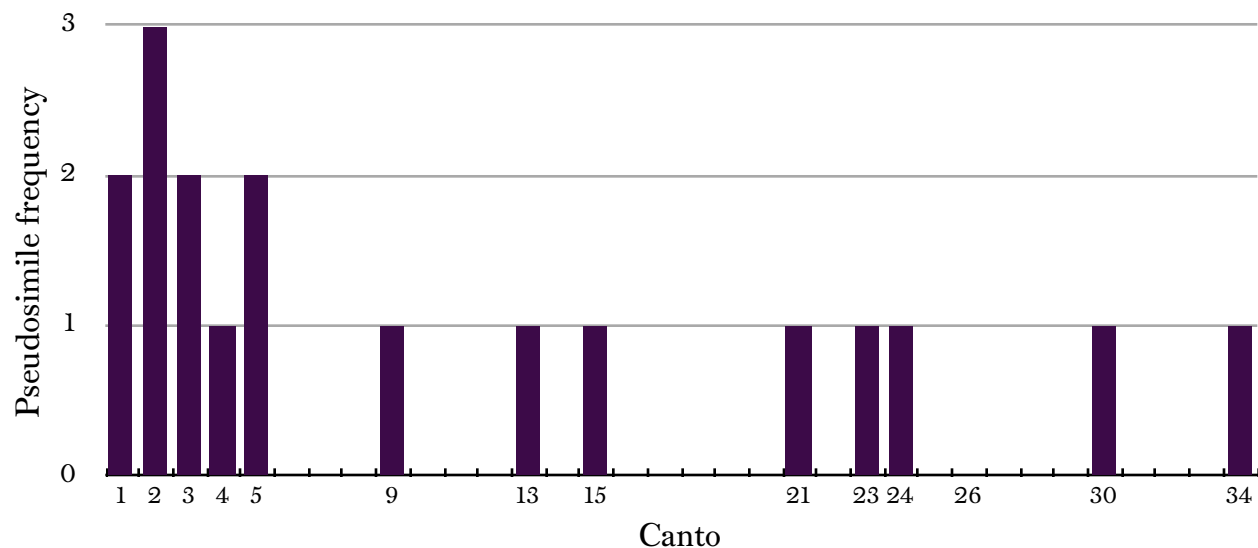
Were God to exist, we could never truly know. We have no basis for imagining ourselves as an *imago Dei*, aside from the texts we read alongside philosophy and drama.

Through its self-consciousness, the text situates itself historically and culturally, making itself itself available as the product of a single author at a single time, in an effort to highlight the unavoidable reality of faith: It can only be faith, and nothing more, as it is limited by our intellect, our ability to perceive, remember, and connect ideas.

Conclusion

To return to the concept of pseudosimile, we can only compare ourselves to what we know of ourselves and of the world. Mallin writes, “Dante’s device signals that fantastical state in which the otherworldly beings find themselves: neither alive nor dead, though undeniably present. For the human narrator, how could likeness obtain in such a state? What could he compare this strange condition to, other than itself?” (Mallin, 25). In the poem’s final pages, Dante challenges the reader to “Imagine, if you have the wit,” what it was like for him to neither die nor stay alive (XXXIV, 25-6). Of course, we cannot. We cannot know what is like not to be alive, and we have no basis for imagining such a situation as being neither alive nor the opposite. We can, however, take pseudosimile in Dante’s *Inferno* as a cue to examine the unwavering spirit with which humanity records its achievements and persists in its own preservation.

Appendix A: Frequency of Pseudosimiles in Dante's *Inferno*



Appendix B: Chronology of Pseudosimiles in Dante's *Inferno*

Inf. I

22-27: "And as one who, with laboring breath has escaped from the deep to the shore turns and looks back at the perilous waters, so my mind, still in flight, turned back to look once more upon the pass no mortal being ever left alive."

55-7: "And like one who rejoices in his gains but when the time comes and he loses, turns all his thoughts to sadness and lament, such did the restless beast make me."

Inf. II

37-40: "And as one who unwills what he has willed, changing his intent on second thought so that he quite gives over what he has begun, such a man was I on that dark slope."

127-30: "As little flowers, bent and closed with chill of night, when the sun lights them, stand open on their stems, such, in my failing strength, did I become." (Not immediately evident as a pseudosimile; grammatical explanation of Italian pronoun inconsistencies can be found in Mallin, 19.)

131-2: "And so much courage poured into my heart that I began, as one made resolute."

Inf. III

13-15: "And he, as one who understood"

136: "And I dropped like a man pulled down by sleep."

Inf. IV

1-3: "A heavy thunderclap broke my deep sleep so that I started up like one shaken awake by force."

Inf. V

141: "I swooned as if in death."

142: "And down I fell as a dead body falls."

Inf. IX

4: "He stopped, like a man intent on listening."

Inf. XIII

40-45: "I let drop the twig and stood like one afraid."

Inf. XV

43-45: "I did not dare to leave the higher path to walk the lower with him, but I kept my head bowed, like one who walks in reverence."

Inf. XXI

25-30: "Then I turned like a man, intent on making out what he must run from, undone by sudden fear, who does not slow his flight for all his looking back: just so I caught a glimpse of some dark devil running toward us up the ledge."

Inf. XXIII

10-12: "Just as one thought issues from another, so, from the first, another now was born that made me twice as fearful as before."

Inf. XXIV

25-30: "And like one who reckons as he works, always planning for what comes next, thus, while raising me to one boulder's peak, he searched for yet another crag and said: "Take hold of that one next but test it first to see if it will bear your weight."

Inf. XXX

136-141: "As a man who dreams that he is being harmed and, even as he dreams, hopes he is dreaming, longing for what is, as though it weren't – so it was with me, deprived of speech: I longed to seek his pardon – and all the while I did so without knowing that I did."

Inf. XXXIV

83-4: "'Hold on tight, for by such rungs as these,' said my master, panting like a man exhausted, 'must we depart from so much evil.'"

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