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## Direct and Indirect Validation in *Green Dante/Green Virgil* #1

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When is disowning actually owning? At what point, if any, does denying that one is attempting to legitimize one's work through reference to an esteemed forerunner become, in fact, a form of legitimation?

The first issue of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* (Fig. 1), a graphic novel published in April 2020 by Aardvark-Vanaheim and designed by Dave Sim, David Birdsong, Benjamin Hobbs, and Sean Michael Robinson,<sup>1</sup> overtly refers to not only classic DC comic books but also Gustave Doré's engravings of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Though such allusions may be interpreted as clear and direct efforts at validation-through-association by a fringe company in an oft-denigrated industry,<sup>2</sup> the satirical tone of this graphic novel, of the *Cerebus* series in which it appears, and of its publisher would seem to sabotage such attempts.<sup>3</sup> Yet, unlike other means of self-legitimation, invoking well-regarded prototypes is not necessarily undermined when parodied. Indeed, it may be strengthened. Merely by pointing at celebrated forerunners, *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 anchors itself in them, invites the audience to conflate it with those predecessors, and suggests it inherits at least some of those prototypes' prestige. Moreover, insofar as *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 downplays legitimation through allusion, it actually aligns itself with many moments in, and an overall strategy of, the *Divine Comedy*. That is, in resisting the perception that it is seeking to validate itself through association with Dante's text, it not only indirectly but also directly achieves precisely that form of legitimation.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this graphic novel and the *Cerebus* series, especially Dave Sim's contributions, see <http://momentofcerebus.blogspot.com/2020/05/green-dante-green-virgil-in-stores-today.html> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JABYiUhM4wA> (January 31, 2020), both last accessed August 30, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> As is detailed on Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aardvark-Vanaheim>, last accessed August 30, 2024) and such fan wiki sites as <https://cerebus.fandom.com/wiki/Aardvark-Vanaheim> (last accessed August 30, 2024), Aardvark-Vanaheim is a small independent Canadian company that began in 1977 as a self-publishing lark between two lovers, Dave Sim and Deni Loubert. Now, after Loubert left Sim and the company in 1983, Aardvark-Vanaheim produces only the *Cerebus* series.

<sup>3</sup> For clear indications of the satirical approach by this publisher, series, and graphic novel, see the sources in notes 1 and 2 above, and my discussion below.



Fig. 1. Outer Front Cover of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1



Fig. 2. Outer Front Cover of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76

The most prominent, promising, and polyvalent of *Green Dante/Green Virgil*'s allusions begin on the outside of the front cover, particularly with its references to issues 76 (Fig. 2) and 85 from the second volume of DC's *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series.<sup>4</sup> As with the earlier of those two issues, the cover of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 features black rays shooting outward across bands of mustard-, grass-, and forest-green from a foreground light source that casts a white reflection on the otherwise grass-green protagonists. On both covers, all of this occurs directly beneath flame-edged white trapezoids that feature the names in grass-green of the protagonists and seem to radiate horizontally from a central figure. Directly above that figure and the trapezoids is a banner that begins with "STOP!" in white letters against forest green, though the rest of that inscription is different in *Green Dante/Green Virgil* as it calls for an end to "GLUING TRAIN LANTERNS to CEREBUS' BUTT!" rather than merely announcing "This is the NEW.. [sic]

<sup>4</sup> Dennis O'Neil (w), Neal Adams (p), Frank Giacoia (i), Cory Adams (c), John Costanza (l), Julius Schwartz (e), *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76 (April 1970), DC Comics; Dennis O'Neil (w), Neal Adams (p), Cory Adams (i/c), John Costanza (l), Julius Schwartz (e), *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 85 (August 1971), DC Comics.

[*GREEN LANTERN/GREEN ARROW*].<sup>5</sup> At upper right on both covers is an imitation black-and-white stamp, though, in the case of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1, it declares “APPROVAL IS AN AUTHORITARIAN CONSTRUCT,” rather than giving the standard inscription found on many comic books of the time: “APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY.”<sup>6</sup> At upper left on both covers are two concentric black circles apparently containing the publisher’s logo, though in the case of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 the inner ring encloses the initials “AV” rather than “DC” and, between the two rings of the *Green Dante/Green Virgil* logo, are the words “CEREBUS IN HELL? COMICS” rather than “SUPERMAN NATIONAL COMICS.” Just below those logos are abbreviated black inscriptions that differ on *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 only in announcing that this “APR.” issue is “NO. 1” rather than “NO. 76.” And a couple of inches lower on each cover, in white symbols amid the band of forest green just beneath the left white trapezoid, is the price of each issue, which has risen from “15¢” for *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 75 to “\$4” for *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1.

That price differs in amount and formatting from the one on *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 85, where “ONLY 25¢ BIGGER & BETTER” appears in black letters within a white circle at upper right on the outer cover. Moreover, this later DC issue features the standard comics-code stamp a third of the way down the right side of the cover, replaces the earlier DC logo with a thin white circle containing the stacked words “DC GREEN LANTERN GREEN ARROW” and intersecting disembodied heads of those two figures, and adds the code 30210 to the date and issue number, which are now directly beneath the juncture of the two trapezoids. However, the figural arrangement in the main image of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1’s outer cover joins that on the outer cover of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 85 in featuring the protagonists standing at left and right in the middle ground looking towards a huddled foreground figure who clutches his left arm behind a table featuring drug paraphernalia.<sup>7</sup> And additional references to that graphic novel, as well as *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76, appear on the inside of *Green Dante/Green Virgil*’s front cover, where, in fact, they become even more explicit. With white letters in a black rectangle at the bottom of the cover, Sim, Birdsong, Hobbs, Robinson, Dante, and Doré are fully named before their first (or, in Doré’s case, last) name is repeated with the word

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<sup>5</sup> The train lantern that appears behind Cerebus here and behind a similarly positioned figure of Green Lantern running towards the viewer of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76’s outer cover represents the energy source from which Green Lantern must periodically recharge the ring that gives him his power as long as he wears it.

<sup>6</sup> The Comics Code Authority was formed in 1954 by the Comics Magazine Association of America as a voluntary, self-regulating way to avoid a government crackdown that seemed likely to come out of Senate hearings on the growing violence, sexuality, and (other) horror in graphic novels. For more information, begin with [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comics\\_Code\\_Authority](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comics_Code_Authority), last accessed August 30, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> The outer cover of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 85 can be viewed at [https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Green\\_Lantern\\_Vol\\_2\\_85](https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Green_Lantern_Vol_2_85).

“Green” immediately before it; to the left of that box is a miniature version of the outer cover’s figure of Cerebus appearing in front of the lantern and flanked by the trapezoidal green labels “GREEN DANTE” and “GREEN VIRGIL”; and above those labels and the black rectangle the rest of the inside cover is nearly filled with a fake memo headlined:

AARDVARK-VANAHEIM INC.  
**GREEN DANTE/GREEN VIRGIL #1**  
cover parody by Dave Sim  
(from a concept by Benjamin Hobbs) of  
**GREEN LANTERN/GREEN ARROW #76 (1970) and #85 (1971) by Neal Adams**

LEGAL/CFO MEETING  
20 JUNE 19  
DO NOT CIRCULATE

The rest of the memo has nothing to do with the allusions to those comic books or Dante, as it pretends to represent a conversation between the CFO and advisor over the chances of being sued by the character Cerebus for portraying him as a “Twitter junkie.” However, the headline, as well as the passages at the bottom of the inside cover, leave little doubt as to the outer cover’s main comic-book sources.

These echoes of DC, especially *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76 and 85, may be seen as a direct attempt at legitimization through reference to one or more esteemed predecessors, as fans and scholars often treat the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series, especially the entries invoked by *Green Dante/Green Virgil*’s cover, as classics.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, to the degree that *Green Dante/Green Virgil* resists that conclusion, it may (also) be seen as an indirect attempt at legitimization. While many commentators may indeed treat *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76 and 85 as classics, at least some critics do not, and that number only grows as one goes back in time.<sup>9</sup> In fact, graphic novels were far from that lofty name and status in the early 1970s when, as mere “comic books,” they were much cheaper (in not only absolute but also inflation-adjusted price), almost never considered a legitimate

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<sup>8</sup> For an entry point to the many blogs and other internet sources that laud these two works, begin with [https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Green\\_Lantern\\_Vol\\_2\\_76](https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Green_Lantern_Vol_2_76) and [https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Green\\_Lantern\\_Vol\\_2\\_85](https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Green_Lantern_Vol_2_85), both accessed August 30, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> For at least somewhat negative treatment of these comics, or at least qualifications in the praise of them, begin with the same sources cited in note 7, above, such as Matthew Peterson’s review from February 16, 2020 in *Major Spoilers* during which he praises volume 76 while noting that it could easily be “dismiss[ed]” as “a preachy polemic,” at <https://majorspoilers.com/2020/02/16/retro-review-green-lantern-76-april-1970-2/#:~:text=Still%2C%20Green%20Lantern%20%2376%20features,out%20of%205%20stars%20overall>, last accessed August 30, 2024.



subject of study, and often dismissed as mere ephemera.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the cover references to *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76 and 85 may validate *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 not only directly but also indirectly, in so much as it is seen as improving on those predecessors and/or underscoring the general growth of graphic novels' prestige.

Nor is that the only indirect legitimation that may spring from those allusions, for by *Green Dante/Green Virgil*'s very resistance to being seen as seeking validation through association, it paradoxically promotes that end. In pointed contrast to the serious tone of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76 and 85, of their series, and of DC Comics in general (at least relative to Marvel and many independent publishers), *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 is overtly and multivalently satirical.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as quoted above, the heading on the top of the inside cover describes the cover explicitly as a "parody" of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76 and 85, and, in accord with much of the indie world in which *Green Dante/Green Virgil* participates, and particularly with its creators' and publisher's other graphic novels, *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 blatantly resists many conventions of its industry and overtly advertises its resistance to authority, as in the outer cover's fake stamp proclaiming "APPROVAL IS AN AUTHORITARIAN CONSTRUCT."<sup>12</sup> That is, like so many satires, *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1 dons its mantle of rebellion with such conspicuous flare that it sabotages the ostensible point of that acting out and, in fact, winds up seeking legitimation *through* approval, albeit from a different authority—its readers—than the one

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<sup>10</sup> Much has been written about the historical condemnation of comic books, particularly with regard to the Senate hearings in the early 1950s and often in defense of graphic novels. Begin with the Wikipedia entry on the Comics Code Authority, cited above in note 6. For a longer discussion of the perceptions behind that wave of intended and actual censorship, see Alex Abad-Santos, "The Insane History of How American Paranoia Ruined and Censored Comic Books," *Vox*, March 13, 2015, last accessed August 30, 2024, <https://www.vox.com/2014/12/15/7326605/comic-book-censorship>. For an introduction to the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham and his highly influential 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart & Co.), which fueled the Senate hearings and, until the last several decades, other condemnations of comic books, see the Wikipedia entry on him at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seduction\\_of\\_the\\_Innocent](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seduction_of_the_Innocent), last accessed August 30, 2024. For a much longer, more scholarly discussion of him and his influence on comic books, see Carol L. Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics," *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012): 383-413.

<sup>11</sup> A great deal has been written on the internet about the character of DC Comics and their products, often in comparison to those of Marvel Comics. One of the more thoughtful entry points to this extended, highly subjective debate is Gerald Early, "Pow! Bam! Biff!: Tales of the Comic Book Wars," *The Common Reader: A Journal of the Essay*, September 4, 2018, last accessed August 30, 2024, <https://commonreader.wustl.edu/c/pow-bam-biff-theses-of-the-comic-book-wars/>. On the growing convergence of the two major publishers, see Thaddeus Howze, "What's the Difference: DC vs. Marvel Comics," June 8, 2016, last accessed August 30, 2024, <https://ebonstorm.medium.com/whats-the-difference-dc-vs-marvel-comics-2e84d86b4156>.

<sup>12</sup> For a quick overview of the indie comic-book world, especially its proclivity for subverting DC, Marvel, and the conventions they represent, see Howze. For more on the character and contents of other graphic novels by the creators of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1, see the sources cited in notes 1 and 2, above.

it mocks. Though its satirical approach superficially opposes any effort to see this graphic novel as seeking validation by invoking authority, the impossibility of completely knowing anyone else's intentions means that this resistance—even, or perhaps especially, when explicitly stated—may merely be a pretense and may therefore function in and of itself as a means of legitimation through association with an esteemed forerunner. Indeed, though it cannot simultaneously double as a direct attempt at legitimation, it can, given the changeability of intention even within a single work, exist side-by-side with one or more direct attempts, including every reference that is not explicitly denied.

And, beginning with the front cover of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* (Fig. 1), such indirect validation via *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76 and 85 may exist in conjunction with direct and indirect legitimation through references to the *Divine Comedy* and/or Doré's nineteenth-century engravings of it.<sup>13</sup> Beyond the obvious references to Dante and his guide in the title of this graphic novel, the fake logo at upper left raises the possibility that, like them, Aardvark-Vanaheim's trademark character, Cerebus, which sprang from a misspelling in the title of a three-headed dog Sim drew for his girlfriend, Deni Loubert, shortly before the two of them founded the company,<sup>14</sup> is also in hell. Moreover, the figure of Dante on the outer cover very much resembles his counterparts in Doré's illustrations, particularly in the encounter with the Simonists of *Inferno* XIX (Fig. 3), where the Pilgrim hunches over towards the right foreground from the middle of the illustration and curls his right hand up towards his scowling face, and the figure of Virgil on the outer cover very much resembles his counterpart in Doré's illustration of *Inferno* XXIX (Fig. 4), as the Pilgrim and his guide look back and down over their left shoulders from the middle center toward the discord sowers in the center foreground.

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<sup>13</sup> For more on Doré's engravings and their relationship to the *Commedia*, begin with Aida Audeh, "Gustave Doré's Illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Innovation, Influence, and Reception," in *Studies in Medievalism XVIII: Defining Medievalism(s) II*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 125–64.

<sup>14</sup> See Don Markstein, at *Don Markstein's Toonopedia*, <https://www.toonopedia.com/cerebus.htm>, last accessed August 30, 2024.



Nor, as we have seen, do the allusions to the *Commedia* and Doré's engravings end there, for, as with the references to DC forerunners, they continue on the inside of the front cover with the issue's title at the top, the lower left miniature copy of the outer cover's banner, and the acknowledgments in the black rectangle at the bottom. Moreover, in a departure from the allusions to *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* comic books, they also appear between the covers of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1. It is difficult to see parallels to the *Commedia*'s plot in the contents of this graphic novel, as the first two folios already feature the test-pilot Green Dante promoting a plane for "THE DAVID BEN-GURIONS OF THE GALAXY'S ITALIAN DIVISION BY-WAY-OF-THEIR-GREEK-COMMERCIAL-GROUP-VATICAN-CITY-HEADQUARTERED-QUMRAN-HOLDINGS-SONS-OF-ZADOK-SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM" while Green Virgil apparently imagines presenting an environmentally green social agenda to the English parliament and "[his] WARD, CEREBUS . . . (HAVING BEEN ABANDONED BY HIS MENTOR) IS ROCKING A MAJOR **TWITTER JONES**." However, at the top on both sides of all twelve folios is the cover logo's question, "CEREBUS IN HELL?", and portions of the Doré-derived cover-figures of Virgil and Dante appear at multiple points in the panels on the folios.



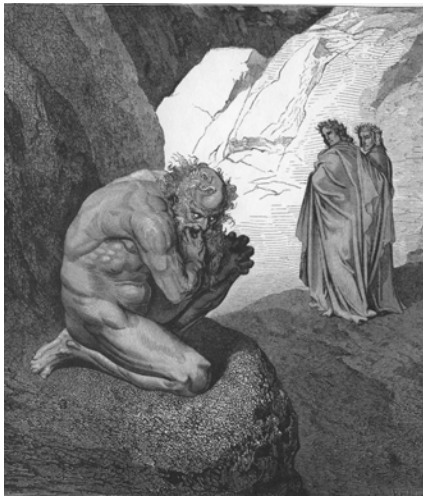


Fig. 5. Doré's Figure of Pluto, *Inferno* VII

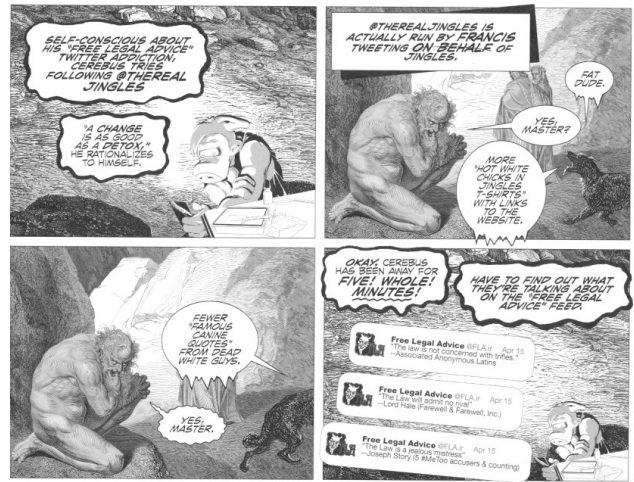


Fig. 6. Folio 8r of *Green Dante/Green Virgil* 1, Featuring Doré's Figure of Pluto

Doré's figure of Pluto from *Inferno* VII (Fig. 5), for example, represents a jingle writer midway through the story (Fig. 6); other excerpts from Doré's engravings, such as the rocky slope around the leopard from *Inferno* I (Fig. 7), form the backdrop to most of the panels (Fig. 8, for example).



Fig. 7. Doré's Depiction of Dante Meeting the Leopard, *Inferno* I

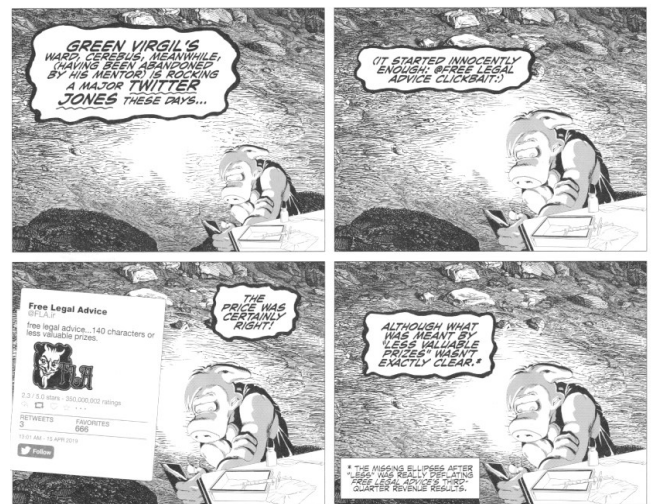


Fig. 8. Folio 2r from *Green Dante/Green Virgil* #1, Featuring Doré Background

Green Virgil and Green Dante are repeatedly mentioned in the panels' many texts and in two of the asides at the upper right of each folio.

None of these folios' allusions to Dante's text and to Doré's engravings are particularly deep or central to the plot, such as it is, and, in that shallowness and tangentiality, they echo the front cover. The title on the outside suggests that, as in the *Commedia*, the contents of this graphic novel will revolve around a pilgrim guided through a sequence of related and ordered ordeals towards enlightenment, but, as I noted above: the audience may be hard pressed to find any logic from panel to panel, much less folio to folio; Green Virgil seems to be pursuing his own narrative rather than helping Green Dante overcome obstacles and gain wisdom; and precisely what Green Dante is in fact learning or even if he is in fact on a path to enlightenment is far from clear. Nor is it obvious why Cerebus's compulsive Twitter scrolling is so prominent on the outer cover. One would think from its literal foregrounding that, like *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 85, this graphic novel will revolve around addiction, that this will be the main sin the protagonists confront as they emulate Dante's pilgrim in witnessing the infernal ranking of error and punishment. However, again, as noted above, it is little more than a motif in the characterization of a figure who seems to exist in a narrative (if one can even use that term for such fragmented references) that is largely distinct from Green Dante's and Green Virgil's expressed thoughts and activities, and, other than acknowledging that the outer cover is a parody of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 76 and secondarily 85, the referential labels and express acknowledgment of sources on the inside of the front cover do nothing to clear up the disjuncture between the cover and contents of this graphic novel.

To the degree that the *Commedia* references continue beyond the front cover, they therefore invite the audience to see them as functioning much like those in many other post-medieval works—as setting the mood for an otherwise unrelated story. As in, say, my local newspaper's comparison of a notorious parking garage to Dante's hell,<sup>15</sup> they suggest a torturous and perhaps tortuous ordeal: a long, winding, thoroughly unpleasant sequence of challenges that await the traveler. Though this graphic novel does not feature only one protagonist following a predetermined path that leads towards an epiphany and builds upon itself, it implies that, like Dante's pilgrim, the three main characters bumbling through its many disjointed scenes are in great danger, enduring tremendous suffering, and may not succeed at whatever it is they are apparently trying to do.

Yet, intentionally or otherwise, these references to the *Commedia* and Doré's engravings of it join the allusions to *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* in also promoting a much more profound accomplishment—backdoor legitimation. Though at no point in this graphic novel do its creators explicitly admit, as they do with regard to those DC comic books,

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Dresser, "HOLIDAY INFERNO Parking at Towson Town Center Not for the Faint of Heart," *Baltimore Sun*, December 20, 1992, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1992-12-20-1992355003-story.html>, last accessed August 30, 2024.

that they are parodying Dante's text or Doré's engravings, the patently absurd ways in which they reference them, especially when seen amid the satirical overall tone of this novel, of its creator's other works, of the series in which it appears, of other graphic novels published by Aardvark-Vanaheim, and of much of the indie-comic world, would seem to undermine the possibility that they are seeking traditional validation through direct and respectful emulation of a widely esteemed source. However, as with the facetious references to *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 75 and 85, even parodic allusions to a source establish a link that, in merely showing awareness of that forerunner, invites the audience to see an association that is inevitably intertwined with their knowledge of the source's reputation.

Moreover, unlike *Green Dante/Green Virgil*'s resistance to being seen as seeking prestige via parallels to DC graphic novels, its opposition to such associations with the *Commedia*, either directly or via Doré's engravings, is *itself* an echo of the very source from which it is perceived as distancing itself. Though Dante is not subtle in directly acknowledging his debt to Virgil and other literary predecessors, he is much more coy in inviting the reader to see him as an heir to his narrator-pilgrim's most famous forerunners.<sup>16</sup> Even as that figure explicitly denies being like Paul and Aeneas, he foregrounds those connections.<sup>17</sup> He links himself to those figures and opens up the possibility that he, and implicitly his author, share in their virtue and legitimacy. Thus, to the degree that *Green Dante/Green Virgil* resists being seen as pursuing direct validation by means of general association with particular predecessors, it not only indirectly promotes itself via such an association, but, in echoing Dante's resistance to being seen as seeking legitimization through association, invites audiences to directly equate it with that illustrious forerunner, to see *Green Dante/Green Virgil* as a worthy heir to a classic narrative via a direct parallel to an indirect form of legitimization paradoxically anchored in resistance to being seen as pursuing validation through that or any other direct reference to esteemed predecessors.

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<sup>16</sup> For an introduction to these issues, see Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 2: Beatrix Loquax and Consolation," *Digital Dante* (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2018), last accessed August 30, 2024, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-2/>.

<sup>17</sup> *Inferno* 2.32: "Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono;" ("I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul"), my translation based on the second volume of Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgate*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols., Società Dantesca Italiana, Edizione Nazionale (1966-8. 2nd edn Florence: Casa editrice Le lettere, 1994). For more on this passage, particularly its linking of Dante to Paul and Aeneas, see Barolini, esp. paragraphs 11-23.