Teaching Dante

Edited by
Christopher Metress

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Special Issue Editor

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About the Special Issue Editor

Christopher Metress is University Professor and a Wilton H. Bunch Interdisciplinary Faculty Fellow at Samford University, where he teaches courses in literature, film, and western intellectual history. He has published more than 100 essays and reviews in such journals as *Studies in the Novel*, *African American Review*, *English Literature in Transition: 1880–1920*, and *Southern Quarterly*, and his most recent books include *Memory, Invention, and Delivery: Transmitting and Transforming Liberal Arts Education for the Future* (co-edited with Richard Dagger and Scott Lee, 2016), as well as *Teaching Augustine* (co-edited with Samford colleague Scott McGinnis, 2016) and *Teaching the Reformations* (2019). He is one of the founders of the Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition project and has co-chaired all three national conferences.

Preface to "TCIT Series"

The role of the humanities in university curricula has been the topic of much national debate, with politicians predicting the imminent demise of liberal learning, a fate feared by some and perhaps welcomed by others. Even if one stops short of such apocalyptic scenarios, core and general education courses that promote a humanities-based liberal arts education are under tremendous pressure to justify themselves in an environment where money is tight and professionalization is all the rage. Concurrently, humanities departments feel a similar push, urged by their administrations to pitch their disciplines based on the skills they develop, rather than the dispositions they cultivate or the questions they inspire. In this context, it is more important than ever that liberal arts courses are not only taught, but taught well.

In support of teaching excellence in the liberal arts, Samford University hosted its inaugural Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition (TCIT) Conference, the first in a series of biennial gatherings designed to explore ways for non-specialists to teach the Christian intellectual tradition more effectively in undergraduate core and general education courses. In October 2014, more than fifty scholars from various disciplines gathered in Birmingham for "Augustine Across the Curriculum." To share the findings of this conference with a larger audience, the organizers of TCIT partnered with Religions to publish *Teaching Augustine*, a special issue of selected papers that later appeared as a similarly titled print volume. This partnership continued with the publication of a second special issue and printed volume on *Teaching the Reformations*, the focus of the 2016 conference, and extends now to *Teaching Dante*, 2018's conference theme.

TCIT conferences are committed to the liberal arts as both a foundation for and a unifying force of degree programs across the university, and we assume that general education and core courses are the key locations where this integrative learning will take place. This strategy, however, faces several difficult challenges. For instance, core courses at institutions similar to Samford often draw faculty who are asked to teach outside of their disciplines and areas of expertise. Specialists in Romanticism find themselves pondering Luther's theology of justification with their students in the context of the late medieval church; theologians struggle to offer historically informed readings of post-colonial fiction; and Latin American historians edge their way cautiously into the foreign world of the drawing rooms of English nobility. The challenge can be daunting, particularly for younger faculty. Having recently emerged from specialized graduate training, they are now called upon to teach—and teach well—texts they may not have read since their undergraduate years, or ever.

A somewhat different problem emerges in general education courses. Here, faculty move more comfortably within their own disciplines. However, professional training and disciplinary pressures often marginalize the great works of the Christian intellectual tradition, resulting in general education courses that, whether by intention or benign neglect, fail to draw to upon the rich insights of that tradition. What emerges are survey or introductory courses that perpetuate the notion that the concerns and positions of the faithful have no place in these disciplines. Finally, for those faculty fully committed to the Christian intellectual tradition, there remains the further challenge of finding a way to promote creative, constructive, and critical engagement with that tradition without lapsing into either hagiography or shallow presentism. Just as simply teaching the humanities is not enough, teaching the Christian intellectual tradition is not enough. It must be taught well, meaning creatively and critically, with a focus on how that tradition, through its own long and contested engagement with the deepest questions, enriches every discipline and, by extension, every curriculum.

The TCIT conferences are designed to address these challenges in academic professional training by providing venues for non-specialists to gather and exchange ideas and strategies for engaging in productive classroom discussions of key writers and, ultimately, the fundamental questions of human existence and flourishing: Who are we? Why are we here? How does one live purposefully and morally with others? Given that such questions transcend any university degree program or discipline, and the Christian intellectual tradition provides an array of influential answers to these questions, it is appropriate that such discussions, both within and across disciplines, be made available to all. It is with this intent that the following volume is offered.

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Special Issue Editor

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Editorial

Introduction: Teaching Dante

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Abstract: This introduction to the Special Issue "Teaching Dante" summarizes the volume's essays and discusses the conference at which they were initially presented.

Keywords: Dante; Catholicism; theology; philosophy; poetry; interdisciplinarity; literary studies; the liberal arts; pedagogy; core and general education curricula; Great Books programs

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In October 2014, Samford University hosted its inaugural biennial conference on "Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition." Drawing more than fifty scholars from thirty-plus universities, and supported by a generous grant from the Lilly Fellows Program in the Humanities and the Arts, "Augustine Across the Curriculum" was designed to help non-specialists teach the writings of Augustine more effectively in undergraduate core and general education classes. Anchored by plenary addresses from Peter Iver Kaufman and Kristen Deede Johnson, a selection of conference papers was published in a special issue of *Religions* in spring 2015, helping to disseminate the interdisciplinary insights of "Augustine Across the Curriculum" to a wider international audience. Building upon the energy and partnerships established at this conference, Samford developed a companion initiative: a biennial "Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition Summer Institute." Led by faculty from Samford's University Fellows Program, this week-long residential seminar met in June 2015 and focused on "Teaching Dante's *Commedia*," with more than a dozen faculty from the fields of history, classics, English, philosophy, and theology engaged in a close reading of Dante's masterpiece. Both biennial initiatives—the conference and the summer institute—flow from a common conviction that Samford shares with many universities and colleges across the country: in this era of intense competition for resources, when the liberal arts are increasingly valued (or devalued) in terms of the "skills" and "measurable outcomes" they produce, it is more important than ever to support institutions and faculty committed to teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition, and teaching it well.

The essays gathered in this special issue represent selected papers from the third biennial "Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition" (TCIT) conference, this one focused on "Teaching Dante." Building on the success of the second TCIT conference (2016's "Teaching the Reformations"), as well as a second TCIT summer institute (2017's "Virgil and the Modern Christian Imagination"), "Teaching Dante" attracted another large gathering of scholars from across the disciplines. In his opening plenary address, which also serves as the opening essay of this collection, Albert Russell Ascoli, President of the Dante Society of America, raised questions and issues that resonated throughout the three-day conference. The same is true for how that address shapes this current collection. Exploring a "guiding thread in [his] own research on and teaching of Dante's great poem," Ascoli skillfully connects three key moments from the *Divine Comedy*: Dante's encounter with the five classical poets in *Inferno* Canto 4; the encounter Dante and Virgil have with another classical poet, Statius, in Cantos 20–22 of *Purgatorio*; and a "remarkable six-canto suite" in *Paradiso* where pilgrim-Dante undergoes a series of doctrinal tests on the theological virtues, quizzed by the likes of Peter, James, and John. Among the many rich conclusions one can draw from these three encounters, Ascoli illuminates how these scenes address a "perennial pedagogical problem" faced by all teachers of Dante—that is, "how to account for the extraordinary spectacle of a first-person epic that at once expresses deep piety with profound 'charitas'

(spiritual love) and appears as the absolute height of a self-aggrandizement seemingly inconsistent with Christian humility." In addition to addressing this tension between Dante-the-poet's secular ambitions (primarily, the "pattern of self-authorization" that runs throughout the work) and the "narrative of spiritual evolution" that Dante-the-poet crafts for Dante-the-pilgrim, these three key scenes also answer another challenge faced by all teachers of the *Divine Comedy*: "the problem of connecting the experiences of the three different realms in a way that brings out both the immense scope and incredible specificity of Dante's poem." For Ascoli, Dante's quick acceptance as the sixth poet of the "bella scola" in *Inferno* 4 temporarily suggests "both humility and self-affirmation," but the fact that pilgrim-Dante quickly moves on to the next circle of Hell accompanied only by Virgil ("the company of six is reduced to two" / "sesta compagnia in due si scema" [*Inf.* 4.148]) also suggests that "Dante, as poet, has already moved beyond the spiritual limitations that constrain the other five ... to Limbo." This movement of simultaneous humility and self-affirmation continues in the extended encounter with Statius in *Purgatorio*. While these cantos do draw an "immediate identification" between the pilgrim and Statius (for instance, Statius and Dante are the only purging sinners in the *Purgatorio* who pass between the boundaries that separate levels), they focus "primarily on the interactions between Statius and Virgil" and, with their "explicit and repeated echoing of the 'bella scola'," they reproduce and revise *Inferno* 4. Because these cantos "systematically intertwine questions concerning the special role of 'poet' and those concerning Christian faith or lack thereof," this extended encounter make us think more deeply about poetry and conversion. However, "[w]hat is left unspoken, though it is structurally obvious already in the episode ... is that, of the three, Dante alone is both a Christian and the author of a Christian poem." Thus, echoing *Inferno* 4, Dante "[o]nce again ... becomes part of a community of writers, clearly cast as the last and least in dramatic terms; although, once again, it is implicitly obvious that the last will be first." This drama of humility and assertion culminates in *Paradiso* with Cantos 22–27. Here, Dante-pilgrim once again joins a company of writers, but instead of poets he meets "sainted souls who were apostles on earth, the three favored apostles of Jesus ... who, among other things, participated in the Transfiguration." In addition, Peter, James, and John are authors of New Testament Epistles (as well as one Gospel and the Book of Revelation), and "although in the narrative order of the canticle Dante does leave them behind him, at least temporarily, there is certainly no question of his 'superseding' them as he does with the pagan poets and Statius." The same holds true for Dante's relationship with Paul, who is "alluded to but never met in person," but with whom "Dante invited comparison from the very outset." In these cantos, Dante "undergoes a formal, tripartite examination that, as he says, is analogous to the scholastic ritual of the 'bachelor' being tested to determine his worthiness to be granted the title of 'magister' or 'maestro.'" Successfully passing this theological "examination," Dante assumes "the role of Christian poet par excellence distantly anticipated in *Inferno* 4, and that Dante implicitly occupied in *Purgatorio* 21 and 22, and then more explicitly assumed on his entrance into the Earthly Paradise." *Paradiso* 25 opens with Dante calling his work a "'poema sacro,' a holy poem, to which both Heaven and Earth have put their hands," thereby highlighting how, via his journey from Hell to Paradise, he has "achieved the capacity to write this 'consecrated poem,' in which, as we have seen, he will assume the starring role."

Complementing Ascoli's plenary addresses, this special issue also contains eleven additional essays. They are grouped loosely from works dealing with comprehensive approaches to the *Divine Comedy* (essays on such topics as how to train students to read Dante's epic and which themes may resonate most with students) to essays which focus on a single canticle (specifically, two essays on *Inferno* and two on *Purgatorio*). In the first of these eleven essays, John Edelman acknowledges how the time constraints of an undergraduate syllabus often limit faculty to teaching solely from the *Inferno*, but he then provides a way for teachers to assign selections from all three canticles. He does this by highlighting cantos that develop "the notion that student-readers of the *Divine Comedy* are called upon by the poem to be not mere observers of the experiences of the poet-pilgrim but to become themselves 'pilgrim-readers.'" Central to Edelman's reading is the poem's treatment of "divine justice," in particular how both Dante and his "pilgrim readers" grapple with the confusion presented by

the "harsh justice" of the *Inferno* contrasted with the "exceedingly lenient" justice of the *Purgatorio*, a confusion students miss if they remain only in the first canticle. This confusion is then complemented by "the fundamental emotional contrast between the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*—between humble repentance and the peace that surpasses all understanding—one of the reasons for taking students beyond the *Inferno* through to the *Purgatorio* and on to the *Paradiso*." Thus, it is only when Dante and his pilgrim readers allow themselves to be bewildered that they experience the fullness of God's mysterious grace and justice. Attentiveness to this mystery, which can only be achieved by reading from all three canticles, teaches students that we are all pilgrim readers when it comes to life's difficult challenges, where "doubts, perplexities, and questions are not to be dodged—any more than their complete resolution is to be expected."

For Matthew Rothaus Moser, Dante's poem also has a transformative effect on its readers. In "Understanding Dante's Comedy as Virtuous Friendship," Moser notes that Dante, in his epistle to Can Grande, proclaimed his intent to move his readers from "a state of misery to a state of happiness." That movement rests, in large part, on a moral and religious transformation that cultivates the virtue of hope and culminates in the beatific vision of God, and Moser reads this journey, undertaken by both Dante and his readers, as establishing "a kind of virtuous friendship" between poet and audience. Through a close reading of *Inferno* 3, *Purgatorio* 5, and *Paradiso* 20, and complemented by specific pedagogical strategies and assignments, Moser encourages his students to "think with the *Comedy* as a project of self-knowledge and intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth and formation." From the outset, this requires shifting student expectations, for as Moser notes, "my students expect to meet Dante as someone who wants only to give them answers rather than one who is committed to asking questions *of* them." The poem's "reformational character," operating through "surprise, shock, [and] misdirection," takes many forms, among them the poet's repeated celebration of divine mystery," which students must understand "not [as] an epistemological dodge, but [as] a rhetorical strategy to open up a space for the virtuous action of understanding, of knowing what to do or say next: to hope, to love, and to pray." Just as Dante's journey opens him up to this virtuous action, so too is the reader asked to "share the pilgrim's surrender in faith and active performance of hope and love in prayer." According to Moser, students can "perform" the *Comedy* in this way "only after personally wrestling with the cold logic of Hell, after feeling the ground shifting under their feet as mount purgatory shakes from the earthquake of mercy, after confronting their own ignorance of the mysterious depths of the divine will." By sharing this "beautiful grace of holy ignorance" with his readers, Dante is himself being a "virtuous friend," and that friendship is most explicit in the poem's final silence, where that silence not only "speaks the truth of God to us" but also leaves us "at a point of desire," refusing to do "our work for us." This silence is Dante's "most profound act of virtuous friendship precisely because it refuses to give to the reader answers to questions they have not yet *personally* investigated." The poem, then, encourages us to set out "*on our own pilgrimage* toward becoming a person of perfect virtue, which is to say, to be grounded by faith, to be animated by hope, and to be moved by Love in compassionate prayer."

In his contribution, Sean Gordon Lewis sees a different kind of challenge for teachers of the *Divine Comedy*. Whereas Moser's approach is cast for students taking an upper-level theology class on the "Christian Imagination," Lewis seeks "to answer the question of how one can effectively teach the Christian vision in Dante's *Commedia* to undergraduates who have little or no religious formation." Noting that his methods for teaching the poem differ in a freshman humanities course than in an upper-level literature elective on the Epic, Lewis offers several different strategies that "are useful in presenting Dante's work to non-religious students without sacrificing the epic's specifically Christian content." Central to these strategies is the *Purgatorio*, where Dante not only "begins to complicate the rules of the afterlife" that students find so troubling in the *Inferno*, but also provides "a Christian vision [that] is actually more nuanced than [students] might have thought, and more relevant to their own lives." This also holds true for the *Paradiso*, which non-religious students at first resist, but can be made to appreciate more fully through "contemporary poems about mathematics and science,"

which provide "apt analogies to begin, at least, to carve out a place for metaphysical poetics in their understanding of literature." In both cases, Lewis turns to "Humanist Theology" as a way to "meet [students] where they are" and to encourage them to meditate on "mysteries that are evident simply to reason and lived human experience, apart from revelation." Such an approach opens up discussions of "mercy," "free will and love," and "the inexpressible," all of which will interest humanists as well as Christians. The larger goal, of course, is to "leave students, regardless of their faith, with some taste of the complexity of Christian thought, and hopefully an appreciation of its positivity and nuance," even if that positivity and nuance is "seen strictly through a humanist lens." Although acknowledging the limitations of attempting "to bring Dante's essentially theological poetics into a solidly human realm, in order to reach students of any faith (or no faith)," Lewis does not see such limits as a violation "of Dante's own epic, since what do we see in the Second Person of the Trinity?—'la nostra effige': 'our [human] figure.'"

The next three essays in the collection situate Dante in different contexts, the first in a course on the history of Christian theology, the next two in courses in literary studies. For Bryan J. Whitfield, the challenge is how to bring Dante into the curriculum outside of core classes and Great Books programs, the only place outside of literature courses where students are likely to read and discuss the *Divine Comedy*. One solution is to read Dante as a theologian as well as a poet, which Whitfield does in his "History of Christian Theology" course. Because the course is designed to explore "the ways theology and Western culture interact," Dante can play a significant role, particularly for teaching the medieval period. Noting that "[a]ny effective study of [this] period requires students to integrate insights from several disciplines," Whitfield argues that Dante's epic "provides the paradigmatic example of the interaction of theology and culture in the West." Reserving five weeks on his syllabus for a guided reading of the *Paradiso*, and treating Dante as a representative medieval theologian, Whitfield carefully outlines his approach, concluding that Dante's "sacred poem" can provide students with three ways to understand the interaction of theology and Western culture: first, that theology "is not a discipline removed from other spheres of life but integral to them"; second, that "the Christian tradition shapes the West and is at the same time shaped by the culture, as [Dante] both receives and transforms the theological tradition he inherits"; and, finally, that great theologians have a strong "afterlife" because, like Dante, they continue to influence Western culture in variety of fields, such as poetry, music, and the visual arts. In their essays, both Christopher A. Hill and Sarah Faggioli are interested in afterlives as well. For Hill, one of Dante's most interesting contributions to literary history—one of his afterlives—is how well his poem helps readers to meet the interpretive challenges posed by "dense and lengthy poems," a.k.a. the "big books" of Hill's title. Noting that most undergraduates are taught to read for "information-retrieval," Hill urges faculty to teach "longer, more allegorical and symbolic poems" such as the *Divine Comedy*, Spenser's *Fairie Queen*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, all of which cultivate in the attentive reader a better experience of literature, one premised on "understanding" more than mere information, and one that pushes students beyond sense and speculation. In fact, each of these epic poems is interested in remaking "not only its narrative characters but also its readers" (a theme that is common to many essays in this collection). By teaching poems that offer a "challenging, even daunting [reading] experience," we give our students the opportunity to undertake their own challenging and daunting quests, an experience that cannot be easily replicated in other forms of reading. As Hill so forcefully articulates toward the conclusion of his essay, "However dark the wood or steep the path, whatever the burden, the understanding reader will embrace it all as a totality, gaining in the experience forms of knowledge and skill that are much greater than the sum of their parts. These skills and knowledge, once gained, are never static or simple, but can inform every intellectual phase of a student's career. Thus, do epic poems manifest the greatest kind of reading possible, and the greatest teaching of that art they so dramatically require." For Sarah Faggioli, Dante's epic provides a form of knowledge that also has an afterlife across time. In particular, Faggioli explores how the *Divine Comedy* can serve as a "frame" for discussing love in literature from the medieval period to the present, and she traces this discussion as it occurs in her two-semester undergraduate seminar. First semester

readings such as the Gospel of Mark, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Dante's epic raise questions about lust, romantic love, and *caritas* that remain unanswered by semester's end, and will be raised again in the following term in works by Francis of Assisi, Vittoria Colonna, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Flannery O'Connor, and Gabriel García Márquez. Of the authors in the fall semester, Dante has the greatest afterlife on questions of love as students in the spring semester see again and again how his insights have either directly influenced other authors or can provide ways to understand what these authors have to say about love. For Faggioli, Dante's journey, which begins in "the farthest place from God and His love" and ends "with a vision of God and of the entire universe as moved by His love," can help students to grasp more deeply their own journey in search of "the very human experience of love," especially in "this lonely, individualistic, modern-day world."

Julie Ooms's "Three Things My Students Have Taught Me about Reading Dante" is a fitting way to round out the first part of this collection. As with the many of the previous essays, this work is attuned to the transformative power of the *Divine Comedy*, only Ooms is here more concerned with the poem's power to transform faculty, and not simply students. Noting that many of us who teach the poem, especially in general education courses, see Dante's work as "an opportunity to teach [our] students to humble themselves before texts older and greater than students' own personal views and experiences," Ooms warns us that this approach can "blind professors to the important lessons their students have to teach them about Dante, about pedagogical techniques, and about the professors themselves and their own biases." In particular, Ooms shares a series of stories that highlight moments when, "through their questions and in their applications of the text," her students taught her about humility, and about reading Dante. First, after framing Dante's first meeting with Virgil as the meeting of one man and his "hero," Ooms was surprised when a student-athlete pushed back on this metaphor, seeing Virgil as more of a "mentor" than hero, as someone Dante saw as a "personal teacher and friend rather than someone he admired only from afar." This new metaphor allowed Ooms to take her discussion that semester in a different direction, particularly in a class full of student-athletes, and to raise issues related to skill development and career preparation. Next, Ooms relates how student responses to *Inferno* 13—The Wood of the Suicides—have reshaped the way she teaches this troubling canto. Originally, she prefaced her discussions by "declaring from the outset ... that I did not agree with Dante's definition of suicide as mortal sin." She did so, she believed, because she "was trying to be sensitive," but she soon came to realize that she was "inadvertently and implicitly telling my students that their anger—at friends, at family members, at their own moments of crippling self-doubt—had no place in the discussion." Now, instead, she tries to provide ways for students to express their anger and grief in class, and although she is still not satisfied she has fully done so, she promises to "keep working on more ways to encourage that empathy and to provide a place for my students to respond to their own experiences of suicide." Finally, Ooms tells of "the most significant lesson" her students have taught her as they "walked through Dante together." After she reminded her students one day that the lowest circle of Dante's Hell is reserved for those who have committed various types of fraud—who have willfully and maliciously misused "the good of the intellect"—one of her students asked, "So, does that mean the smartest people usually end up in the bottom of Hell?" Admitting that "[on] the face of it, his point isn't even technically correct," Ooms "went with it" and spent a good deal of the period "talking about the idea that intellectual power could potentially lead people to worse sins." Eventually, this discussion led Ooms to examine more closely her "own default positions and prejudices": "I, like many other academics do, rely on intellectual prowess to justify myself and to construct my identity, and I am often—no, always—tempted to equate intellect with genuine thoughtfulness and, especially, with wisdom. But it is neither of these. And the misuse of intellect can easily draw us, myself included, into the deepest of sins." In the end, Ooms understands that her students have taught her that teaching the *Divine Comedy* is about teaching her students, and herself, to love more deeply, for, as Dante says in *Purgatorio* 17, "love alone/is the true seed of every merit in you, / and of all acts for which you must atone."

The final four essays in the collection each address a specific canticle. David Chapman and Dennis Sansom focus on the *Inferno*, with Chapman emphasizing the canticle's engagement with classical mythology and Sansom placing Dante in dialogue with contemporary philosophy. For Chapman, one of the challenges of teaching Dante is how often students find "themselves lost in a strange wood of symbols and allegories that are remote from their education backgrounds." Specifically, students seem baffled by the strange "intermingling of actual historical characters and mythological figures" because, in their academic experience, "there is a rather strict division of history and literature, fact and fiction. We don't expect a story about the Vietnam War to include references to Apollo and Zeus." In fact, "the whole idea of mythological characters seems somewhat suspect [to them]. Shouldn't we be more concerned with real people and real events than fictional ones?" Of course, this estrangement opens up opportunities for teaching students about "mythology as a means of expressing human value," in particular how myth is a "fluid and malleable" way for writers to engage the past and revise it for their own purposes. Nowhere is this more evident than in Dante's retelling of the myth of Odysseus, a story that had been circulating for more than 2000 years before Dante revised it in *Inferno* 26. By comparing Dante's revision with Book 12 of the *Odyssey*, students can see how Dante takes the original story away from "the familial values of Homer" and reconceives it as a tale about our "proper relationship to God," with Odysseus not dying "a hero's death ... in the company of his family and devoted nation," but instead suffering eternal damnation for lying to others and sacrificing them to "his own maniacal pursuit of adventure and glory." "By examining Dante's re-envisioning of Homer's heroic warrior," Chapman writes, "we can begin to focus [class] discussion not on the apparent contradictions between the two stories, but on the work that myth performs in helping us explore our own cultural values. How we tell Odysseus' story—and by extension how we tell any myth—is based in large degree on what we want the story to tell about us." For Sansom, the illuminating connection in the *Inferno* is not back to Homer but forward to Richard Rorty. According to Sansom, the *Inferno* has much to teach us about "the relationship among human nature, moral order, and the vices," and this relationship is best understood by contrasting Dante's vision with Rorty's thoughts on "the contingency of language, selfhood, and community." For Rorty, the "truly modern person" is the "liberal ironist" who "continually remakes her or himself by adopting new metaphors for living." For Dante, this is non-sensical and, as Sansom argues, one of the reasons this so is because Rorty's vision represents a failure of "the moral imagination," providing "no way to prevent or correct the 'reasonably vicious' person." Against Rorty's "liberal ironist," Dante offers "the pilgrim," a metaphor which better elucidates "the inherent necessities of moral action" and helps "students to understand more deeply how the moral imagination shapes and directs their lives." In the end, Dante exposes the shortcomings of Rorty's vision, which "does not help us to understand why some people can be informed, deliberate, and rationalizing of their behavior but be also committed to cruelty and harm of themselves and others." Because Rorty offers us "contingency without telos," he "has no way to use his ideas to prevent the reasonably vicious from happening; he gives no basis for a prophetic ethic that would warn us of the 'inferno' that awaits all who aim for the wrong aims, even if they are sincere and rational in doing so."

In the two concluding essays, Jane Kelley Rodeheffer and Paul Camacho help us through the difficult terrain of the *Purgatorio*. As Rodeheffer notes, students find this section challenging "on a number of levels"; however, those challenges can be addressed by a close reading of Cantos 29–33, where "Dante the poet provides a window through which the reader can interpret the pilgrim's journey in the third and final part of the *cantica*." In these cantos, Dante makes several references to the Emmaus story in the *Luke* 24, and reading that story alongside of Cantos 29–33 can help students to unpack Dante's experience in the *Purgatorio*. To build her case, Rodeheffer relies on Eric Aurebach's explication of Dante's "figural system," whereby the poet, in Aurebach's words, "combines two events, causally and chronologically remote from each other, by attributing to them a meaning common to both." For instance, the appearance of Jesus in *Luke* 24 and Beatrice in the *Purgatorio* "are attended by a series of images that serve to map one story onto the other," marking Beatrice as a clear *Figura*

Christi. Additionally, "the most striking aspect of the two texts is the veiling of the Christ figure." Just as Jesus draws near to the two disciples but remains a stranger to them ("their eyes were prevented from recognizing him" [Lk 24:16]), Beatrice is often veiled from Dante, who describes her as appearing within a "cloud of blossoms," adorned in "a veil of white," a figure he "could not see . . . with [his] eyes" (XXX 25–37). As with Cleopas and his companion in *Luke* 24, Dante is prevented from seeing clearly "until [he has been] properly chided by the veiled Christ," revealing a slowness of heart common to "all Christian pilgrims, who fail to understand that the recognition of their true good is an affair of the heart." Of course, Dante's figural system does more than simply point out connections between his poem and the Emmaus story, between Jesus and Beatrice; it also points to "something beyond." That "further horizon" becomes clear when students note that, in "gazing at the nature of God incarnate, Dante is both satiated and left yearning for more ("While my soul, filled with wonder and with joy / Tasted the food that, satisfying in itself, / Yet for itself creates a greater craving" [XXXI 127–29]). This craving "suggests that even the revelation of Christ in Beatrice is a provisional event, namely a figura of the eternal reality that, while always already fulfilled perfectly in God, is a matter of hope and anticipation for us." Moreover, it is important for students to see that "Dante's recognition of Christ in Beatrice takes place within a procession of the Church Triumphant," because "[w]hile the ideal of the Church Triumphant has already been fulfilled in God through God's providence, it exists beyond time and as an historical event, it is veiled and obscure and will remain so until we see Christ face to face." In the end, highlighting Dante's use of *Luke* 24 as part of a larger "figural system" not only helps students to appreciate the poet's vision "of an essential passage in Christian life," but it also "brings them into the Medieval European world of interpretation." Doing so allows students to partake in a "dance of figuring and prefiguring that gives meaning to the text of *Purgatorio* while simultaneously preserving that mystery of slowness of heart giving way to conversion, repentance and forgiveness, which forms the soul of the entire poem." So attuned, "students of the *Purgatorio* may just be encouraged to ask what Dante's narrative process—layered as it may be—could mean for their own recognition of Christ."

Paul Camacho's essay on Cantos 17 and 18 of the *Purgatorio* rounds out this volume. According to Camacho, Virgil's discourse on love in these cantos—which lie at the very center of the *Commedia*—invites us to employ love as a hermeneutic key to the full poem. Placing his approach to Dante's epic within a larger philosophical tradition, Camacho argues that the poet, like Plato and Augustine, understood "true education" as "metánoia," that is, "the radical conversion of mind and life that each of us must achieve in a personal and decisive way." Reflecting on "what it would mean to teach Dante's *Commedia* for the sake of conversion or metanoia," Camacho turns to the *Purgatorio* as a means of exploring "how we conceive of the end or goal of our teaching, and . . . how we might imagine anew the practice of our teaching in light of Dante's own intrinsic pedagogical methods and practice." The *Purgatorio* is a better resource than either the *Inferno* or the *Paradiso* for exploring these issues because, unlike these other canticles, the *Purgatorio* is dedicated to transformation. In fact, it is the only canticle in which Dante's characters and Dante's readers exist in time, because "only here is there the possibility of change and growth. If we read the *Commedia* to learn how to love better here and now, in this world, it is the *Purgatorio* that will provide the blueprint." Dante's poem, then, "presents a pedagogy of love, in which the reader participates in the very experience of desire and delight enacted in the text," and Virgil's discourse on love is an essential part of "educating" that desire and delight. First, that discourse "gives us the central animating idea of the entire *Commedia*: "Neither Creator nor His creature . . . / was ever without love, whether natural / or of the mind." Following Vittorio Montemaggi, Camacho sees these lines as embodying "the drama of divine love . . . [that] unfolds in the *Commedia*"; that is, "the drama of the human community itself which chooses to reject, strives to understand, and finally accomplishes participation in the love that made it." Virgil's discourse also helps students to understand that love "is the seed of every virtue and of every deed that merits punishment," and in turn requires faculty to ask "what difference does such an anthropology of desire make for the way we teach our students, especially if we consider our vocation to be the same as Virgil's, i.e., if our aim is not only to impart information, but also to accompany our students on their

difficult journey of intellectual and moral conversion?" Here, then, is the heart of Dante's poem and Camacho's reading of it. The move that Dante's pilgrim takes from ignorance through awareness to intellectual contemplation "function[s] to effect in the student a love for ultimate things," and our teaching of the poem must assist in that transformation. Taking up Augustine on "the weight of love" and the freedom that comes with loving "absolute" beauty, Camacho insists that our teaching of Dante must direct students to this kind of experience: "The human being, like the sun and all the other stars, is moved by love. When that love lessens, when the heart loses some of its restlessness, then it is beauty and beauty alone that will rekindle the flame of desire." Ultimately, "as Virgil teaches in his Discourse, as Dante dramatizes throughout his entire poem, and as Augustine developed in his philosophical reflection on freedom, conversion comes not from the screwing up of will but from the honing of loving-attention in festive celebration and 'entirely active mindfulness,' a consent and celebration of the good of being." Thus, the "more we can help our students give themselves over to that 'consent and celebration,' to the 'essentially joyful vigilance' that is 'celebrating mindfulness of the ultimate powers,' the stronger their voices will become. Radical conversion will be the response of a soul shaken awake."

Souls shaken awake: all of us who teach the *Divine Comedy* know that the poem possesses this soul-shaking power. Of course, not all souls are the same, nor are they shaken by similar things or in similar ways. However, all souls seek awakening, and no poem in the Christian Intellectual Tradition better expresses this shared longing, this common desire to see better than we now see, to know better than we now know, to be better than we now are. It is my hope that readers of this collection find insight and inspiration as they teach the *Divine Comedy* to a new generation of readers, introducing our students to the power of Dante's vision so that they may awaken something powerful in themselves.

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Article

Starring Dante

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Abstract: This essay offers an example of a guiding thread in my own research on and teaching of Dante's *Commedia*. Specifically, I will follow a strand that leads us from Dante's encounter with the "bella scola" of classical poets in *Inferno* Canto 4, through a key scene in the *Purgatorio* where Dante and his guide Virgil meet the late classical poet Statius, to the remarkable six-canto suite in the Heaven of the Stars, sign of Gemini, in which Dante-poet has Dante-character undergo a series doctrinal tests on the theological virtues. His successful response to the challenges posed by the apostles Peter, James, and Paul doubly authorizes him as poet and as Christian teacher of the highest order. These unique experiences as Dante is successively introduced to and made part of a rising series of elite groups, highlights his double role as humble student and prospective teacher of others. Among the various aims of this essay is to give a sample of a way in which teachers of the *Commedia* may address the perennial pedagogical problem of how to account for the extraordinary spectacle of a first-person epic that at once expresses deep piety with profound "charitas" (spiritual love) and appears as the absolute height of a self-aggrandizement seemingly inconsistent with Christian humility. Another is to suggest one possible strategy for teaching the Comedy as a whole, and especially the final canticle, the Paradiso, which even Dante himself notoriously thinks is "not for everyone".

Keywords: Dante; *Commedia*; *Inferno*; *Purgatorio*; *Paradiso*; theology and poetry; medieval astrology

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It would hardly be an exaggeration to say—at a time when in many parts of the country and in so many institutions, the teaching of the humanities, and of literature in particular, and even more in particular the historical past, has suffered terribly—that the enduring power of certain authors—Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes—to capture the imagination of students and the general public alike seems ever more precious, even as it becomes more precarious. And this is especially true for a work such as the *Commedia* (hereafter given as *Divine Comedy*), built on Dante's profound religious faith and his commitment to teaching it, which has appealed to a great many readers from the broadest possible spectrum of cultural backgrounds and world views—Catholic and Protestant—Christian and non-Christian alike—from Florence to Birmingham to Tokyo.

In this essay, I offer an example of a guiding thread in my own research on and teaching of Dante's great poem.[1] Specifically, I will follow a strand that leads us from Dante's encounter with the "bella scola" of classical poets in *Inferno* canto 4, through a key scene in the *Purgatorio* where Dante and

[1] The number of pedagogical resources for the teaching of Dante has expanded exponentially over the last decades as dantisti (Dante scholars) have made increasing use of the technological possibilities afforded by the internet, at the same time as the number of hard-copy translations of the works, of biographies, and of volumes devoted explicitly to pedagogy have also multiplied. The Dante Society of America website provides an extensive if not complete list of links to many of the most useful sites currently available https://www.dantesociety.org/education-and-outreach, as well as access to the bilingual bibliographical resource know as the Bibliografia Internazionale Dantesca/International Dante Bibliography (http://dantesca.ntc.it/dnt-fo-catalog/pages/material-search.jsf) [to use the English-language version of the latter site, click on the EN icon in the upper-right]. The forthcoming volumes on approaches to teaching the *Divine Comedy*, edited by Christopher Kleinhenz and Kristina Olson, and published by the Modern Language Association, will be another extremely useful resource, as, I believe, will the special issue of *Religions* in which this essay finds itself. Still very useful, however, is (Jacoff 2007).

his guide Virgil meet the late classical poet Statius, to the remarkable six-canto suite in the Heaven of the Stars, sign of Gemini, in which Dante-poet has Dante-character undergo a series doctrinal tests on the theological virtues. His successful response to the challenges posed by the apostles Peter, James, and Paul doubly authorizes him as poet and as Christian teacher of the highest order. These unique experiences as Dante is successively introduced to and made part of a rising series of elite groups, highlights his double role as humble student and prospective teacher of others. Among the various aims of this essay is to give a sample of a way in which teachers of the *Divine Comedy* may address the perennial pedagogical problem of how to account for the extraordinary spectacle of a first-person epic that at once expresses deep piety with profound "charitas" (spiritual love) and appears as the absolute height of a self-aggrandizement seemingly inconsistent with Christian humility. Another is to suggest one possible strategy for teaching the *Comedy* as a whole, and especially the final canticle, the *Paradiso*, which even Dante himself notoriously thinks is "not for everyone."

First, however, I'd like to speak briefly about my own "subject position" as a non-Christian scholar-teacher of the greatest of Christian poets (with due deference to Milton's similar claims to that title). I originally came to study Dante as a point of convergence between two different life-paths, one vocational, one familial. The first was my fascination during my college years with the poetry of T.S. Eliot, whose famous pronouncement on the post-classical Western Canon, "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third,"[2] was reflected as well in a web of Dantean allusions in his poetry, all of which finally led me to read Dante for the first time under the guidance of Professor Angelina Pietrangeli at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The other was a will to explore my own Italian heritage: my Italian-Jewish heritage I should say—and add that my father and his family were refugees from the racial laws propagated by Mussolini's fascist regime on the eve of the Second World War. My initial attachment to Dante then was cultural and literary, not religious in any recognizable sense. And though the person with whom I studied Dante for my Ph.D., Giuseppe Mazzotta, was and is a practicing Catholic, deeply invested in what he has at different moments called the "theology of history" and *theologia ludens* of the *Divine Comedy*,[3] my religious orientation remained unaltered, though of course I learned a great deal, though never enough, about Christianity, especially medieval Christianity, in the process. I would say as well that, on the whole, my students—at Cornell, at Northwestern, and now at Berkeley—have collectively been of a secular orientation. Or, at least, most of them knew very little about the Bible and the beliefs and practices of Christianity in its long history and many diverse forms. Of course, from time to time one or two students would come pre-endowed with some real knowledge of Christianity and its texts and they would always be a welcome addition, as I tried to explain the various concepts indispensable for even a rudimentary understanding of a poet whom Robert Hollander plausibly defined as a "theologus-poeta" and who from time to time has been accused of having attempted to write a Third Testament.[4] I imagine that many of those issue of

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[2] (Eliot [1929] 1964).

[3] For the first phrase see (Mazzotta 1979), for the second his *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), (Mazzotta 1993, chp. 11). More recently, he has published a guide to his teaching of the poem, through Yale Open Courses series, as *Reading Dante* (Mazzotta 2008). See also the related lecture series at https://oyc.yale.edu/italian-language-and-literature/ital-310.

[4] (Hollander [1976] 1980); see also his, (Hollander 1969). On the *Commedia* as "third Testament," see Gerhard Regn (Regn 2007, pp. 167–85), who is building on (Kablitz 1999). North American Dante criticism, much of it following in the wake of Charles Singleton, Hollander, and others, has been largely "theological" in orientation, though it is theology seen from an abstracting secular perspective, and most often concerned with the implications of Dante's eschatological vision for his concept of himself as poet. Variations of this theme can be found in scholars as varied as John Freccero, Teodolinda Barolini, Amilcare Iannucci, Christian Moevs, Peter Hawkins, Lino Pertile, Guy Raffa, Mary Watt, Matthew Treherne, Vittorio Montemaggi, Claire Honess and many others. A second and generally related strand of North American and anglo-phone criticism has been the study of Dante's appropriation and rewriting of classical authors whom he absorbs and subsumes into a Christian vision of cultural history (Hollander, Mazzotta, Barolini, Ronald Martinez, Winthrop Wetherbee, and Zygmunt Baranski are among many strong voices in this line of study). Despite the general importance of Erich Auerbach's work in English, until recently the notion of "Dante, Poet of the Secular World" and of Dante as key player in the founding of the Western tradition of mimetic realism (*Mimesis*: "Figura") has had relatively little echo, though (Barolini 1992), and later writings, and the work of (Ascoli 2008, 2013). A sharper focus on the political-social side of Dante's work, much

Religions and this essay in particular, face a rather different problem—whether specifically teaching Dante from their own faith-based perspective and/or introducing him to students with considerable knowledge of the Bible and the Christian traditions.

Let me give a rudimentary example of what I conceive of as a possible difference in the attitude of secular and Christian students confronting the *Divine Comedy* for the first time, and in particular the relationship of master and pupil established between Dante and Virgil in the very first canto, which concludes with the Roman poet's sudden disappearance just as Dante is about to encounter Beatrice in the earthly paradise 63 cantos later. For most of the students I have taught, a basic question that arises is "why didn't Dante save Virgil?", on the assumption that human affection and admiration alone should be the guiding principle in what for them is basically a work of science fiction, with "salvation" as the necessary happy ending to a narrative.[5] For a Christian student, an earlier question might have been: *why* is Dante being guided by a pagan poet whose epic Augustine dismissed as the epitome of the diabolical City of Man in his *Civitas Dei* (*City of God*)? Such a student would also probably be more inclined to wonder why Dante thought he could save or damn anyone, much less Virgil in particular, and perhaps even to be puzzled at his *hubris* in claiming to reveal the truth of the after-life. In fact, it often seems to me that Dante has something to confuse and offend virtually every Christian sect. For Catholics, just for starters, there is his habit of damning popes whose politics and spending habits he disagreed with (notably in *Inf.* Canto 19)—or, perhaps more ironically still, presenting us with a one-time pope in *Purgatorio* Canto 19 who only converted to Christianity *after* he assumed the papal mantle.[6] He also offers a powerful critique of the taking of vows in the early cantos of *Paradiso*, which might seem to anticipate Luther's views articulated some two centuries later. Such things, of course, quite endeared him to Protestant reformers, who, on the other hand, had to deal with his claims to extraordinary access to God's plan, his penchant for leaning on what Luther called the "Aristotelian Church," his insistence that the Papacy—when properly led—was indeed the spiritual center of Christianity, his belief that there is such a place as Purgatory (indeed his central place in creating its iconography),[7] his celebration of prayers as "works" capable of hastening the access of souls to Heaven, his attachment to the cult of Mary, not to mention the whole idea of Beatrice's role in his own apparently assured salvation.

Whatever the orientation of student and teacher, however, the central problem of reading the *Divine Comedy* is bound to be the figure of Dante himself, as the character present from beginning to end of the poem, as the witness to the eschatological destinies of a wide range of memorable damned, purging and sainted souls, as a poet moving toward a complex of spiritual experience, knowledge, and poetic creativity that will permit him to compose the "sacro poema" or "sacred poem" (*Paradiso* 25.1),[8] in which he then will "star."[9] In Canto 2 of *Inferno* (lines 13–33), the pilgrim compares the journey he is about to undertake to two famous precursors believed to have traveled to the other world—Aeneas, the Virgilian and Roman hero who descends into the underworld, past the realm of the damned and onto

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more common in Italy, where the *Commedia*'s character as "national poem" is in the foreground, has been generally lacking, though the recent books of Justin Steinberg (Steinberg 2007, 2013) and Alison Cornish (Cornish 2011) offer examples of a new and different direction.

5 On this endlessly repeated question, see, for instance, (Barolini 2006, chp. 7). The literature on Dante and Virgil is immense. Among the most influential voices have been Hollander, (Hollander 1983); Mazzotta, "Virgil and Augustine," in "Vergil and Augustine," chp. 4 in *Dante, Poet of the Desert*; (Barolini 1984, pp. 201–56), as well as a number of the essays in (Jacoff and Schnapp 1991). See also Ascoli, *Dante and the Making*, esp. pp. 307–57. See also notes 14–16 below.

6 Ascoli, *Dante and the Making*, esp. pp. 345–48.

7 (Le Goff 1986).

8 Both the Italian and English are cited, here and throughout, from *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling; comm. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez; illus. Robert Turner (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996 [volume 1: Inferno], 2003 [volume 2: Purgatorio], 2011 [volume 3: Paradiso]). (Durling [1996] 2011). Occasional emendations to the translation are marked in the text with brackets.

9 As with most of the topics taken up in this essay, the literature on the interplay between the two "I" character and narrator–of the *Commedia* is vast. The most influential version of the Dantean dyad is that of (Contini [1957] 1976), cogently developed by (Freccero 1986, chp. 1), in relation to the autobiographical model of St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

the home of the blessed, and Saint Paul, who by his own cryptic words in 2nd Corinthians (12: 1–7), was rapt into "the third heaven," though in the body or not he declines to say. As generations of readers have recognized, when the pilgrim declares "io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono" (2.32; I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul), he both expresses due humility and, tacitly, prepares us for a journey, and a poem recounting it, that go far beyond Virgil and his hero, and indeed beyond Paul himself, at least in the comprehensive detail with which he will record his experience.

In teaching the *Divine Comedya*, the two most common strategies for tracking Dante's experience are to focus on his interactions with the souls of the three realms—the ways in which his reactions to them index his own fears and possibilities—and to chart his relationship with his three guides, Virgil, Beatrice, and, in the very last cantos, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. And of course for a complex of reasons, courses on the *Divine Comedy*, when they get out of Hell at all, tend to dedicate an inversely proportional amount of time and energy to the other realms (say, on Berkeley's 14 week semester, 8 to Hell, 4 to Purgatory, and 2, if that, to the *Paradiso*). The temptation to burrow into the most fascinating episodes and characters (Francesca and Paolo [*Inf.* 5], Brunetto Latini [*Inf.* 15], Ulysses [*Inf.* 26], Ugolino [*Inf.* 32–33], the "girone" or circle of the proud [*Purg.* 10–12], the encounter with Buonagiunta da Lucca [*Purg.* 10–12], the return of Beatrice and departure of Virgil [*Purg.* 30], the meeting with his ancestor Cacciaguida [*Par.* 15–17], and so on), often makes it hard to discern the arc of the poem as a whole. One of the efforts that I appreciate is the effort in current criticism to focus more attention than is usual on multi-canto sequences (such as that leading from *Purgatorio* 16 to 27).[10] In my teaching I try to do the same, although it is trickier business, since it involves delving deeper than most of my undergraduates and even some of my graduates would like into the arcana of scholasticism, the politics of Guelf vs. Ghibelline, the economics of proto-capitalist Florence, and so on.

At least as tricky is the problem of connecting the experiences of the three different realms in a way that brings out both the immense scope and incredible specificity of Dante's poem. Of course, one should be as clear as possible, with outlines, diagrams, pictorial representations, and so on about the ordering principles of divisions and subdivisions that structure each of the canticles, and the ways in which these are mirrored and reversed from realm to realm. And the recent development of the old principle of "vertical" readings promoted by the Oxford group, which emphasizes the parallels between same-numbered cantos of the successive canticles is useful (for instance the parallel cantos 6 for Dante's politics; the fiery rhetoric that links the cantos 26–27 in each realm, etc.). Useful as this technique may be, however, it actually glosses over the complexities by which Dante connects canto to canto (sometimes the principle is one of reversal [e.g., *Inf.* 5, *Purg.* 27; *Purg.* 5, *Inf.* 27], and it gets more elaborate and less predictable).[11]

What I would like to do in the balance of my time, then, is single out a series of episodes over the three canticles that track, on the one hand, the "secular" pattern of poetic self-authorization that has been most prominent in my own work and in much North American Dante criticism of the last half-century, and, on the other, the narrative of the spiritual evolution of Dante-pilgrim and the quasi-evangelical mission of Dante-poet on the other. In doing this, I will not add much to what others and I myself have said about these specific episodes—my aim, instead, is to suggest a guiding thread that might be useful in the teaching of the *Commedia*. Let me begin by recalling the fundamental discovery of Robert Hollander that was one of the initial inspirations for my own study of Dante's evolving relationship to medieval categories of authorship and authority. Hollander noticed that word "autore," which Dante defines in one acceptation as "a person worthy of faith and obedience"

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[10] For this particular sequence, see Ascoli, *Dante and the Making*, pp. 332–57. Among the rare, comprehensive efforts of this kind, see (Swing 1962; Cogan 1999).

[11] (Corbett and Webb [2015] 2017). The most notorious example, widely discussed in the literature are the parallel cantos 6, which move in scope from Florence (*Inferno*), to Italy (*Purgatorio*), to the Holy Roman Empire (*Paradiso*). Other excellent examples are in (Fido 1986); and the "Intercantiche" by Durling and Martinez in the second volume (*Purgatorio*) of the Durling translation cited above.

(qualities linked by him to Aristotle in his treatise, *Convivio* [*The Banquet*], book 4, chp. 6; translation mine), appears exactly two times in the *Divine Comedy*, once attributed to Virgil, whom Dante-pilgrim calls "lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore" (*Inf.* 1.85: my master [or teacher] and my author) in the first canto of *Inferno*, and once to God, whom he refers to as the "verace autore" (*Par.* 26.40: "the truthful [or veracious] Author"), in *Paradiso* 26.[12] With these references are associated three mentions of the word "autorità"—once in reference to the great pagan thinkers, poets and rulers gathered together in Limbo, Virgil's eternal dwelling place (*Inf.* 4.113)—and twice to the rational, human authority that bolsters Dante's understanding of the divine love of the True Author, again in *Paradiso* 26 (ll. 26, 47). The conceptual and narrative arc described by Hollander begins with Dante modeling himself on and measuring himself against the poetic and intellectual authority of the pagan ancients, and ends with him conceding that the source of all authority and the one true author of truth itself is God, in effect renouncing his own claim to being an "author" even as he goes far beyond Aristotle, Virgil, and indeed most Christian writers in his assertion of access to the divine. To Hollander's account I have added, among other things, the consideration that for Dante in the *Divine Comedy* the word "autore" reflects both of his earlier etymological definitions of the word, not only of the philosopher "worthy of faith and obedience" but also of the poet (*autore* from *avieo*), who binds together, in effect creates, language, in particular the illustrious vernacular of Italy, with the form-endowing use of meter and rhyme.[13]

In the three episodes I will now consider, I will focus primarily not on either of the previously mentioned roles of Dante-pilgrim, namely as witness of the destiny of souls or exclusively as pupil of Virgil, Beatrice and/or Bernard, but rather on their special character as episodes in which Dante becomes part of a small group or community into which he is inducted in such a way as to constitute a special moment of "authorization" that will then allow him to accede to the next such encounter, and so on. While there are other "personalized" encounters, these three stand out not only in and of themselves, but in the ideal, ascending pattern that they create as the pilgrim moves upward and comes closer and closer not only to his own climactic spiritual experience as character, but also to becoming the poet who can then recount that experience. These episodes are: the meeting with the five classical poets in *Inferno* 4; the encounter of Virgil and Dante with the late classical epic poet Statius in *Purgatorio* 20–22; and the "examination scene" in the Heaven of the fixed stars in which Dante is tested in turn by Saints Peter, James, and John on the three theological virtues (respectively, Faith, Hope and Divine Love) and then meets with our first ancestor, Adam, in *Paradiso* cantos 24–26.

I will not dwell at length on the first of these scenes, which is by far the best known of them.[14] You may recall that in Canto 4 Dante enters the first circle of Hell, the Limbo, or outer-edge, where, to quote Virgil, "sanza speme vivemo in disio" (*Inf.* 4.42; without hope we live in desire). Those included in Limbo are the unbaptized (especially infants) and those who, living before Christ, and of course also unbaptized, did not believe sufficiently to be redeemed. Also noted is the fact that before the "Harrowing of Hell" after Christ's Crucifixion, this place had been populated by Old Testament Patriarchs and women, beginning with Adam, who Christ then took back with him to Heaven (note, by the way, the anticipation both of Dante's entrance into Adam's first home at the end of the *Purgatorio* [cantos 28–33], and of his meeting with Adam in *Paradiso* 26). While there is no evident punishment for the denizens of this first circle except deprivation of the Divine Presence, it is also the case that their hopelessly desiring condition, rooted in their lack of faith in the one true God, is in fact the basis for every punishment suffered throughout Hell, a point that may be helpful in orienting students. Most noteworthy for the teaching of this particular configuration, of course, is the fact that Dante is incorporated into the band, the "bella scola," of five classical poets (in addition to Virgil: Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan),

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12 Hollander, *Allegory*, pp. 78–79.

13 Ascoli, *Dante and the Making*, esp. chps. 1–2, and chp. 7, sec. v–vi. See also Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert*, pp. 258–59.

14 See for instance, Hollander, *Il Virgilio dantesco*; Barolini, *Dante's Poets*; (Iannucci 1993).

> Così vid'i' adunar la bella scola
> di quel signor de l'altissimo canto
> che sovra li altri com'aquila vola.
>   Da ch'ebber ragionato insieme alquanto,
> volsersi a me con salutevol cenno,
> e 'l mio maestro sorrise di tanto;
>   e più d'onore ancora assai mi fenno,
> ch'e' sì mi fecer de la loro schiera,
> sì ch'io fui sesto tra contanto senno.
>   Così andammo infino a la lumera,
> parlando di cose che 'l tacere è bello,
> sì com'era 'l parlar colà dov'era. (Inf. 4. 94–105). (So saw I come together the lovely school of that lord of highest song [Homer], who soars above the others like an eagle. When they had spoken together for a time they turned to me with sign of greeting, and my master smiled at that; and they did me an even greater honor, for they made me one of their band, so that I was sixth among so much wisdom. Thus we went as far as the light, speaking things of which it is good to be silent now, as it was good to speak them there where I was).

That Dante becomes the "sesto"—sixth or last or both—among such (poetic) wisdom, will again suggest both humility and self-affirmation, and it is evident that as the "sesta compagnia in due si scema" (*Inf.* 4.148: the company of six is reduced to two), when Dante-pilgrim, with Virgil, move on down to the next circle of Hell, Dante, as poet, has already moved beyond the spiritual limitations that constrain the other five, including, in the long, in fact endless, run, Virgil as well, to Limbo.

The most prominent purgatorial sequel to this episode, again as is well-known, is the encounter in Cantos 21–22 (and following) with Statius, late-classical author of the *Thebaid* and the unfinished *Achilleid*, who lived after the coming of Christ, but apparently was not known to have been a Christian before Dante represents him as such in this episode.[15] Statius first appears to the travelers just as he experiences a Christo-mimetic liberation from the bonds of Purgation, which enables him to proceed freely up through the last two "gironi" (circles or terraces), those of gluttony and lust, of which he was apparently not guilty in any way. As the one purging sinner in the whole canticle who is seen passing from one zone to another, he embodies the fundamental difference between the eternal punishments of Hell and the temporary, if still intense, tortures of *Purgatorio*. The only other person seen passing these boundaries is, of course, Dante himself, and so there is an immediate identification between Statius and the pilgrim.

The episode, on the other hand, apparently focuses primarily on the interactions between Statius and Virgil, with explicit and repeated echoing of the "bella scola" of *Inferno* 4, which this grouping at once reproduces and revises. The first of the paired cantos provides an identification of the two classical poets, and leads to the constitution of a relationship of friendship between them, mediated by Dante's inability to conceal from Statius the fact that his guide is the author of the *Aeneid*, of which Statius has just said that it was "my mama and my nurse in writing poetry" (*Purg.* 21.97–98), a declaration that also aligns him with Dante's original identification of Virgil as his "master and author." These cantos systematically intertwine questions concerning the special role of "poet" and those concerning Christian faith or lack thereof. The presence of all three of the members of this little group in Purgatory requires explanation. Virgil requires it, because he is a damned soul consigned to the Limbo of virtuous pagans and clearly has no business being outside of Hell. Dante needs it as well because, as is repeatedly stressed throughout the canticle, the fact that he is still "in the body" makes him unlike all of the

[15] For Dante, Virgil and Statius, see among many others: Mazzotta, Dante, Poet of the Desert, pp. 219–25; Barolini, Dante's Poets, pp. 256–69; (Martinez 1995) (one of his several important essays on this figure); (Wetherbee 2008, chp. 6).

disembodied shades who populate this realm, and is in need of special guidance provided by grace (even if as Virgil says, it is clear that he must "reign with the good" after his death). Finally, Statius' presence requires explanation because there is no trace in the books that Virgil has somehow read or for that matter in the historical record known to Dante that he had ever converted to Christianity. It is, of course, Statius's account of his double conversion, both away from the vice of excessive spending (symmetrical with avarice in the Aristotelian scheme), and (albeit secretly) toward the new Christian religion, and the role that Virgil and his texts played in those alterations that dominates the second of the two cantos, most notably in the following lines:

> . . . . . . "Tu prima m'invïasti
> verso Parnaso a ber ne le sue grotte,
> e prima appresso Dio m'alluminasti.
>   Facesti come quei che va di notte,
> che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova
> ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte,
>   quando dicesti: 'Secol si rinnova;
> torna giustizia e primo tempo umano,
>   e progenïe scende da ciel nova.'
>   Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano." (22.64-73)
> ("You first sent me to Parnassus to drink from its springs, and you first lit the way for me toward God. You did as one who walks at night, who carries the light behind him and does not help himself, but instructs the persons coming after, when you said 'The age begins anew; justice returns and the first human time, and a new offspring come down from heaven.' Through you I became a poet, through you, a Christian").

What emerges is a kind of chiastic conundrum. One poet is a damned pagan, the other a saved Christian, but the former's poetry is capable of revealing, or at least supporting, Christian revelation, while the latter's poetry shows no trace of Christian inspiration. Subtending the episode is a supporting rationale for Virgil's role throughout the first two realms of the afterlife, namely that God is capable of speaking through him in ways that he himself does not and cannot recognize, a corollary of the general dictum that divine providence always works in ways mysterious to human beings. What is left unspoken, though it is structurally obvious already in the episode, and will only become more so as the pilgrim ascends first into the earthly paradise and thence through the visible heavens into the Empyrean, is that, of the three, Dante alone is both a Christian and the author of a Christian poem.[16] Once again Dante becomes part of a community of writers, clearly cast as the last and least in dramatic terms; although, once again, it is implicitly obvious that the last will be first.

This conflation of Dante's spiritual itinerary and his poetic vocations in dialectical relation to Virgil and Statius will become particularly clear in his final interaction with his newly multiplied guides, when, in canto 28, lines 139–148, Matelda explains to him that Parnassus, the classical mountain of poetic inspiration, was a dream-like foreshadowing of the Earthly Paradise he is about to enter:

> "Quelli ch'anticamente poetaro
> l'età dell'oro e suo stato felice,
> forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.
>   Qui fu innocente l'umana radice;
> qui primavera sempre e ogne frutto;

[16] See the reading of this episode in Ascoli, *Dante and the Making*, pp. 317–22, which draws significantly on the interpretations of Mazzotta, Barolini, and Martinez, cited in the previous note.

nettare è questo di che ciascun dice."
Io mi rivolsi 'n dietro allora tutto
a' miei poeti, e vidi che con riso
udito avëan l'ultimo costrutto" (Purg. 28.139–47; cf. 31.139–45)
("Those who in ancient times wrote in their poetry of the Age of Gold and its happy state, perhaps [in or through] Parnassus dreamed [of] this place. Here the human root was innocent; here there is always spring and every fruit; this is the nectar of which each one tells." I turned entirely around, back to my poets, then, and I saw that they had smiled hearing her last construction).

The Eden which Dante then enters then becomes a place where, at least in my reading, Dante imagines his invention of the vernacular poetic language capable of being molded into the *Commedia* as an analogue to the formation of human speech by the first man, Adam.[17]

In the final entry in this series of Dante's inductions into the company of writers, the cast of characters is very different than the two I have examined so far. Yes, they are writers, but not of poetry: rather all are sainted souls who were apostles on earth, the three favored apostles of Jesus in fact, those who, among other things, participated in the Transfiguration that revealed Jesus as the Christ in the company of the Old Testament authors and prophets;[18] all three are authors of New Testament Epistles, one is the author both of a Gospel and of Revelation.[19] And, although in the narrative order of the canticle Dante does leave them behind him, at least temporarily, there is certainly no question of his "superseding" them as he does with the pagan poets and Statius. However, as we shall see, it is clear enough that he is becoming something like their equal. And in the background, alluded to but never met in person, lurks the New Testament author with whom Dante invited comparison from the very outset, St. Paul, said to be the possessor of a "verace stilo" (*Par. 24:* truthful stylus [but also "style"]—echoing and improving on the "bello stilo" [truthful style] Dante was said to have inherited from Virgil in *Inf.* 1.87), whose journey to the "third heaven" Dante certainly has overgone by this point, at least in detail, if not in spiritual import.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I would begin teaching this episode by setting the stage for what I have punningly referred to as Dante-pilgrim-poet's "starring" role. The episode that concerns us specifically spans *Paradiso* Cantos 24–26, but it is part of the larger suite of cantos devoted to Dante's passage through the Ptolomaic Heaven of the fixed stars, the 8th and last of the visible Heavens, followed only by the Primum Mobile and the Empyrean, the invisible Heaven of Heavens itself. The episode begins at line 100 (always a significant number for Dante) of Canto 22, and lasts for the final third of the canto (ending at 154). It then continues through Cantos 23–26 entire, and occupies almost the first two thirds (lines 1–96) of Canto 27's 148 lines. At approximately 5 cantos in length it is the longest stay in any single subdivision of *Paradiso*, and indeed the longest single stretch in one place in the entirety of the *Commedia* (or tied with the earthly paradise episode, depending on whether you count the time Dante spends on the outside looking in). It is also the episode in which Dante-pilgrim himself is the center of attention for the longest time. The reason is not far to seek. Dante's sojourn in the Heaven of fixed stars occurs in one specific constellation, Gemini, which, he hastens to tell us, is his natal constellation, and its angelic influence, mediating the will of divine providence, has made him

[17] Ascoli, *Dante and the Making*, pp. 400–5, and see also the related argument concerning *On Eloquence in the Vernacular*, in chp. 4, and concerning *The Banquet* (*Convivio*) in the essay by the same author (Ascoli 2018).

[18] The Transfiguration of Christ is told in Matthew 17: 1–9, Mark 9: 1–9, and Luke 9: 28–36. In a famous simile (*Purg.* 32.76-82), Dante compares himself to the three privileged Apostles who witness the event; in his earlier *Convivio* (book 2, chp. 1) he used the scene to illustrate the "tropological" or "moral" sense of fourfold allegory. On Dante's use of and identification with the scene of the Transfiguration, see (Schnapp 1986, pp. 91–123; Hawkins 1999, pp. 186–93).

[19] At this point, let me mention a couple of the many studies dedicated in part or as whole to Dante's use of the Bible in the *Commedia*: (Barblan 1988); Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, esp. chps. 1–4; (Kleinhenz 2015, chps. 6, 7, 17). For the related question of the analogies between the author of the *Commedia* and the the human authors of the Bible, see again note 4 above, as well as (Ascoli 2017).

the one (and apparently only) person worthy both of taking this extraordinary journey, in or out of the body, and of then writing the work in which what he can recall of his travels is recorded:

> S'io torni mai, lettore, a quel divoto
> trïunfo per lo quale io piango spesso
> le mie peccata e 'l petto mi percuoto:
>   tu non avresti in tanto tratto e messo
> nel foco il dito, in quant' io vidi 'l segno
> che segue il Tauro e fui dentro da esso.
>   O glorïose stelle, o lume pregno
> di gran virtù, dal quale io riconosco
> tutto, qual che si sia, il mio ingegno,
>   con voi nasceva e s'ascondeva vosco
> quelli ch'è padre d'ogne mortal vita,
> quand' io sentì di prima l'aere tosco;
>   e poi, quando mi fu grazia largita
> d'entrar ne l'alta rota che vi gira,
> la vostra regïon mi fu sortita.
>   A voi divotamente ora sospira
> l'anima mia, per acquistar virtute
> al passo forte che a sé la tira.
>   ....
>   Col viso ritornai per tutte quante
> le sette spere...
> [e] tutti e sette mi si dimostraro
> quanto son grandi e quanto son veloci
> e come sono in distante riparo.
>   L'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci,
> volgendom' io con li etterni Gemelli,
> tutta m'apparve da' colli a le foci.
>   Poscia rivolsi li occhi a li occhi belli. (Par. 22.106–123, 133–134, 148–154)
>
> (So may I return, reader, to that devout triumph on whose account I ever weep for my sins and beat my breast: you would not any sooner have withdrawn your finger from the fire and put it in, than I saw the sign that follows the Bull and was within it. O glorious stars, O light pregnant with great power, from which I acknowledge that all my talent comes, whatever it may be, with you was being born and with you was setting he that is father of every mortal life, when I first felt the Tuscan air, and then, when grace was extended to me to enter the high wheel that turns you, your region was allotted me. To you now my soul devoutly sighs, to acquire power for the difficult pass that draws me to itself. . . . With my sight I returned through every one of the seven spheres . . . And all the seven showed me how large they are and how swift and how distant in dwelling. The little threshing floor that makes us so ferocious, as I was turning with the eternal Twins, appeared to me, all of it from the mountains to the river mouths. Then I turned my eyes back to her [Beatrice's] lovely eyes).

From this vantage point he looks back over the entirety of his journey, down through the seven planets of the geocentric cosmos, even to the "threshing floor" of our world, a sight that he will, with punctual symmetry, reproduce at the moment when he finally leaves this sphere for the Primum Mobile.[20]

[20] For a reading of the episode of the Fixed Stars as a whole, which has influenced my own thinking considerably, see (Durling and Martinez 1990, pp. 240–58) (Martinez is the principal author of these pages).

Each of those earlier spheres housed (if only for appearance's sake)[21] different qualities of saved souls, from lowest (those who failed to keep vows, in the Heaven of the Moon), to highest (the contemplatives of the 7th heaven, Saturn). This sphere, however, is the seat of the Church Triumphant in it its entirety, though the only souls to appear to Dante here are the most illustrious of all, this side of Mary and Christ himself, namely Saints Peter, James, and John, and Adam, father of all humanitity, the first three of whom test Dante's worthiness to be "of their number," and the last of whom offers his conversation as a kind of reward for the successful passing of that test. In other words, once again, Dante is at once subordinated and assimilated to a very distinguished group of souls.

In this case, conspicuously, the interactions would seem to be of a theological rather than a poetic kind. Dante undergoes a formal, tripartite examination that, as he says, is analogous to the scholastic ritual of the "bachelor" being tested to determine his worthiness to be granted the title of "magister" or "maestro," which we recall is also the second and lesser of the two epithets Dante attributes to Virgil in Canto one, *Inferno* (but which here is clearly in regards to a material entirely alien to the pagan poet, namely the three theological virtues named by Saint Paul):

> Sì come il bacciallier s'arma e non parla
> fin che 'l maestro la question propone,
> per approvarla, non per terminarla,
> così m'armava io d'ogne ragione
> mentre ch'ella dicea, per esser presto
> a tal querente e a tal professione. (Paradiso 24.46–51)
> (And as the bachelor arms himself but does not speak until the master proposes the question, and then to analyze, not to determine it; so I armed myself with all reasons while she [Beatrice] was speaking, to be ready for such a questioner and such a profession).

The pilgrim then goes on first to define, then to prove the existence of, and finally to demonstrate his own possession of Faith to St. Peter in Canto 24, of Hope to St. James in Canto 25, and of Charity or holy Love to St. John in Canto 26. And while the examination in Faith is, strictly speaking, theological, it may well recall Statius' discourse on his accession to faith (albeit in Nicodemian mode) in *Purgatorio* 22, since, as we have just seen, the reference to Paul's "verace stilo" clearly recalls and supersedes Virgil's "bello stilo." Perhaps most important as a key to making a connection between Canto 24 and the earlier episode is the fact that where Statius famously tries and fails three times to embrace the empty shade of Virgil, St. Peter celebrates Dante's success by circling him three times at canto's end (24.152), as he had also greeted Beatrice at the beginning of the canto (24.19–24).

I have written much more extensively elsewhere about the three examinations and the various ways in which they authorize Dante and his language (specifically the vernacular language in which he is writing the *Divine Comedy*).[22] In the remainder of this essay, however, I would simply like to point to some fairly obvious ways in which a student can be made to see how the examination scene, and Dante's indoctrination into the "Church Triumphant," even as he is given his marching orders for a return to the "Church Militant," make explicit the role of Christian poet par excellence distantly anticipated in *Inferno* 4, and that Dante implicitly occupied in *Purgatorio* 21 and 22, and then more explicitly assumed on his entrance into the Earthly Paradise.

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21 The distribution of the sainted souls throughout the visible heavens is actually a fiction designed ad hoc for Dante, since they are all really in the Empyrean: see Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion*, chp. 14.

22 Ascoli, *Dante and the Making*, chp. 7, sections v–vi and see again n. 17 above. On aspects of this episode, see also (Brownlee 1984; Brownlee 1990); William Stephany, "*Paradiso* XXV," in "Dante's 'Divine Comedy'; Introductory Readings III: 'Paradiso'," a special issue of *Lectura Dantis* 16–17 (Stephany 1995, pp. 371–88; Benfell 1992); Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, chp. 10; Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, chp. 4; (Moevs 1999; Lombardi 2007, pp. 129–34, nn).

As has regularly been remarked, Dante, who in *Inferno* twice called his poem a "comedìa" (16.128; 21.2), in clear opposition to Virgil's "alta tragedìa" (*Inf.* 19.113) in this specific episode apparently tries out a new sort of name, beginning already in Canto 23:

Se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue
che Polimnïa con le suore fero
del latte lor dolcissimo più pingue,
  per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero
non si verria, cantando il santo riso
e quanto il santo aspetto facea mero;
  e così, figurando il paradiso,
convien saltar lo sacrato poema,
come chi trova suo cammin riciso.
  Ma chi pensasse il ponderoso tema
e l'omero mortal che se ne carca,
nol biasmerebbe se sott' esso trema:
  non è pareggio da picciola barca
quel che fendendo va l'ardita prora,
né da nocchier ch'a sé medesmo parca. (Paradiso 23.55–69)
(If now were to sound all those tongues which Polyhymnia and her sisters with their sweetest milk made richest to help me, we could not come within a thousandth of the truth, singing her holy smile and how bright it made her holy face, and thus, figuring forth Paradise, the consecrated poem must leap over, like one who finds his path cut off. But whoever thinks of the ponderous theme and the mortal shoulder that has taken it on, will not blame it for trembling beneath the burden: it is no voyage for a little bark, the one my daring prow goes cutting, nor for a helmsman who spares himself).

The poem now is "consecrated," and then in the first line of canto 25 Dante refers to his work in progress as a "poema sacro," a holy poem, to which both Heaven and Earth have put their hands, and imagines himself returning from exile to his beloved and despised Florence to receive the laurel crown in the Baptistry:

Se mai continga che 'l poema sacro,
al quale ha posto mano e Cielo e terra
sì che m'ha fatto per più anni macro,
  vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
del bello ovile ov' io dormì agnello,
nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra,
  con altra voce omai, con altro vello
ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte
del mio battesmo prenderò 'l cappello;
  però che ne la fede, che fa conte
l'anime a Dio, quivi intra' io, e poi
Pietro per lei sì mi girò la fronte. (Paradiso 25.1–12)
(If it ever happen that the sacred poem, to which both Heaven and earth have set their hand, so that for many years it has made me lean, vanquish the cruelty that locks me out of the lovely sheepfold where I slept as a lamb, an enemy of the wolves that make war on it, with another voice by then, with other fleece I shall return as poet, and at the font of my baptism I shall accept the [laurel] wreath: for there I entered the faith that makes souls known to God, and later Peter so circled my brow because of it).

The idea of a consecrated or holy poem, doubly acknowledged by the classical laurel and St. Peter's symbolic crowning, clearly realizes the promise of the Statius/Virgil episode, which in fact concluded in Canto 22 with a reference to John the Baptist, and may in fact, and ironically, recall Virgil's eternal home, shared with unbaptized infants and his fellow virtuous pagans who were not, like Dante, born into the faith of Peter. That these lines end at almost the exact center of the episode of the Gemini episode (there are 360 lines through 25.12, and 361 more before Dante and Beatrice leave the constellation), no doubt emphasizes the fact that Dante's examination in theology is also proof of his fitness as holy poet, comparable, perhaps, to the David of the Psalms, whose "teo-dìa, or "god-song," the pilgrim will shortly thereafter cite in the examination on hope (25.73), with a distant echo of the apparently now superseded categories of "come-dìa" and "trage-dìa" (see also *Par.* 30.24).

In some sense, then, we have clearly arrived at Hollander's "theologus-poeta." But perhaps there is a little more to say. The reference to the collaboration of "heaven and earth" has, no doubt rightly, been taken as a hint at a double authorship, human and divine, not unlike that of the Bible itself. But it also has a special significance in the context of the Gemini, the twins, who are, of course, Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Leda by Jupiter, who famously took turns in heaven and in hell, expressing their dual human and divine origins, and, in a way, anticipating Dante's journey through Hell to Paradise.[23] In this sense, the whole episode suggests that it is Dante in himself who, Christo-mimetically, has realized the possibility for humanity to fully actualize its divinely endowed nature. In this sense, too, it is particularly fitting that the examination scene leads into Dante's encounter with Adam, in which humanity's "first father" makes reference to his own itinerary that led him from Eden, to the fallen world of history, to the underworld—the Limbo where Virgil dwells eternally (this is the last mention of him in the *Divine Comedy*)—before being elevated at last to the "concilio" of the blessed:

> Tu vuogli udir quant' è che Dio mi puose
> ne l'eccelso giardino ove costei
> a così lunga scala ti dispuose,
>   e quanto fu diletto a li occhi miei,
> e la propria cagion del gran disdegno,
> e l'idïoma ch'usai e che fei.
>   Or, figliuol mio, non il gustar del legno
> fu per sé la cagion di tanto essilio,
> ma solamente il trapassar del segno.
>   Quindi onde mosse tua donna Virgilio,
> quattromilia trecento e due volumi
> di sol desiderai questo concilio,
>   e vidi lui tornare a tutt'i lumi
> de la sua strada novecento trenta
> fïate mentre ch'ïo in terra fu'mi. (Paradiso 26.109–120)
> (You wish to know how long ago God placed me in the high garden where she [Beatrice] there readied you for so long a stairway, and how long it was a delight to my eyes, and the true reason for his great anger, and the language that I spoke and that I devised. Now, my son, not the tasting of the tree in itself was the cause of so long an exile, but only the going beyond the [sign]. Down there whence your lady sent Virgil, for four thousand, three hundred and two turnings of the sun I yearned for this assembly [the time between his death

[23] For an extended reflection on the significance of the Gemini for Dante, with a different emphasis from mine, see Durling and Martinez, *Time and the Crystal*, pp. 240–57 et passim. On Dante's astronomy/astrology more generally, see (Kay 1994; Cornish 2000).

and Christ's], and I saw him return along the road of all his lights nine hundred thirty times, while I lived on earth).

Like Adam, and Christ, like the Twins, Dante has gone from this world to the underworld and on to Heaven, and in so doing has achieved the capacity to write this "consecrated poem," in which, as we have seen, he will assume the starring role.

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Pilgrim Readers: Introducing Undergraduates to Dante's Divine Comedy

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Abstract: In the context of undergraduate education, "Teaching Dante" often means reading selected cantos from the *Divine Comedy*, most, if not all of them, taken from the *Inferno.* I suggest, however, that Dante's aims in the *Divine Comedy*, as well as the particular experiences related in the *Inferno* itself, cannot be understood from any perspective offered by the *Inferno* alone. In spelling out my reasons for saying this I offer an approach to the text that includes readings from each of its three *cantiche* within the sometimes severe time-limitations of an undergraduate course. Central to this approach is the notion that student-readers of the *Divine Comedy* are called upon by the poem to be not mere observers of the experiences of the poet-pilgrim but to become themselves "pilgrim-readers." In this presentation, this "call" is itself explored through the treatment of "divine justice" within the poem.

Keywords: Dante; pedagogy; interdisciplinarity; literary studies; philosophy; core and general education curricula; great books programs

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1. Introduction

About 15 years ago I signed myself up for Italian 101 at the college where I teach, having decided that I wanted to read Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Italian. I made my way through a half dozen courses and finally on to Dante I and Dante II. Along the way, colleagues and other acquaintances would tell me of their having read some Dante in college or even in high school. Nearly always, however, they reported that they had read only from the *Inferno*. That seemed to me very understandable. For a variety of reasons the *Inferno* is likely to be for the first-time reader the most accessible part of the *Divine Comedy*. Additionally, in any undergraduate course in which Dante's work is only a part—and even a relatively small part—of what is to be studied, time-constraints are bound to be severe. Nonetheless, I soon came to think that the practice of reading only from the *Inferno* was unfortunate in the extreme. Part of what led me to this view was the powerful emotional contrasts I experienced at the transitions from the *Inferno* to the *Purgatorio* and from the *Purgatorio* to the *Paradiso* in my first reading of the full poem in Italian. By "contrasts" I mean the sense of light and space in Canto I of the *Purgatorio* coupled with the hopefulness of the penitent sinners in other early cantos as contrasted with the darkness and anguish of the *Inferno*; and then the sense of still greater light in Canto I of the *Paradiso*, along with the contentment, humility and plain joy of the souls that Dante meets in the early cantos of the same as contrasted with the labors of the climb up Mount Purgatory, with the visions and sounds of both virtue and vice on the different cornices. From then on I thought that if I were to teach Dante to undergraduates I would have to ask my students to read, along with substantial parts of the *Inferno*, enough of the *Purgatorio* and enough of the *Paradiso* to at least suggest the powerful contrasts enforced in the transitions between the three parts of the poem. However, the point was not wholly one of emotional contrasts; for these, it seemed to me, were, in the poem, tied up with that "good of the intellect" which, as Virgil tells us in *Inferno* 3, is lost to the souls of the *Inferno* (Sinclair 1939a, p. 47). The problem, as I came to see it, was that the *Inferno* itself does not offer us any substantial representation of that good and so cannot give the reader any effective understanding of the *Inferno*

itself. By this I mean that it cannot give the reader any proper understanding of the significance of Dante the Pilgrim's experience within it, which may be one reason why the reading of the *Inferno* can so easily turn into an exercise in rubbernecking, of marveling again and again at the ingenious forms of divine retribution Dante has devised for the damned. Hence my objectives in this essay: To spell out my concern about students' reading the *Inferno* alone and in doing so offer an alternative to individuals trying to find a place for Dante—or, more precisely, the *Divine Comedy*—in their undergraduate courses.

In what follows, then, I will try to do two things. First, I will try to spell out a case for saying that the *Inferno* cannot, on its own, offer us any proper understanding of the significance of Dante's experience within it. Second, I will suggest an approach to teaching the poem that allows an instructor to take students beyond the *Inferno* and through to the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* within what I expect to be the fairly common time-constraints met in an undergraduate course. One aspect of this approach might be said to be "pragmatic," and I will discuss this presently. The other aspect of it might be called "interpretive." This aspect is suggested by my title, "Pilgrim Readers," and will be delineated in the course of my efforts to accomplish my first goal—that of making my case for leading students beyond the *Inferno* to the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*—for in the course of those efforts I will give considerable attention to what I will call "the problem of divine justice." I will use Dante's treatment of this problem to bring out the significance of "the good of the intellect" within the poem as a whole.

Let me, then, briefly revert to the pragmatic aspect of my suggested approach to the poem and simply note some of the practical decisions I have made in my own teaching of it. The first of these is my decision to use John Sinclair's translation of the poem. Sinclair's is a prose translation, which seems to me preferable to any of the verse translations I know. More importantly, however, is that Sinclair provides what I think are accessible and very helpful discussions of each canto immediately following his translation of it. So the second of the relevant practical decisions I have made is to ask students to read one canto and its commentary each day, so that in four weeks they would be expected to read about twenty eight cantos,[1] though in my own classes I also make plenty of references to other cantos. I leave it to the students to determine whether it is better for them to read Sinclair or Dante first. Lastly, I distribute Dorothy Sayers' "map" of Dante's hell, found in her translation of the *Inferno* (Sayers 1950, pp. 138, 180, 264), as well as her diagrams of Mount Purgatory and of Paradise, found in her editions of the *Purgatorio* (Sayers 1955, pp. 202–3) and *Paradiso* (Sayers 1962, unnumbered insert), respectively. In all of this, my hope is that students get through at least a substantial number of the particular cantos that I want to focus on and so can both experience in their own reading what I take to be the crucial emotional contrasts among the three parts of the poem and ultimately arrive at an understanding of their significance to the poem as a whole. Now, then, on to my case for getting beyond the *Inferno*.

2. Hell

It is in the opening lines of the *Inferno* that Dante tells us that to describe the "dark wood"—a wood "savage and harsh and dense"—in which he found himself "in the middle of the journey of our life" is hardly less bitter than death itself, but that he will do so in order to give an account "of the good which [he] found there." In his commentary on these lines, Charles Singleton tells us that the "good that he found there" will be "the wayfarer's rescue by Virgil after the she-wolf thrusts him back

[1] Truth to tell, I devote almost seven weeks to Dante in the two courses in which I teach his *Divine Comedy*, one a course in medieval philosophy and the other a course in the philosophy of religion. So I may be pushing rather too hard here in trying to sketch an approach that can fit into four weeks. All the same, the following is one selection of cantos that might be assigned within that shorter time-frame: *Inferno*: 1 through 6; 11 (Virgil on the order of hell); 26 (the "mad flight" of Ulysses); 33 (Ugolino); 34 (Satan, the exit from hell and the sighting of the stars). *Purgatorio:* 1–5; 17 and 18 (Virgil on love and sin); 27 (Virgil's final charge to Dante); 30 (Virgil's disappearance; Beatrice's appearance); 31 (crossing Lethe); 33 (Eunoe; Dante "ready to rise to the stars"). *Paradiso*: 1; 3–5 (entry into Paradise; the spheres of the Moon and of Mercury); 22 (To the sphere of the stars; Dante's view of "the little threshing floor" that is the earth); 27–28 (To the *primum mobile* and the "inversion" of the universe); 33 (The Beatific Vision).

into the dark wood" (Singleton 1970, p. 6). This seems to me perfectly true. At the same time, however, it seems to me that the good of this rescue surely lies not only in what Dante is rescued from but in what he is rescued for. He is rescued from the dark wood and so, in an important sense, from himself; for Dante's hell clearly is not, like Sartre's, "other people" but, essentially, oneself. On the other hand, what Dante is rescued *for* can be said to be, on one level, the "smile" of Beatrice (Sinclair 1939c, p. 333), on another level, the "truth" of the heavenly court (Sinclair 1939c, p. 361), and, ultimately, a vision of God (Sinclair 1939c, p. 479ff.), God being, on Dante's view, the fullness of that truth that is itself "the good of the intellect" spoken of by Virgil in *Inferno* 3.

Insofar as he is rescued *for* something, then, his rescue from the dark wood marks for Dante the Pilgrim—as distinct from Dante the poet—the beginning of a conversion, indeed, the beginning of that "ripening" (*maturare* is the Italian verb) which, as Beatrice explains to him in *Paradiso* 25, must be undergone by any mortal who is to rise to paradise (Sinclair 1939c, p. 361). All things from the mortal world, she explains, must be "ripened" in the "beams"—that is, in the light—of the heavenly court (see also the use of "beams" [*raggi*] in *Paradiso* 23 (Sinclair 1939c, p. 335). The metaphor of "ripening" is introduced in the third round or "*girone*" of the seventh Circle of the *Inferno*, where Dante remarks to Virgil that the fire that falls like rain seems not to "ripen" proud Capaneus (Sinclair 1939a, p. 183). Sinclair's translation is "soften," and the sense is that of fruit being softened as it ripens or matures. Later, Vanni Fucci is described as *acerbo*—"unripe", sour, or bitter—which Sinclair renders as "hardened"(Sinclair 1939a, p. 307). The hardness is the hardness of pride common to Capaneus and Vanni Fucci but original to Satan, as indicated in *Paradiso* 19, where we are told that "the first proud spirit, who was the highest of all creatures, fell unripe [*acerbo*] through not waiting for light," that is, for grace (Sinclair 1939c, p. 273). It is in relation to this pride that, in *Purgatorio* 10, Dante introduces another metaphor of conversion, that of the butterfly:

> O proud Christians, weary wretches sick in the mind's vision ... do you not perceive that we are worms born to form the angelic butterfly that soars to judgement without defense? Why does your mind float so high, since you are as it were imperfect insects, like the worm that is undeveloped?[2] (Sinclair 1939b, p. 137)

Dante's own ripening begins in the *Inferno*, but that is also where the need for it is made clear, as in Canto 5, when, at the end of his encounter with Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, he feels such pity (*pieta*) at their plight that he swoons and falls "as a dead body falls" (Sinclair 1939a, p. 79). When he comes to himself at the start of Canto 6 he speaks of the sadness that had confused or overwhelmed him. Whatever we make of the pity, the sadness and the confusion here are not those of Dante the poet but of Dante the pilgrim, for the poet has already learned what the *Inferno* has yet to teach the pilgrim, essentially, as Capaneus himself will explain in Canto 14, that the shades in hell are in death what they were in life. I take this to be a fundamental principle of Dante's Hell, a principle arguably found already in Virgil's *Aeneid*, where in Book Six Anchises says of the shades in Virgil's underworld that each "suffers his own spirit," (Virgil 1935, p. 559) itself a judgment that may be seen as a version of Heraclitus's "Character is fate." Here, in any case, is the sense in which one can be one's own hell. But it belongs to the "ripening" that Dante the pilgrim must undergo that he should learn the decidedly limited place of pity in the *Inferno*. Thus Virgil—with some impatience—will rebuke the pilgrim when he weeps over the contorted shades of the Diviners in Canto 20: "Are you even yet among the other fools? Here pity lives when it is altogether dead. Who is more wicked than he who sorrows at God's judgment?" (Sinclair 1939a, p. 251).

These may seem harsh words, not only to the pilgrim, but, perhaps, to us as well—unripe as we may be?—and certainly in my experience to more than a few undergraduates. Is not Dante's God a vengeful—a vindictive—God? Thus arises what I have called "the problem of divine justice." However,

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[2] Sinclair's translation, except where in the first line I have replaced his "vainglorious" with "proud", the Italian being "*superbi*".

if the *Inferno* raises this problem, it also complicates it, both for Dante the Pilgrim and for us as readers. For, while it is perfectly evident that the punishments of hell are retributive (the sense of the term "*contrapasso*" in *Inferno* 28 (Sinclair 1939a, p. 353)), the sense of "retribution" here is not that of an "external" retaliation for a deed done. As I have already suggested, retribution in the *Inferno* consists in the playing out of the state of one's very self. Again, the issue is not simply a matter of deeds done. And yet just how profoundly it is not a matter of deeds done is not made evident until the *Purgatorio.* For it is only there that we will find that many of the *deeds* of the "fortunate souls" (Sinclair 1939b, p. 49) ascending Mount Purgatory are also the deeds of the damned in Dante's *Inferno* (see, e.g., the envy of Guido del Duca in *Purgatorio* 14; the pride of Omberto Aldobrandischi in *Purgatorio* 11; or the heresy of Manfred, son of Frederick II, in *Purgatorio* 3). Indeed, as we learn as early as *Purgatorio* 5, what makes the difference in the fate of such "fortunate" because saved sinners may be something so small as "one little tear" (Sinclair 1939b, p. 73), so long as it be a tear of genuine repentance (see Manfred's remarks in *Purg*atorio 3 (Sinclair 1939b, p. 51)). The essential point is in fact made in *Purgatorio* 1, where, having witnessed the fate of the suicides in *Inferno* 13, we now find that Cato, the pagan suicide, is the warder of Mount Purgatory and, apparently, destined for salvation (Sinclair 1939b, p. 23). Thus, what may have seemed a harsh justice in the *Inferno* may seem exceedingly lenient in the *Purgatorio*, to which we must now turn.

3. To Mount Purgatory and on to Paradise

The contrast between the realm of the repentant and that of the damned is immediately enforced in Canto 1: Dante and Virgil have made their way out of the "dead air" of hell into a "sapphire dawn" that "gladdens the eyes" of the pilgrim (Sinclair 1939b, p. 19). Dante turns from the East to the South and sees four stars—having, ultimately, the symbolic value of the four (infused) cardinal virtues (see *Purgatorio* 31)—in whose light the whole sky seems to rejoice. The light of the stars is so bright that when Dante sees it reflected from the face of Cato it is as if the sun itself were shining on the Roman hero of freedom. Dante and Virgil are at the foot of Mount Purgatory, the mountain on which "the human spirit is purged and becomes fit to ascend to heaven" (Sinclair 1939b, p. 19). The souls they meet are said to be "well" or "happily" born—"*ben nati*"—or, as Sinclair has it, "born for bliss" (Sinclair 1939b, p. 71), and their lives are said to be "*ben finiti*," that is, well finished, for they are soon to begin the purgation of their sins in their ascent of the mountain and so make their way to Paradise. Gladly will they endure the suffering of Purgatory, for their suffering is understood to be redemptive. As Virgil explains in Canto 15, here the wounds of sin are healed by being painful. Such healing and the humility that is a condition for it (see the "humble" [*l'umile*] rushes in *Purgatorio* 1 (Sinclair 1939b, p. 25)) are essential to the soul's progress toward that "good of the intellect" lost to those in hell. This can be made clearer, however, if we return to Cato—though not to Cato alone, but to the varied states of virtuous pagans in the *Commedia* as a whole—for while Virgil will return to "Limbo," the First Circle of the *Inferno*, Cato is not the only pagan whose salvation is affirmed in the poem.

In *Purgatorio* 10, where the sin of pride is to be purged, Dante and Virgil look upon the examples of humility carved in the marble wall of the cornice or terrace on which they make their way up the mountain. The first is of Mary at the moment of the Annunciation. The second is David dancing before the ark, "more and less than a king" (see Singleton 1973, pp. 206–7). But the third depicts "the high glory" of the Emperor Trajan (Sinclair 1939b, p. 135). As Singleton writes: "Legend has it that the Emperor was setting out for the wars when a poor widow stopped him and demanded redress for the death of her son and that when he tried to put her off, she constrained him to accede to her demand" (Singleton 1973, p. 210). Moreover, as Singleton goes on to note, legend further has it that Gregory the Great was so moved by Trajan's response to the woman that he prayed that Trajan be recalled to life from hell, "in order that he might have room for repentance" (Singleton 1973, p. 210) for his sins. In the carving, Dante's Trajan responds to the widow's plea by saying that he will fulfill his duty to her before he goes to war: "Justice requires it and compassion bids me stay" (Sinclair 1939b, p. 135).

Evidently, though not surprisingly, Trajan took advantage of the "room for repentance" he was given. I say "not surprisingly" because his own humility was evident in his acceptance of the woman's demand. (He is pictured, we must recall, on the wall of the terrace upon which the sin of pride is to be purged.) He then appears in *Paradiso* 20, where he and the wholly fictitious Ripheus of Virgil's *Aeneid* are among the five "lights" or spirits that make up the eyebrow of the Eagle that is there the symbol of divine justice. In his *Aeneid* Virgil describes Ripheus as "the most just" of the Trojans (Virgil 1935, p. 323), and here in *Paradiso* 20 the Eagle itself says of him: "[N]ow he knows much that the world cannot see of the divine grace, although his sight does not discern its bottom" (Sinclair 1939c, p. 291). In his comment on *Paradiso* 20, Sinclair writes that it was "impossible for [Dante] to believe that the saving gifts of faith and hope and love—the three 'theological' virtues are repeatedly referred to in the Canto—would be withheld from Ripheus by the Grace which, being divine, is infinite" (Sinclair 1939c, p. 299). This may be true, but one needs to be careful here. While both Scripture (Acts 10:35) and 13th century theology support Dante's placement of Trajan and, by extension, of Ripheus in Paradise, Dante's point is not to assure us that God in his wisdom will in the end come up to our or Dante's own standard of justice. To the contrary, as the Eagle makes clear in Canto 20, what we need to learn from the cases of Trajan and Ripheus is restraint in our judgments about "the elect" (Sinclair 1939c, p. 293). That is, we need to learn greater humility. Near the close of the Canto, the Eagle has this to say: "O predestination, how far removed is thy root from their gaze who see not the First Cause whole! And you mortals, keep yourselves restrained in judging, for we, who see God, do not yet know all the elect; and this very lack is sweet to us, because in this good our good is perfected, that what God wills we will too" (Sinclair 1939c, p. 293). We mortals, then, simply do not know the fate of Trajan (or of Virgil, for that matter), while of the wholly fictitious Ripheus there is no fate to be known. Again, as the Eagle tells us, our good is perfected not when we are relieved to have Dante's—or anyone else's—support for our own judgments about divine justice, but when we simply will that God's will be done. In this way, Canto 20 takes us back to *Paradiso* 3, where Piccarda explains to Dante that she does not will for herself a higher place in heaven because "in God's will is our peace" (Sinclair 1939c, p. 53).

But if all of this explains why we need caution when we hear the stories of Trajan and Ripheus or, for that matter, read of the salvation of Cato, it also underscores the fundamental emotional contrast between the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*—between humble repentance and the peace that passes all understanding—one of the reasons for taking students beyond the *Inferno* through to the *Purgatorio* and on to the *Paradiso*. Equally important, however, is that students will then encounter Dante's warning to the reader in *Paradiso* 2: "O ye who in a little bark, eager to listen, have followed behind my ship that singing makes her way, turn back to see your shores again; do not put forth on the deep, for, perhaps, losing me, you would be left bewildered" (Sinclair 1939c, p. 33). It is true that Dante goes on to address a different "few" of his readers: "Ye other few that reached out early for the angels' bread by which men here [on earth] live but never come from it satisfied, you may indeed put forth your vessel on the salt depths, holding my furrow before the water returns smooth again" (Sinclair 1939c, p. 33). But unless we are confident of belonging to this other few, we are here challenged to consider the possibility that we are not ourselves prepared for what will follow, nor, perhaps, were sufficiently prepared even for what we met in the *Inferno* or *Purgatorio.* After all, Dante the Pilgrim required the whole of the *Inferno*, as well as that of the *Purgatorio* and the first twenty-two Cantos of the *Paradiso*, before, in Canto 23, he could "bear" the smile of Beatrice (Sinclair 1939c, p. 333), and then continue through the last cantos of the poem to the Empyrean, the tenth heaven where, in the vision of God, every desire is "completed" (*perfetti*), "ripened" (*matura*), and "whole" (*intera*), that is, whole, ripened and perfected in its eternal satisfaction (Sinclair 1939c, p. 319). Moreover, the *Paradiso* makes clear, I think, a crucial reason why Dante the Pilgrim finally is able to bear the smile of Beatrice, namely, by doubting and questioning. As he declares in *Paradiso* 4:

> I see well that our intellect is never satisfied unless the truth enlighten it beyond which no truth can range. In that it rests as soon as it gains it, like a beast in its lair; and it can gain it,

else every desire were vain. Doubt, therefore, like a shoot, springs from the root of the truth, and it is nature that urges us to the summit from height to height. (Sinclair 1939c, p. 67)

We may, conclude, then, that in *reading* the *Divine Comedy*, doubts, perplexities, and questions are not to be dodged—any more than their complete resolution is to be expected. Few of us, surely, as readers of the poem, *can* be more—nor should wish to be less?—than Pilgrims, ripening, we hope, as we go.

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Understanding Dante's Comedy as Virtuous Friendship

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Abstract: As Dante explains in his epistle to Can Grande, the purpose of the *Comedy* is to move the reader from a state of misery to a state of happiness. The poet himself testifies that the poem was written as a work of moral philosophy oriented to the achievement of happiness, *eudaimonia*: the beatific vision of God. Moreover, Dante insists on his poem's efficacy to affect in its readers a similar moral and religious transformation as that which the poem represents through the narrative journey of the pilgrim. To put it another way, Dante represents his poem's relationship to its reader as a kind of virtuous friendship. This essay sets forth a model for teaching Dante's poem as an experiment in virtuous friendship that can transform the classroom into a workshop for the philosophical and religious quest for happiness. This involves teaching the text with an eye not only to the content and style of the poem but also to the performative and participatory demands of the text. Beginning with this framework, this essay works out pedagogical strategies for teaching the *Comedy* as a form of virtuous friendship extended over the centuries between Dante Alighieri and the contemporary reader. Chiefly, I explore ways Dante makes his readers complicit in the pilgrim's own moral and spiritual journey toward the virtue of hope translated into the practice of prayer through a close, pedagogical reading of *Inferno* 3, *Purgatorio* 5, and *Paradiso* 20. I explore ways that Dante's use of surprise, shock, misdirection, appeal to mystery, and retreat to silence creates a morally significant aporia of knowledge that serves as a laboratory for readers' own virtuous transformation. I end with a critical assessment of the challenges involved in understanding the *Comedy* as virtuous friendship.

Keywords: Dante; teaching; virtue; formation; pedagogy; understanding; prayer; hope; friendship; understanding

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1. Teaching toward Understanding

I begin with what I hope is not a particularly controversial claim. The goal of teaching Dante's *Comedy* is to help students "understand" the poem. The difficulty lies in what it means to understand the poem. Is "understanding" equivalent to historical or literary re-construction of the text? Does understanding consist in the ability to rehearse the difference between a Guelph and the Ghibelline, to state what "Virgil" and "Beatrice' symbolize, and to memorize the logical ordering of Dante's afterlife?

In this essay, I suggest a thicker definition of what it means to teach students how to understand Dante's *Comedy.* Following the lead of Rowan Williams, I suggest that "understanding" is best defined as "knowing what to do or say next" (Williams 2014, p. 68). Williams uses the example of a teacher writing a pattern on the chalkboard: "2, 4, 6, 8 . . . ". We understand the pattern when we write "10". "Understanding" consists, therefore, not only in the acquisition of information, but also in knowing what response this information requires of us.

This definition of understanding brings up the possibility of "performative" reading, or what J.L. Austin has called the "perlocutionary effect" of reading—that is, the effect that occurs by means of the

text.[1] What we might call the "mediation of the book" is an important sub-theme of the *Comedy*; indeed, it is a theme which reinforces the mediatory role played by the *Comedy* itself. Thus, the central question of my course's study of Dante is whether this is a text that we can and will perform to our salvation. If so, what would such a performance look like? I suggest to my students that "understanding" the poem occurs more in and through the particularities of their personal performance of the text by becoming people characterized by virtue, rather than in their ability to rehearse a collection of information *about* the poem.[2]

I teach the *Comedy* as part of my Christian Imagination course, an upper-level theology class that fulfills a core curriculum requirement at my Jesuit university. The "imagination" of the course's title refers to Charles Taylor's influential concept of the "social imaginary," which I gloss (with the help of James K.A. Smith) as a "collection of stories, images, and myths of the good life that shape both our desires and our actions".[3] I pair this term with C.S. Lewis' brief essay on hermeneutics, "Meditation in a Toolshed" (Lewis 2014). In that essay, Lewis describes the need for two forms of optics: a "looking at" (which he describes as analytical, detached, etc.) and a "looking along" (which he describes as a kind of sympathetic vision; a way of inhabiting a particular way of seeing, of making it your own for a time). My course is a sustained exercise in looking *at* and looking *along* a number of different—even competing[4]—social imaginaries, not in a disinterested and merely academic way, but as a mode of self-knowledge. Thus, the thesis statement of my course is an excerpt from a poem by Dana Gioia, found at the top of the course syllabus:

> The tales we tell are either false or true,
>
> But neither purpose is the point. We weave
>
> The fabric of our own existence out of words,
>
> And the right story tells us who we are. (Gioia 2012, p.13)

The *Comedy* is one of those social imaginaries that "tells us who we are"—or, perhaps better, invites us to become a certain type of person. To riff once again on Rowan Williams, to understand the *Comedy* is to "look along it" and to see it as something more than a "phenomenon without any conviction that this [is] a story in which [we] belong" (Williams 2014, p. 71). When we understand the *Comedy*, we see Dante himself as a virtuous friend whose words put on us a salutary "pressure to respond and continue" the narrative of the pilgrim's journey of self-knowledge—his poetic and theological construction of himself by means of language—through the performance of the narrative in our own lives.[5]

I structure my course around this goal of inviting students to a reflective, engaged, and performative reading by adopting the following pedagogical strategies:

(1) I assign the entire *Comedy*. The religious, philosophical, and moral power of the poem emerges most completely and most powerfully when students follow the pilgrim's entire journey.

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1 The *Comedy* is full of examples of morally significant performative reading. Two examples will make this plain. First, Paolo and Francesca perform their reading unto their damnation: "A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it. That day we read in it no further" (*Inferno* 5.137–138) (Alighieri 2000). Second, Statius misreads Virgil and is saved: "Through you I was a poet, through you a Christian" (*Purgatorio* 22.73) (Alighieri 2004).

2 Arguing thus, I want to resist a pre-mature reification of the *Comedy* as "literature" (or even as "theology") by attending to the performative character of the text, emphasizing especially its *perlocutionary* effect in the reader. See Austin (1975, pp. 100–1).

3 See Smith (2009, p. 66). As a relatively tame example of a "social imaginary" I recall a commercial for the iPad Air that used a variety of images of artistic, athletic, innovative, and adventurous lives played over a monologue from the film *Dead Poets Society*. With my students I discuss how Apple is sellinga picture of the good lifewhich is meant to shape our desires (both for that life and for the iPad that will help us achieve that life) and our actions (of going out and buying a ne device).

4 For example, we follow Dante with a study of Friedrich Nietzsche and a graphic novel the depicts the Nietzschean imagination: Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (Moore 2014.)

5 See Williams (2014, p. 72): "And all this is inseparable from the recognition that we cannot speak about our *selves* without narrative, without the hinterland of allusion to the time it takes to shape or establish what we can call a self by new utterance, new determinations of who is speaking".

(2) Even in a lecture-format course (30 students), I create space for consideration, discussion, and debate of Dante's claims. My aim is to present the classroom as a space for friendly conversation, a workshop for wisdom under Dante's tutelage. This pedagogical style also animates my decision to host individual oral exams at the end of the semester rather than a written, comprehensive exam. The pilgrim's moral and spiritual journey is effected through conversation and friendship; so too must our pilgrimage through the poem.

(3) I assign weekly reflection journals in which students pick a specific scene from the week's reading that they find especially important, controversial, disagreeable, or significant. They must then, in 500 words or less, personally interact with the selected text, arguing with it, challenging it, praising it. They must then author a brief response to themselves *from* Dante. This exercise puts students into direct dialogical relationship with Dante's poem.[6]

(4) Students have to read and review a memoir of reading the *Comedy* which narrates the power of encountering the poem as a living text and Dante as a virtuous friend.

(5) Finally, students must write a reflection paper in which they narrate their own "social imaginary" or "picture of the good life" in conversation with the texts of our course. The goal of this assignment is for students to "look along" our course texts to consider their own lives, loves, and ambitions.

This style and these assignments are geared toward initiating students into a virtuous friendship with Dante through the mediation of the poem and the course. The goal is to think with the *Comedy* as a project of self-knowledge and intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth and formation.

2. Reading toward Virtue[7]

The biggest obstacle to my students' "understanding" of the *Comedy* along the lines I have been suggesting is the assumption that Dante is writing a treatise of moral philosophy rather than a reformational and missionary text (e.g., Cacciaguida's instruction to write the *Comedy* in *Paradiso* 17). To put that another way, my students expect to meet Dante as someone who wants only to give them answers rather than one who is committed to asking questions *of* them. They expect didactic and ideological discourse rather than a poem.[8]

Yet I insist that the purpose of the pilgrim's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven is not simply to expand Dante's discursive comprehension of philosophic and theological realities, but to reform and remake the pilgrim as a man and as a poet. Going further, the same purpose extends to us, Dante's readers, for whom he wrote them poem "to move [readers] from a state of misery to happiness".[9]

The reformational character of the *Comedy* is shown most clearly in the pilgrim's examination on the theological virtues in *Paradiso* 24–26. In these cantos, we see Dante quizzed on three things:

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[6] My classroom dynamic is inter-personal, engaged lecture and discussion. After briefly lecturing on the content of the day's reading, drawing attention to the subtleties and nuances of the text, I then turn our attention to contemporary extension of Dante's ideas, inviting students to engage him sympathetically but critically. Chiefly, I ask students to discuss among themselves and then together as a group whether or not the particular theme in Dante's poem that we have discussed "translates" to their own day and what, if anything, Dante might have to say to challenge us today.

[7] Much of this section is drawn from or otherwise inspired by the work of Montemaggi (2016). For other work on Dante in a similar vein, see DeLorenzo and Montemaggi (2017). For a seminal study of Dante's philosophy that sets the stage for much of the theological extension of the poem as I explore here, see Moevs (2005).

[8] This has both an academic and a personal dimension. Academically, my students come to our reading with a certain prejudice against Dante, being familiar only with *Inferno*. What they know of him is simply that he created an elaborate system of infernal torments for his political enemies. They are surprised to encounter Dante as someone with a far more complex and constructive project than that. Personally, however, despite their distaste for *Inferno*, I find that my students can make sense of it once they identify its moral plan. They often end up preferring the *Inferno* to the other two *cantica* because of its clear and stark moral calculus. There seems to be an element of "moral control" in *Inferno* that appeals to them, which gets challenged the moment they cross into *Purgatorio*. I will elaborate on the salutary effects of this challenge to their controlled moral system below.

[9] See Dante's *Letter of Cangrande*, paragraph 15: http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html.

his intellectual apprehension of the virtues (definitions, etc.), how he learned about the virtues, and, most critically, his personal conformation to these virtues [“do you have it in your pocket?” (*Paradiso* 24.85)].[10] He must not simply know about faith, but to be faithful; to be hopeful; to be charitable. By taking his readers along with him on his *itinerarium ad mentis deum* (journey of the mind into God), Dante invites readers into the same transformative conformation of their souls to divine love. For the pilgrim, to “understand” the journey is to know what to do or say next: like Peter Damien in *Paradiso* 21, to become virtuous, to become love (Montemaggi 2016, p. 30). So too, I suggest, for us as readers.

This trajectory in the *Comedy* is the central focus of my course’s study of the poem. How might reading the *Comedy* help us become faithful, hopeful, and charitable? This line of inquiry begins with our discussion of the infamously “difficult words” carved above the gate to Hell: “Abandon every hope you who enter here” (*Inferno* 3.9) As Vittorio Montemaggi suggestively points out, the Italian could also be rendered as “Those who enter here *have* abandoned hope” (Montemaggi 2016, p. 212).[11] I ask my students to explore the rhetorical differences between the two translations, asking them to keep in mind the ambiguities of Dante’s Italian that get lost in translation. We proceed then into Hell, stopping first to visit the virtuous pagans in Limbo. We explore together the historical and theological context of Dante’s treatment of the virtuous pagans, making sure that students first apprehend the logic of Dante’s presentation before I invite them to argue the justice or injustice of Dante’s treatment of the virtuous pagans (especially as it bears on his treatment of Virgil). Students typically voice concerns about whether it is “fair” for “good people” to be condemned for failing to know a Christ who had not yet come. The presence of unbaptized babies in Limbo only compounds the sense of injustice: how could innocent babies be damned? More to the point, Dante’s representation of Limbo exposes that students consider the need for baptism to be an arbitrary, exclusionary, and ultimately silly moral consideration. If people are “good” (or “innocent”), why should they need baptism, too?

While there are confusions and frustrations throughout the rest of the journey through *Inferno*, in general, students begin to acclimate to the moral logic of Dante’s infernal system. They may not like or appreciate his moral scheme, but, given his theological and metaphysical presuppositions, students can at least recognize—if not appreciate—its sense.

This sense, however, is immediately compromised once we arrive in Purgatory. There, on the shores of the mountain, we meet Cato, a virtuous pagan and a suicide. Following the moral logic of *Inferno*, Cato decidedly does not belong in this region of grace. Indeed, we might say that many of the figures the pilgrim meets in ante-purgatory should come as a surprise—even a shock—to us as readers. The salvation of Buonconte in *Purgatorio* 5 is especially scandalous to students. How can it possibly be fair that someone like Buonconte can be saved simply by gasping *“Maria”* as he dies, when *Plato* is damned? There is hardly a point in our reading that is more frustrating for students than this scandalous presentation of the radicality of divine grace. They agree with Cato’s outburst upon seeing Virgil and the pilgrim climbing out of Hell, “Is heaven’s eternal law broken?” (*Purgatorio* 1.46).

I will often ask my students to substitute someone from our own day for Cato, Manfred, and Buonconte. Who would they be shocked to encounter in the realm of grace? How would they react if the first person they encountered was one of the moral monsters of our recent history? I suggest that they consider the first five cantos of *Purgatorio* as Dante’s way of holding up a mirror to them to expose ways that all of us resist the radical generosity of grace, often preferring the cold, straightforward logic of Hell. In other words, what does our response to the presence of Cato, Manfred, and Buonconte tell us about our own limited understanding and acceptance of the radicality of grace? Dante confronts us as readers with the decision to embrace grace (even if it thrusts us into the ambiguities of the higher logic of divine mercy), or to retreat to the straightforward, unrelenting moral calculus of the damned.

[10] All quotations from the *Comedy* come from the translation by Robert and Jean Hollander.
[11] It is worth noting that while the passage in question could be translated in the indicative as Montemaggi suggests, it seems to me to be syntactically infelicitous to do so. Nevertheless, the point Montemaggi makes about the possible ambiguity of Dante’s grammar is worth careful consideration for the artistic and theological work of the poem.

Their frustration with the way that grace seems to "break the rules" reaches its apex in the encounter with Trajan in *Paradiso* 20. Why does Trajan get a "second chance" while Virgil appears to be unceremoniously dismissed the moment Beatrice arrives on the scene in *Purgatorio* 30? Our discussion of *Paradiso* 20 focuses on how the pilgrim's encounter with a redeemed Trajan creates a kind of theological crisis for both pilgrim and reader. Trajan serves as the breaking point for my students because it underscores the impenetrability of the mystery of divine predestination and forces readers to distinguish between "knowledge" and "understanding". To put it another way, the pilgrim's encounter with Trajan brings both him and us to the climax of our moral trajectory, where to understand the mystery of divine providence is to know what to do or say next: to love, to hope, and to pray. In so doing, we come to a salutary moment of cataphatic beauty within our ignorance: to embrace our ignorance is to embrace a humility that binds us to the spirit of Christ, according to which our "knowing what to do or say next" will be formed and judged.[12]

As is well known, Dante's treatment of Trajan in *Purgatorio* 10 and *Paradiso* 20 relies on a popular medieval legend. According to this legend, Gregory the Great's affection for Trajan's virtuous—if pagan—sense of justice inspired Gregory to pray for Trajan's salvation. As a "result" of Gregory's prayer (insofar as that language is appropriate for this context), God raises Trajan from the dead, Trajan is baptized, and transferred out of Limbo to the heights of Paradise, where he appears to the pilgrim as a mystery that confounds the pilgrim's understanding.[13] The pilgrim "fails to see, how, though you believe [these things], they came to pass, because their cause is hidden" (*Paradiso* 20.88–90). How can it be that Trajan finds himself in Heaven, despite lacking baptism in life? As if underscoring the scandalous claim he is making, the poet invokes Trajan's story in the heaven of justice, inviting his readers to ask the obvious question: how is this justice, especially in light of everything we have seen regarding the virtuous pagans—especially Virgil—throughout the previous *cantica?*

The pilgrim is just as flummoxed by this revelation as his readers. He finds himself bumping into the limits of his knowledge. He wants the ability to to comprehend the logic or rationale of divine predestination, to gaze unblinking into the brilliance of divine mystery, like an eagle that can peer directly into the sun without going blind. But it is precisely here that the pilgrim and the reader's ambitions for knowledge are comically stymied. As the eagle of justice urges the pilgrim (and, through him, the readers):

Predestination! How remote your root,

From all those faces that, in looking up,

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[12] In addition to the apophatic dimension of this scene in the *Comedy*, there is a cataphatic dimension, too: the beauty that comes through the humble acceptance of being carried by the love, hope, and prayers of others. The release from a kind of controlling self-determination is a theme in the pilgrim's journey. Perhaps the clearest example of this is in *Purgatorio* 9. Dante and Virgil have been wandering aimlessly along the base of the mountain, lost among the rocks. As he is sleeping, Dante is visited by St. Lucia who carries him up to the gate of Mt. Purgatory, setting him on the correct path for his journey of healing. The story of Trajan and Gregory is a further play on the same theme of holy friendship, of an active surrender to being carried by another.

[13] We should take care not to misunderstand the theological moves Dante is making here as somehow diminishing the need for personal accountability and responsibility in favor of a passive receptivity of an external grace. Joseph Ratzinger insists that a human being receives divine grace which then elicits personal agency and responsibility. Mercy comes from God, channeled through the intercession of the blessed, in a way that enables the recipient's active transformation. "Encounter with the LORD is this transformation," Ratzinger says. We might understand Gregory's prayers for Trajan as the channel of God's mercy that made it possible for Trajan's active, transformative encounter with God in the waters of baptism. This kind of influence of another's prayers is possible, Ratzinger further states, because "man" does not designate a "closed monad" immune from the salutary work of another's spiritual labor on our behalf. See Ratzinger (1988, pp. 231–32). My thanks to Leonard DeLorenzo for pointing me in this direction. Further, if the heavenly life is indeed the "communion of saints" (Hebrews 11), then there is a necessary dynamic of spiritual exchange, mutuality, and reciprocity at work in every act of intercession. It is a work that enables rather than affronts personal responsibility before God. The model here, I think, is infant baptism. The faith of the church "stands in" for the faith of the infant, enabling her later personal choice to indwell the communion of saints through confirmation. I do not believe it is a coincidence that Dante situates the virtuous pagans together with unbaptized babies in Limbo in *Inferno* 4. Perhaps the presence of both in the Inferno are indictments against a church that failed to offer its faith and hope on their behalf. See DeLorenzo (2017).

Cannot in toto see the primal cause!

Yet this deficiency for us is sweet,

For in this good our own good finds its goal,

That what God wills we likewise seek in will. (*Paradiso* 20.136–139) (Alighieri 2008)

The ignorance that the pilgrim recognizes and the poet celebrates confronts readers with the crisis of decision: will our ignorance create in us an epistemic humility that funds faith and trust in the mystery of mercy that is the divine will? Such faith, such trust, coupled with hope and love, are the culmination of the comic re-making of the pilgrim's personhood. The perfection of our humanity, our will, is to seek God's will. This is what is modeled to both the pilgrim and readers in the story of Gregory's love for Trajan.

Regnum celorum suffers violence

Gladly from fervent love, from vibrant hope

—only these powers can defeat God's will:

Not in the way one man conquers another,

For That will wills its own defeat, and so,

Defeated it defeats through its own mercy. (*Paradiso* 20.94–99)

Like the pilgrim, my students encountering Trajan ask, "How can this be?" Wrestling with the knotty theological relationship between divine predestination and human agency and free will leads pilgrim and reader both to a salutary aporia of knowledge. The question that this aporia opens up is: what do I do now?

The poet's celebration of divine mystery is not an epistemological dodge, but a rhetorical strategy to open up a space for the virtuous action of understanding, of knowing what to do or say next: to hope, to love, and to pray. As Susannah Ticciati wrote in relation to the same issue in Augustine, "The imagination is freed from the question of *how* to plot divine and human agency in relation to one another, and is freed to focus on the liberating context opened up by grace—and hence to prayer" (Ticciati 2015, p. 970). Invited into the text, the perlocutionary effect of this encounter for the reader is to share the pilgrim's surrender in faith and active performance of hope and love in prayer. Students can "perform" the *Comedy* in this way only after *personally* wrestling with the cold logic of Hell, after feeling the ground shifting under their feet as mount purgatory shakes from the earthquake of mercy, after confronting *their own* ignorance of the mysterious depths of the divine will. This is the beautiful grace of holy ignorance.

This line of inquiry is immediately followed by another question: how do I become a person whose response is faithful, hopeful, and charitable prayer? As I tell my students, even to *ask* these questions is to set out on a pilgrimage toward that Love that moves all things, even, perhaps, our hopeful and loving prayers. If we take these questions seriously, we join Dante on his pilgrimage, accompanying him along the path of virtue.

3. The Challenges of Reading for Virtuous Friendship

What are the challenges and benefits of teaching the *Comedy* in this way? A few concluding thoughts.

(1) This approach depends on student buy-in, which has gotten noticeably more difficult to obtain, even in the last ten years of teaching. Why it is more difficult for students today to read in this personally engaged way is anyone's guess. One can propose a number of causes: an over-emphasis on STEM disciplines at the expense of the humanities; an obsession with standardized testing in primary and secondary education; the diminishing number of young people who read for pleasure; the list of blame marches on ad infinitum.

While some of these (I am not sure) are valid concerns, it seems to me that students often come into university having not been taught two critical things. First, I often find that my students have never been invited to *love* books—to *delight* in the act of reading, to *exult* in language, character, and narrative. This is often a failure not of students but of teachers, who see their work as passing on information rather than serving as a "midwife to love".[14] But Dante himself can model just this kind of love. Dante himself is a great reader. Dante's love for *reading* Virgil transitions quite easily, without drawing any attention to itself, into a love for Virgil himself in the pages of the *Comedy*.[15] Yet so many of our students have been taught to read "great texts" like Dante's because they are "important" or "classics". This is reading transformed into a form of "eat your [literary] vegetables" not terribly dissimilar to how St. Augustine's schoolteachers tried and failed to teach him Greek.[16] Students today approach their reading as a task to be completed rather than a joy to be observed and delighted in.

Second, students seem not to have been formed with the intellectual virtue of patience with a text. Part of this may be the result of the malformative practices of reading that students have been taught through curricula that sacrifice depth for breadth and personal encounter with passing familiarity. Yet the need for patience with something—be it a person, a text, an image—is a necessary ingredient for actually *knowing* it. Love, as St. Augustine and Dante would both insist, is a kind of knowledge [*amor ipsum notitia est*: love itself is knowledge], and love turns on a kind of intimacy, a dwelling with, a patient and attentive presence.[17] Education's end according to Simone Weil is precisely this kind of attention (Weil 1959, pp. 66–76).

But in addition to this, students often have not been wellformed in the *spiritual* virtue of patience with themselves and the transformative process that education is meant to work upon them. As I will outline more fully below, my approach to teaching the *Comedy* risks promising too much. Several students will confess to me that they feel like they are failing to grasp Dante "right away" in the way that I have emphasized. "I feel like I'm not getting out of this reading what I should be". To that point, I share with my students that I *hated* reading the *Comedy* in my own undergraduate studies. I did not appreciate the poem until I found myself in my own dark wood at age 27 and suddenly the text came alive to me with all of its existential and spiritual vitality. So, I tell my students, my class is simply sowing seeds, confident that they will reap a harvest, though what that harvest will look like and when it will happen, I do not know. This is one of the salutary mysteries of teaching.

(2) This is a time-consuming and necessarily unsystematic style of teaching. There is the very real danger of over-emphasizing and under-emphasizing aspects of the poem, and this approach ends up neglecting a lot of thematic content (e.g., the political aspects of the text). As a professor, I need to be sure to create space for students to raise questions about topics or themes that *they* identify in the text, even if it is not a part of *my goal* for the day's discussion. I do this by dedicating the first 5–15 min of class to student questions and comments. Giving space for students to direct the conversation communicates to the class that *their personal concerns* matter, have a place in the conversation, and are valuable enough to consider together. I want to be sure that *Dante* provokes them to thought, and not just me as their teacher. During this time, my role is simply as host for the personal encounter between them and Dante.

Even so doing, I repeatedly fail even to gesture toward the full complexity and richness of the poem. I try to telescope this reality to my students from the first day of the semester, urging them to keep their books at the end of the semester, because a text as rich as the *Comedy* cannot be digested in a single reading. On the final day of the semester, I again urge them to keep their books, saying, "Maybe

[14] Ben Myers, "Farewell Speech: What I have Learned about Learning": http://www.faith-theology.com/2017/11/farewell-speech-what-i-have-learned.html.
[15] On Dante's personal love for Virgil, see Montemaggi (2016, pp. 206–15).
[16] See *Confessions* 1.xiv.23 for Augustine's discussion of how he learned Latin because he loved it rather than through fear of his schoolmasters.
[17] This underscores my decision to assign the entire *Comedy* and devote seven to eight weeks of the academic semester to it.

you are finished with these books now that our class is over. But the real question, I think, is if these books are finished with you".

(3) As suggested above, the real danger of this approach to teaching the *Comedy* lies in the peril of over-promising what the poem can do, or even *divinizing* the *Comedy*. Over-promising the efficacy of the poem runs the risk of presenting Dante as a religious authority, as a theologian rather than as a poet, that is, as someone who uses language to "explore the darkened corners" (Williams 2014, p. 71) of the mystery of the encounter with God. It is always a temptation to misrepresent Dante as someone offering answers instead of raising questions, or of presenting Dante as an authority rather than as a virtuous companion. It is to mistake Dante for a new Beatrice, someone already beatified, rather than as a Virgil, someone with wisdom and discernment, though still vulnerable to serious errors. It is to render the poem as an opaque end *in* itself rather than an iconic sign pointing *beyond* itself.

Fortunately, there is a built-in defense against such an error: the abrupt silence with which the poem ends. I am sure my students are not the only ones who react to Dante's final silence with a mixture of relief—it is finally over!—and frustration—that's *it*? It is important to give the students space to articulate their frustrations with Dante's silence and then invite them to reflect on *why* Dante defaults to silence. This question often results in silence from my students as well. I then reframe the question as "how might Dante's silence be an act of friendship to you, the reader?" Students eventually decide that Dante is being a virtuous friend by not explaining his understanding because (1) he is acknowledging that the truth of God cannot be represented in word or image, so his silence speaks the truth of God to us; (2) if he has done his job as poet, his silence leaves us at a point of desire. If he were to explain what he came to understand in his beatific vision, he would have done our work for us. There would be no need for us to undergo our own pilgrimage to the beatific vision. Dante's silence here is his most profound act of virtuous friendship precisely because it refuses to give to the reader answers to questions they have not yet *personally* investigated. Thus to "understand" the *Comedy* is not to enshrine it as an end in itself. To "understand" the poem's final silence is to "know what to do or say next"—to "look along" the *Comedy* at our own lives by setting out *on our own pilgrimage* toward becoming a person of perfect virtue, which is to say, to be grounded by faith, to be animated by hope, and to be moved by Love in compassionate prayer. This is what it means to read the *Comedy* not just "with our minds but with our lives" (Myers 2018, p. 64).

I tell my students that learning to read a text with their lives is the work of a lifetime. Reading for virtuous understanding involves relinquishing the ambition to control and master a text. It requires humility, patience, docility, and vulnerability. This is a risky challenge, I warn them, but a good one. As all of us who have grown to appreciate Dante's virtuous friendship have learned: "[r]eaders of Dante have nothing to lose in coming to the *Commedia*—except, perhaps, life as they've known it thus far" (Hawkins 2006, p. xxiv).

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Mathematics, Mystery, and Memento Mori: Teaching Humanist Theology in Dante's *Commedia*

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Abstract: Undergraduate students in the United States of America are increasingly less religious, and this decline in religiosity is felt not only at secular colleges and universities, but also at those with a religious affiliation. This article seeks to answer the question of how one can effectively teach the Christian vision in Dante's *Commedia* to undergraduates who have little or no religious formation. The methods I have used to teach freshmen in core Humanities courses have differed somewhat from the methods I have used to teach upperclassmen in Literature electives. For the freshmen, focusing on what I call "humanist theology" has been successful, allowing them to see that the Christianity found in Dante's epic is not merely a list of rules, but a way of viewing human life that is consonant with their own experiences. *Purgatorio* is the most important canticle for this method, and the case of Virgil's damnation is a vital topic. For upperclassmen, finding analogies to Christian Mystery in the fields of mathematics, the sciences, and creative writing has proven fruitful. The main conclusion of this study is that these techniques are useful in presenting Dante's work to non-religious students without sacrificing the epic's specifically Christian content.

Keywords: Dante; *The Divine Comedy*; Christian Humanism; The Christian Intellectual Tradition; Literature Pedagogy

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1. Introduction

If high school students or undergraduates have read any portion of Dante's *Commedia*, it is almost certainly his *Inferno*. There are good reasons for this fact. The canticle begins the epic, depicts physical struggle and moral growth, and (most importantly for younger readers) has enough gory *contrapassos* to qualify as horror fiction. Reading only *Inferno*, however, always seemed to me to be a disservice both to students and to Dante's epic vision. This opinion has only become more solidified as I have continued to see the undergraduate classroom populated by students whose religious formation is slim to nonexistent. "Nones"—young people who do not identify with any religion—are a fast-growing demographic in America. Smith and Snell's vital work on young adult religion and spirituality indicates that only 5% of American youth are religiously "devoted" (attending weekly services; praying often), and that only 14.3% fall into the "regular" category (regular, but not weekly, attendance of religious services; prayer less important in daily life) (Smith and Snell 2009, p. 259).[1] Their research thus indicates that religious faith plays little to no role in the lives of over 80% of "emerging adults" (people in their teens and twenties). Traditional undergraduate students are exactly this demographic. Religiously-affiliated universities have student bodies that are perhaps atypical because of self-selection, but studies of faith-based higher education have concluded that this is generally not the case (Marsden 1994; Morey and Piderit 2006). As these demographic trends continue, the professor at a Catholic or Christian school cannot rely on basic religious literacy in many students.

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[1] See particularly Chapter 5, "The Cultural Structures in Emerging Adult Religion," which is quite a telling chapter for the future of faith in the United States.

Given these trends, I had to consider carefully what image of God and Christianity one gets from *Inferno* alone. The answer is likely a version of what non-Christians and inadequately catechized Christians already think: the Christian God is at best a rigid authoritarian ("follow my rules or else be tortured forever in Hell"). The Gates of Hell say that *Love* made them, which appears to add insult to injury.[2] At worst, God becomes a sadistic bully, damning souls who simply had the misfortune to commit a single sin, single sins that do not seem wrong to most 21st-century students. Undergraduate students are more apt to look at Pietro della Vigna's suicide (*Inferno* 13) and Brunetto Latini's homosexuality (*Inferno* 15) with pity and understanding, further solidifying for many students the notion that Christian theology is inhuman and outdated. As someone interested in both the fullness of the Christian tradition and the richness of Dante's theological imagination, I find that teaching *Inferno* alone creates more problems than it solves.

The question, then, is how to do justice to the complexity of Dante's theological epic with students who, by and large, lack the necessary background to appreciate it. At Mount St. Mary's University, I have taught Dante's *Commedia* every Spring as part of a required Freshman Humanities survey on the Classical and Christian Imagination. I have also taught the entire work (in translation) in an English elective on the Epic. My experiences of teaching Dante to these two different populations—general population freshmen who are required to be in my course, and upperclassmen (largely English majors) who elected to take my course—have led me to think that the path to guiding non-religious students to appreciate Dante's epic must be found in the heart of the work, *Purgatorio*. It is in this second canticle that the reader sees even more clearly the nature of sin and virtue, and, more importantly, how Dante begins to complicate the rules of the afterlife through the question of salvation for noble pagans, a particularly troubling case for the character of Virgil. In this essay, I will share some of the strategies I have found useful for helping general population underclassmen to see that Dante's Christian vision is actually more nuanced than they might have thought, and more relevant to their own lives. My challenge with non-religious upperclassmen was a bit different, since the most troubling canticle for them was *Paradiso*. In their case, I had to justify a poem written about a non-human subject: heavenly realities that we cannot "know," and that even Christians must admit are mysterious.[3] For these upperclassmen, contemporary poems about mathematics and science proved to be apt analogies to begin, at least, to carve out a place for metaphysical poetics in their understanding of literature. In both cases, I found that a kind of "Humanist Theology"—meditating on mysteries that are evident simply to reason and lived human experience, apart from revelation—was a key concept to meet them where they were and help them appreciate and understand better Dante's achievement as one of the major poets of the Christian Intellectual Tradition. This kind of theology does not seek to replace traditional Christian theology, but it is complementary to it. If our hearts are restless until they rest in God (as Augustine says in the first book of his *Confessions*), if God has written the Law on the hearts of the gentiles (Romans 2:15), then ordinary human life, without reference to systematic theology, points in the direction of the Christian mysteries at the center of Dante's epic.

2. Dante's *Purgatorio*: An Education in Mercy

I will begin with teaching *Purgatorio* to underclassmen, since I have done so much more frequently, and because this freshman introduction to Dante seems to me to be far more vital: the more freshmen

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2 "Giustizia mosse il mio alto Fattore:/Facemi la Divina Podestate,/La Somma Sapienza e 'l Primo Amore"; "Justice cause my High Architect to move:/Divine Omnipotence created me,/The Highest Wisdom, and the Primal Love" (*Inferno* 3.4-6). Anthony Esolen's translations will be used throughout this essay (Alighieri, Dante. 2002. *Inferno*. Edited and Translated by Anthony Esolen. New York: The Modern Library; Alighieri, Dante. 2003. *Purgatory*. Edited and Translated by Anthony Esolen. New York: The Modern Library; Alighieri, Dante. 2004. *Paradise*. Edited and Translated by Anthony Esolen. New York: The Modern Library). Esolen's notes are scholarly enough for introducing students to the work, and they take Christianity seriously, a great resource for introducing students to the Christian Intellectual Tradition.

3 1 Corinthians 2:9: "What eye has not seen, and hear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him" (*New American Bible, Revised Edition*).

who realize that the *Commedia* is a deep work that has continued relevance, even apart from its faith content, the better! In the first place, I should note that I do not teach *Purgatorio* entirely without context. I have my students read the first few cantos of *Inferno* to orient themselves to the work, followed by a brief summary of the canticle. Each semester I also tend to have a few students who have read *Inferno* in high school, but have never read *Purgatorio*. I can thus very quickly get the class to understand the basic premise of the economy of salvation and damnation: sin turns a person away from God and neighbor, and thus is a damnable offense. My religious students without much formation formulate Dante's world in a typical Pelagian fashion: do good, and go to heaven; do evil, and go to hell. So far, so good. But what about a person who has sinned greatly, profoundly, but who repents at the last second? This tit for tat economy of salvation would seem to rule against such persons. This is why Antepurgatory is a vital place in the epic to begin questioning the simple (and technically heretical!) notion that good deeds earn salvation. Such a multitude of damned souls crosses into *Inferno* that one might well ask how *anyone* could be saved.[4] When students get to Manfred (*Purgatorio* 3) and Buonconte da Montefeltro (*Purgatorio* 5), however, matters become more complicated. Manfred, the son of Emperor Frederick II, died excommunicated from the Church, a fate that one might think would damn him. While he recognizes his sins, his words speak of the immense Mercy shown to souls in Antepurgatory: "My sins were horrible,/but endless grace/has arms of generous goodness thrown so wide/they take in all who turn to them . . . no man so loses, by their curse's power,/eternal love, that cannot return/so long as hope shows any green in flower" (*Purgatorio* 3.121-23, 133–35).[5] Buonconte, the sinful son of the damned friar Guido da Montefeltro (*Inferno* 27), recounts a particularly vivid example of this kind of hope: his last-minute conversion on the battlefield:

> . . . below the Casentino
> Rushes a stream, the Archiano, born
> In the Apennines above the Hermitage.
> Just where it empties and its name turns vain
> I arrived with an arrow in my throat,
> Fleeing afoot and spattering the plain.
> And there at once my sight and speech were gone.
> I ended with 'Maria' on my lips
> And fell, and left my flesh to lie alone.
> It's truth I tell—tell it to all alive!
> God's angel took me, and the one from Hell
> Hollered, 'O you from Heaven, why deprive
> Me of his soul? He sheds one little tear
> And you bear his immortal part away!' (*Purgatorio* 5.94-107)[6]

If a single, sincere prayer while dying—whispering the name of the Mother of God as one bleeds out from a neck wound—is enough to save a person, then the question is changed: why isn't *everyone* on the road to heaven? The Mercy of God found in Antepurgatory is profound, grace operating beyond natural justice. Here I can introduce students to the picture of a God Who is Mercy Itself. Recall that the angel at the gates of Purgatory proper is charged by St. Peter to let in too many, rather than too few:

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4 "E dietro le venìa sì lunga tratta/di gente, ch'i' non averei creduto/che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta"; "And all behind that flag in a long file/so numerous a host of people ran,/I had not thought death had unmade so many" (*Inferno* 3.55-57).

5 "Orribil furon li peccati miei;/ma la bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia,/che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei . . . Per lor maladizion sì non si perde,/che non possa tornar, l'etterno amore,/mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde" (*Purgatorio* 3.121-23, pp. 133–35).

6 "A piè del Casentino/traversa un'acqua c'ha nome l'Archiano,/che sovra l'ermo nasce in Apennino./Là 've 'l vocabol suo diventa vano,/arriva' io forato ne la gola,/fuggendo a piede e sanguinando il piano./Quivi perdei la vista e la parola;/nel nome di Maria fini', e quivi/caddi, e rimase la mia carne sola./Io dirò vero, e tu 'l ridì tra' vivi:/l'angel di Dio mi prese, e quel d'inferno/gridava: 'O tu del ciel, perché mi privi?/Tu te ne porti di costui l'etterno/per una lagrimetta che 'l mi toglie" (*Purgatorio* 5.94-107)

"Peter's they [the keys] are, who said that I should err/rather in opening than in keeping shut,/so long as men should kneel before my feet" (*Purgatorio* 9.127-29).[7] Whether students believe in Purgatory as an actual part of their religious faith, in the world of the *Commedia* Purgatory itself is a sign of God's mercy: even if you threw your whole life away in vice, a little ray of hope is enough to put you on the road to heaven. The damned lack this hope (cf. the Gates of Hell: "abandon all hope, you who enter here"; *lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*, *Inferno* 3.9). Apparently, even the smallest bit of this virtue is enough to be saved in the world of the *Commedia*.

This image of divinity leads naturally to questions about how we imagine ourselves living our lives. Even without a more specialized, Thomistic knowledge of virtue and vice, every person can consider this question: are there things that I do, ways I that live my life, that are unhealthy or counterproductive? Do I wish that I lived differently in certain aspects of my life? This way of phrasing these questions sounds similar to those found in "self-help" books, a genre with which the average undergraduate is likely familiar. If young adults begin to see Dante's *Purgatorio* as focused on self-improvement, washing the grime away from the faces of the repentant so that their true selves can shine through, this presents them with a far more positive picture than that of a distant God who damns people for breaking rules: "My master gently ran his open hands/over the little tufts of grass, and I,/who understood the reason for his art,/Presented him my cheeks, still stained and teared./He wiped them, and at last discovered all/the color that the smoke of Hell had bleared" (*Purgatorio* 1.124-29).[8] In reality, every soul in the *Commedia* is where she or he is by choice: the choice to be the best version of themselves or the choice to be something else.[9] Put in those human terms, which are not terribly far, I think, from the text's own vision, the paradox of God's infinite Justice and infinite Mercy becomes a bit clearer for most underclassmen.

3. Free Will and Love: The Center of the *Commedia*

I also highlight the vital importance of the center of Dante's *Commedia* to emphasize how the notions of free will and love give rise to the work's entire economy of salvation. Like any liberally-educated medieval person, Dante appreciated mathematics, and attending to number in the *Commedia* yields much fruit. *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* each have 33 cantos (a number with obvious Trinitarian overtones), while *Inferno* breaks this perfection with 34. That extra canto, however, means that the *Commedia's* 100 cantos can be neatly divided into two sets of 50: *Purgatorio* 16 is the last canto of the first 50, while *Purgatorio* 17 is the first canto of the last 50. I impress on students that authors, particularly authors of Dante's skill, do not write works haphazardly, and *Purgatorio* 16 and 17 can easily be seen as the "thumbnail" version of the argument of the work as a whole: that humans have free will, that God loves each human soul, and that every action, both good and evil, is caused by love.

In *Purgatorio* 16, Dante gives one of the most important speeches in the *Commedia* to Marco the Lombard, a man caught in the smoke of the circle of the wrathful. Dante the Pilgrim questions Marco on the cause of sin and evil: "but pray, show me the cause of all this sin,/that I may see it and reveal it, for/some blame the stars, some fortune here below" (*Purgatorio* 16.61-63).[10] Marco answers him in one of the most beautiful and significant passages of the epic:

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7 "Da Pier le [le chiavi] tengo; e dissemi ch'i' erri/anzi ad aprir ch'a tenerla serrata,/pur che la gente a' piedi mi s'atterri" (*Purgatorio* 9.127-29).

8 "Ambo le mani in su l'erbetta sparte/soavemente 'l mio maestro pose:/ond' io, che fui accorto di sua arte,/porsi ver' lui le guance lagrimose;/ivi mi fece tutto discoverto/quel color che l'inferno mi nascose" (*Purgatorio* 1.124-29).

9 The damned in *Inferno* have a telling habit of blaming everyone but themselves for their current predicament. Consider Francesca early on in the canticle: "Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse!"; "A pandar was that author, and his book!" (*Inferno* 5.137; NB: Esolen makes reference to Pandarus from the English literary tradition to approximate the semiotic function of Galeotto in the Italian literary tradition). According to Francesca, she and Paolo are not to blame for their lust: the Arthurian romance bears all the fault, which rings rather hollow.

10 "Ma priego che m'addite la cagione,/sì ch'i' la veggie e ch'i' la mostri altrui;/ché nel cielo uno, e un qua giù la pone," (*Purgatorio* 16.61-63).

. . . "My brother," he began,
"the world is blind, and it has been your home.
You living men attribute to the sky
The causes of all things, as if they moved
Ever and only by necessity.
That would destroy the freedom of your will,
Nor would it then be just to deal out joy
For doing well, or woe for doing ill.
The heavens give your movements their first nudge—
Not all your movements, but let's grant that too—
Still, light is given that you may freely judge
And choose the good or evil; and should free will
Grow weary in the first battles with the stars,
Foster it well and it will win the day.
You men lie subject to that One who made
You free, a greater force, a better nature,
Who formed your minds without the planets' aid.
Thus if this present world has gone askew,
Look to yourselves, in yourselves lies the cause" (*Purgatorio* 16.65-83).[11]

This speech not only solidifies the logic of Christian economy for students; it further shows application to their own lives. How much do we imagine that we are in control of our own lives? In place of divine determinism, consider biological or sociological determinism: I ask my students to what extent their genes, their upbringings, their homes have now determined, for the rest of their lives, the choices they will make. Fairly quickly conversation reveals that while they think that these externals matter to varying degrees, even biology, psychology, and sociology majors want to say that they do have at least *some* freedom of choice, and they often point to case studies of exceptional individuals who rise above the bad hand dealt them by fate (they all read Frederick Douglass in our core curriculum). Dante calls us to responsibility and action, not blaming our problems solely on others. Bad leadership *is* a problem (*Purgatorio* 16.97-105), and there are limits to what an individual can do to change the community. At the same time, the individual can do *something* to face the evil in the world; as Marco notes, if there is evil, then the cause is in *us*. The call to action to realize that we are connected to and complicit in societal evils and the exhortation to choose to live differently resonate with students of diverse backgrounds, and are keys to understanding the *Commedia* as a whole.[12]

Turning to *Purgatorio* 17, we find Virgil's masterful discourse on love, which explains much of the epic's economy of salvation, but also raises further problems:

Not the Creator nor a single creature,
As you know, ever existed without love,

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[11] " . . . e poi cominciò: 'Frate,/lo mondo è cieco, e tu vien ben da lui./Voi che vivete ogne cagion recate/pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto/movesse seco di necessitate./Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto/libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia/per ben letizia, e per male aver lutto./Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia;/non dico tutti, ma, posto ch'i' 'l dica,/lume v'è dato a bene e a malizia,/e libero voler; che, se fatica/ne le prime battaglie col ciel dura,/poi vince tutto, se ben si notrica./A maggior forza e a miglior natura/liberi soggiacete; e quella cria/la mente in voi, che 'l ciel non ha in sua cura./Però, se 'l mondo presente disvia,/in voi è la cagione, in voi si cheggia" (*Purgatorio* 16.65-83).

[12] It is also worth noting the image of the soul and the origin of evil in this canto: "Directly from His hand who cherished her/before she came to be, the simple soul/comes forth just like a little baby girl/Who cries and laughs and doesn't know a thing/save that, moved by her Maker, by her joy,/she willingly turns to all that makes her sing./Innocently she tastes the savor of/some lesser good, then chases it, deceived,/unless some rein or guide direct the love"; "Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia/prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla/che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,/l'anima semplicetta che sa nulla, /salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,/volontier torna a ciò che la trastulla./Di picciol bene in pria sente sapore;/quivi s'inganna, e dietro ad esso corre,/se guida o fren non torce suo amore" (*Purgatorio* 16.85-93). This image of the beautiful, beloved soul falling through childish ignorance harmonizes nicely with Virgil's treatment of love in the next canto.

The soul's love or the love that comes by nature.
The natural love is just and cannot rove.
The soul's love strays if it desires what's wrong
Or loves with too much strength, or not enough.
When towards its prime good it is led aright
And keeps good measure in the second goods,
It cannot be the cause of bad delight,
But when it twists to evil, or does not
Race for a good with the appropriate care,
The Potter finds rebellion in the pot.
Hence you can understand how love must be
The seedbed where all virtuous deeds must grow,
With every act that warrants punishment (*Purgatorio* 17.91-105).[13]

Particularly by this point in the epic, students are primed to recognize the truth in Virgil's words, and can supply their own examples. Do they have a friend or roommate in a dysfunctional romantic relationship? Of course they do! Do they love Netflix more than studying for a math exam? Of course they do! It does not take Christian faith to recognize the truth of ordered and disordered loves, and the prerogative to attempt to love well. But this very fact puts front and center another problem students often have with Dante's epic: the damnation of Virgil.

4. Virgil's Damnation and the Mystery of Salvation

Purgatorio does not make Virgil's damnation easy for the reader. Granted, Limbo is a naturally pleasant place in which one can discuss philosophy and poetry for all eternity, but that technicality becomes much harder to bear as readers grow ever fonder of Virgil. They see Virgil relate to Dante more as a loving mentor in *Purgatorio* than as the stern father he sometimes was in *Inferno*. Particularly when students meet Cato and Statius in *Purgatorio*, they find Virgil's damnation much more problematic. Cato was republican pagan suicide who is apparently going to heaven; allegorical readings aside, if he can be on the way to heaven, why not Virgil?[14] Moreover, even though Statius was a Christian when living, Statius's conversion story raises *pathos* for Virgil's plight. The ultimate "fanboy" (as many of my students call him), Statius praises Virgil for Virgil's central role in his conversion:

. . . "You were the one,"
Said he, "who first invited me to sip
Of the springs in the grottoes on Parnassus;
And then you lighted me the way to God.
You did as one upon the road at night
Who holds a torch that those behind may see,
Though he himself's unaided by the light,
Saying, 'From Heaven descends a newborn son;

13 "Né creator né creatura mai,"/cominciò el, "figliuol, fu sanza amore,/o naturale o d'animo; e tu 'l sai./Lo natural è sempre sanza errore,/ma l'altro puote errar per malo obietto/o per troppo o per poco di vigore./Mentre ch'elli è nel primo ben diretto,/e ne' secondi sé stesso misura,/esser non può cagion di mal diletto;/ma quando al mal si torce, o con più cura/o con men che non dee corre nel bene,/contra 'l fattore adovra sua fattura./Quinci comprender puoi ch'esser convene/amor sementa in voi d'ogne virtute/e d'ogne operazion che merta pene" (*Purgatorio* 17.91-105).

14 As an examplary lover of liberty, Cato is certainly suitable allegorically as a gatekeeper for Purgatory. Dante, however, was clearly not a republican (consider his identification of Christ with Roman imperialism; heaven is "quella Roma onde Cristo è romano"; "that Rome where Christ is Roman," *Purgatorio* 32.102). Suicide is a damnable offense in medieval Christian theology (consider *Inferno* 13). Nevertheless, this republican suicide is going to heaven on the literal level of the text, a level that no medieval exegete could forget. Cato's ultimate fate depends on one's reading of *Purgatorio* 1.73-76: "You [Cato] know it—for you did not find it bitter/to die for liberty in Utica,/where you sloughed off the garment that will shine/So bright on the great day"; "Tu 'l sai, ché non ti fu per lei amara/in Utica la morte, ove lasciasti/la vesta ch'al gran dì sarà sì chiara." References to a clear body at the last judgment convince me that his future salvation is assured by the text.

The morning of humanity returns,
And a new age of justice has begun.'
A poet you made me, and a Christian too" (*Purgatorio* 22.63-73).[15]

Dante's Virgil was as perfect as a human being could be without divine revelation, and his writings actually inspired people to become Christians.[16] In a theologically-curious passage, Virgil also demonstrates that the damned in Limbo can *love* the living; he says to Statius: "If virtue kindles love,/it kindles love in the beloved too,/provided that love's flames can be observed. Thus from the day when Juvenal came down/to dwell with us upon the rim of Hell/and your affection was made known to me,/My well-wishing for you was such as no/man ever felt for one he'd never seen" (*Purgatorio* 22.10-17).[17] The ability to love others is not typically a characteristic that Christians associate with the damned. If all this is the case, why is Virgil doomed to return to Hell?

Dante the Poet cultivates the reader's attachment to Virgil to the very end, with Virgil's poignant last words and his shocking absence. Virgil's final words to Dante the Pilgrim make reference to Dante's initial subjection of his will in *Inferno* 2,[18] indicating that Virgil's guidance has come to completion: "The temporal and eternal fires, my son,/you have now seen, and you have reached a part/where I discern no further on my own./I've led you here by strength of mind, and art; take your own pleasure for your leader now . . . . No longer wait for what I do or say./Your judgment now is free and whole and true;/to fail to follow its will would be to stray./Lord of yourself I crown and miter you" (*Purgatorio* 27.127-31, 139–42).[19] While Virgil has no more words in the *Commedia*, his continued presence through *Purgatorio* 28-30 lulls readers into a false sense that he will remain indefinitely. I often need to direct students to take notice of Virgil's departure, coming, as it does, right before the climax of *Purgatorio*, the entrance of Beatrice:

I turned left—as a little child will do
Wide-eyed and running over to his mama
When he's afraid of something or he's hurt,
To say to Virgil, "Not a drop of blood
Runs in my veins that isn't trembling now!
I know the traces of the ancient flame—"
But Virgil had deprived us of his light,
Virgil the sweetest father, Virgil, he
In whom I trusted that I might be healed,
Nor all the world our mother Eve once lost
Could keep my cheeks that had been cleansed with dew
From darkening again with bitter tears (*Purgatorio* 30.43-54).[20]

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15 Ed elli a lui: "Tu prima m'inviasti verso Parnaso a ber ne le sue grotte,/e prima appresso Dio m'alluminasti./Facesti come quei che va di notte,/che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova,/ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte,/quando dicesti: 'Secol si rinova; /torna giustizia e primo tempo umano,/e progenie scende da ciel nova.'/Per te poeta fui, per te christiano" (*Purgatorio* 22.63-73).

16 Christians throughout the middle ages considered Virgil's Fourth Eclogue to contain a Messianic prophecy in the exact place cited by Statius. For a classic treatment, see Ella Bourne, "The Messianic Prophecy in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue" (Bourne 1916); for a more recent treatment of this messianic reading in art, see L.B.T. Houghton, "Virgil's Fourth Eclogue and the Visual Arts" (Houghton 2015).

17 "Amore,/acceso di virtu, sempre alstro accese,/pur che la fiamma sua paresse fore;/onde da l'orca che tra noi dicese/nel limbo de lo 'nferno Giovenale,/che la tua affezion mi fé palese,/mia benvoglienza inverso te fu quale/più strinse mai di non vista persona" (*Purgatorio* 22.10-17).

18 "Go, for we now share one will alone:/you are my guide, my teacher, and my lord"; "Or va, ch'un sol volere è d'ambedue:/tu duca, tu segnore e tu maestro" (*Inferno* 2.139-40).

19 "Il temporal foco e l'etterno/veduto hai, figlio; e se' venuto in parte/dov'io per me più oltre non discerno./Tratto t'ho qui con ingegno e con arte;/lo tuo piacere omai prendi per duce . . . . Non aspetar mio dir più né mio cenno;/libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,/e fallo fora non fare a suo senno;/per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio" (*Purgatorio* 27.127-31, 139–42).

20 "Volsimi a la sinistra col respitto /col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma/quando ha paura o quando elli è afflitto,/per dicere a Virgilio: 'Men che dramma/di sangue m'è rimaso che non tremi:/conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma'./Ma Virgilio

Even in the presence of his Lady, Dante the Pilgrim weeps over Virgil's sudden absence, marring the countenance that Virgil himself cleansed back in the first canto of *Purgatorio*. I ask my students whether they were satisfied with Virgil's departure, and most of them are not. For a character as good as Virgil, they find it odd that he just slips away without another word. I point out to them, however, that this is actually quite realistic. What if the last words your best friend said to you are the last words she or he will *ever* say to you? What if the last time you met *is* the last time? I can say with 100% certainty that everyone in my classroom will die at some point in time, and while we live as though we will never die (a phenomenon that a Christian may use to suggest the reality of life eternal), we all *know* that at some point this life will end. Furthermore, we have no way of knowing when exactly that will be. This mediation—again on a very human mystery—tends to lead to excellent conversation, which ties back to the question of how we live. How might we live differently if we were aware of the fact, the *fact*, that we are not sure whether or not we have seen our friends and family for the last time? That is a lesson that Virgil can teach to anyone.

It does not, however, deal with the problem of Virgil's damnation, since many of my keener students note that Marco Lombard's speech raises a troubling problem: if free will is so important, how can God hold Virgil responsible for something that was completely out of his control, the fact that he happened to be a gentile, born before the coming of Christ?[21] Answering that question requires me to jump ahead briefly into *Paradiso* to consider the vexing questions raised by the salvation of two different pagans, Trajan and Ripheus. I begin by letting the students know that there *are* pagans in heaven, which initially only infuriates them more: if Trajan and Ripheus, why not Virgil?! My initial response is to return them to considerations of human mystery. Dante is a master at balancing the specific truths known through Christian revelation with the mystery that God transcends any human knowledge or formulation: the "rules" exist, but they also can be transcended, a notion that many find hard to navigate. An apt analogy for students is to consider their own futures. They likely have an idea of what they want to major in and what they want to do after graduation. Let's say that we have Martha, who is majoring in Biology and wants to go to medical school to be an oncologist. That's fantastic, and Martha has good reason, based on what she knows of life at this moment, to imagine that her knowledge of the future is accurate. A bit of reflection, however, reveals that this accurate image of the future is not complete or infallible: what if she finds out that she hates medical school? What if next year she discovers a new passion that she currently does not recognize? What if she finds a career path that did not exist five years ago? This might seem like a tangent, but it actually gets at a vital concept in the Christian tradition: we recognize both that we have accurate knowledge, but that that knowledge is always imperfectly grasping at something mysterious.

Returning to *Paradiso* 19 and 20, the answer to the question of Ripheus and Trajan reinforces the importance of free will, loving community, and the self-recognized limits of Christian teaching. Ripheus is a real conundrum, simply justified through some special grace.[22] In the case of Ripheus, all we can say is that there are simply some mysteries in life. Trajan, however, is a more interesting figure, since his salvation was the result of a pious Christian praying something apparently impossible:

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n'avea lasciati scemi/di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo patre,/Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi;/né quantunque perdeo l'antica matre,/valse a le guance nette di rugiada/che, lagrimando, non tornasser atre" (*Purgatorio* 30.43-54).

[21] Virgil himself appears to be slightly miffed at the apparent injustice of his situation earlier on in the canticle: "I am Virgil, and this fault alone/has lost me Heaven: I did not have the faith"; "Io son Virgilio; e per null' altro rio/lo ciel perdei che per non aver fé" (*Purgatorio* 7.7-8).

[22] "By grace that showers from a spring so deep/no creature's sight can penetrate into/its first upwelling wave, the other soul/Placed all his love in righteousness below;/for which, grace upon grace, God raised his eye/and showed him our redemption yet to come,/And he believed in it, and from that day/he could not bear the stink of paganism,/and he reproached the people gone awry./Those Ladies were his sponsors at baptism,/the three at the right wheel of the chariot, a thousand years before the Baptist came"; "L'altra, per grazia che da sì profonda/fontana stilla, che mai creatura/non pinse l'occhio infino a la prima onda,/tutto suo amor là giù pose a drittura:/per che, di grazia in grazia, Dio li aperse/l'occhio a la nostra redenzion futura;/ond' ei credette in quella, e non sofferse/da indi il puzzo più del paganesmo;/e riprendiene le genti perverse./Quelle tre donne li fur per battesmo/che tu vedesti da la destra rota,/dinanzi al battezzar più d'un millesmo" (*Paradiso* 20.118-29).

that a dead pagan emperor receive salvation. According to legend, St. Gregory the Great's prayers impelled God to raise Trajan briefly from the dead, enough time to receive baptism:

To flesh and bone
The one returned from never-repenting Hell,
Of living hope, with power to impel
Prayers to God that he might rise once more,
And live, and so be moved to willing well.
Returned unto his flesh the briefest hour,
The glorious spirit I've been speaking of
Believe in Him and sought His help and power,
And in believing, kindled into love
So true, the second time he fell asleep
He merited his coming to this joy (*Paradiso* 20.106-17).[23]

It seems rather odd that prayer can violate the natural order of life and death. But perhaps it should not be so surprising. In the same canto as this account of the salvation of these two noble pagans, the Eagle, made up of the souls of the just in the sphere of Jupiter, has this to say about prayer:

The kingdom of Heaven suffers violence
From living hope and burning charity
That overcome the will of the divine,
Not as a man will overcome a man—
The divine wins because it would be won,
And won, it wins with its benignity (*Paradiso* 20.94-99).[24]

This is an astonishing passage. When humans pray to God, God *loves* to have His will overthrown. Particularly for Christian students, this passage is arresting: if we choose to love through prayer, God will change His will. The question of Virgil's status, therefore, becomes not so much why he is in Hell, but why we are not praying for his salvation! According to the *Paradiso*, God is not bound by His own norms, and perhaps we should be more bold in our loving prayers as members of the Communion of Saints. Lest we think too highly of ourselves, though, recall the words the Eagle has for Christians who in their lives are less faithful than such noble pagans: ... Many now cry, 'Christ, Christ!'/Who'll be less near to him on Judgment Day/than will the one who never knew Christ" (*Paradiso* 19.106-08).[25] It appears as though Dante is working towards something that my Catholic students articulate as Baptism by Desire, a concept about which Thomas Aquinas wrote, but which was not official Church doctrine in Dante's lifetime.[26] This final piece of the puzzle should leave students, regardless of their faith, with some taste of the complexity of Christian thought, and hopefully an appreciation of its positivity and nuance, seen strictly through a humanist lens.

5. *Paradiso*: Writing about the Inexpressible

These sorts of questions and topics can be used for undergraduates at any phase of their development to help reveal the perennial relevance of the *Commedia*, regardless of the reader's faith.

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[23] "Ché l'una de lo 'nferno, u' non si riede/già mai a buon voler, tornò a l'ossa;/e ciò di viva spene fu mercede:/di viva spene, che mise la possa/ne' prieghi fatti a Dio per suscitarla,/sì che potesse sua voglia esser mossa./L'anima gloriosa onde si parla,/tornata ne la carne, in che fu poco,/credette in lui che potea aiutarla;/e credendo s'accese in tanto foco/di vero amor, ch'a la morte seconda/fu degna di venire a questo gioco" (*Paradiso* 20.106-17).

[24] "*Regnum coelorum* violenza pate/da caldo amore e da viva speranza,/che vince la divina volontate:/non a guisa che l'omo a l'om sobranza/ma vince lei perché vuole esser vinta,/e, vinta, vince con sua beninanza" (*Paradiso* 20.94-99).

[25] "Molti gridan 'Criso, Cristo!',/che saranno in giudicio assai men *prope*/a lui, che tal che non conosce Cristo" (*Paradiso* 19.106-08).

[26] For a good overview of Catholic doctrine on baptism by desire, see William Fanning's article in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* on Baptism (Fanning 1907).

Before concluding, however, I should also talk about an additional consideration I have when teaching *Paradiso* to upperclassmen. In my experience, *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* are easy "sells" for reasons I have outlined above. *Paradiso*, however, is hard going. As one student put it, the problem is that this canticle is an epic without conflict, and conflict is what makes for good stories (like *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, which conform to the "hero's journey"). I mused on that excellent observation, and reformulated it this way: the "conflict" in *Paradiso* is the conflict with our own mind and human language to grasp and express mysteries that, by definition, transcend human reason and language. My students were not initially impressed with that formulation: if that is the case, then why is Dante even trying? I pointed out how wildly experimental *Paradiso* is: Dante begins coining new words to try to grasp the realities he is seeing (*transuminar*/transhumanize; *s'addua*/twoed; *s'inluia*/in-Hims; *s'invera*/entruthed;).[27] In that regard, he shows some kinship with James Joyce, a point that some English majors appreciated. At the end of the day, though, Joyce is still writing about observable human reality: why read a work that is trying to express non-observable, inhuman realities?

When confronted with this question, I decided to put Dante aside briefly and consider a sonnet from 1923 by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

> Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.
> Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,
> And lay them prone upon the earth and cease
> To ponder on themselves, the while they stare
> At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere
> In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese
> Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release
> From dusty bondage into luminous air.
> O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,
> When first the shaft into his vision shone
> Of light anatomized! Euclid alone
> Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they
> Who, though once only and then but far away,
> Have heard her massive sandal set on stone (Millay 2002).

This sonnet itself requires some careful analysis and explication. Euclid is studied in one of our Core mathematics courses, but most undergraduates do not appreciate the *beauty* of points, lines, and theorems. I need to gloss a bit: what is a geometrical figure? Something that has no physical reality: no color, texture, smell, or mass. Even the figures are simply visualizations for utterly abstract concepts (as our students discover in Plato's *Republic*). And yet the logic of how axioms build on one another into theorems and proofs is *beautiful*, according to St. Vincent Millay. Pure logic, not bound by earth or language, has a beauty all its own, and this beauty is worthy of being commemorated in a sonnet. Moreover, continuing on my mathematical riff, I note that we *know* that there are such things as irrational numbers. *Phi*, *pi*, and the diagonal of a square (the *alogon* of Plato's *Meno*) are

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[27] *Paradiso* 1.70-71: "Transuminar significar *per verba*/non si poria"; "To signify man's soaring beyond man/words will not do." *Paradiso* 7.4-6: "Così, volgendosi a la nota sua,/fu viso a me cantare essa sustanza,/sopra la qual doppio lume s'addua"; "I heard, in rhythm with the harmony/of hosts, the singing of that radiance/bright with the twinning of a double ray." *Paradiso* 9.73-81: "'Dio vede tutto e tuo veder s'inluia,'/diss' io, 'beato spirto, sì che nulla/voglia di sé a te puot' esser fuia. Dunque la voce tua, che 'l ciel trastulla/sempre col canto di quei fuochi pii/che di sei ali facen la coculla,/perché non satisfice a' miei disii?/Già non attendere' io tua dimanda,/s'io m'intuassi, come tu t'inmii.'"; "'God sees all, and your vision so in-Hims,/O blessed soul,' said I, 'no will of man/can fly or be concealed from what you see./Then why do you by whom this heaven rings/in merry concord with those pious flames/who weave their silken cowls with their six wings,/Not raise your voice to satisfy my wish?/I wouldn't wait for you to speak your will,/if I could so in-you as you in-me.'" "*Paradiso* 28.37-39: "E quello avea la fiamma più sincera/cui men distava la favilla pura,/credo, però che più di lei s'invera"; "And the least distant from that purest fire/shone with the clearest flame, I think because/the point entruthed itself most fully there." The first two instances display rare points in which I find Esolen's translation lacking, since they appear to miss the new words coined by Dante.

some with which most of them are familiar. Leave faith aside: we know through *reason* that there are mathematical entities that go beyond reason and language, and that these entities exist in the world: look at any spiral or circle. If the subject of literature is life, then why not write sonnets about irrational numbers or the unobservable inner workings of black holes?[28] Some people become English majors because they dislike mathematics and science; I try to show them that real English majors should not discount the poetic potential of these subjects. Dante certainly didn't: consider Statius' treatise on hylomorphic embryology in *Purgatorio* 25! These considerations were not entirely successful at impressing on my students the validity and importance of such apophatic poetry, but most of them were willing to grant that Dante was likely doing more in *Paradiso* than they could appreciate, which is a solid first step.

The last step, however, was to connect the great Italian poet to the struggles of young writers. Ultimately, by *Paradiso* 33, language utterly fails Dante, and his vision is impossible to put even into newly-invented words. At this point, epic begins to fall into lyric, and ends only in vision and silence:

> Alas how feeble language is, how lame
> Beside my thought!—and, for what I was shown,
> To call thought 'small' would be too great a claim.
> O Light that dwell within Thyself alone,
> Who alone know Thyself, are known, and smile
> With Love upon the Knowing and the Known!
> That circle which appeared—in my poor style—
> Like a reflected radiance in Thee,
> After my eyes had studied it awhile,
> Within, and in its own hue, seemed to be
> Tinted with the figure of a Man,
> And so I gazed on it absorbedly . . .
> Here ceased the powers of my high fantasy (*Paradiso* 33.121-32, 142).[29]

Here my English majors who were creative writers began to articulate an understanding of the mystery at the heart of Dante's poetics. All authors struggle to find the right words for the phenomena they describe, and the description of a phenomenon is not identical to it. Think of the experience of falling in love: you could be the most eloquent poet in the language, but the fullness of that experience (a mysterious and divine experience, if you are Dante falling in love with Beatrice!) will ever elude being encapsulated in limited human language. Apophatic theology can be a hard concept for even well-formed, believing Christians to grasp; in Dante's final struggle to express himself, even non-religious students began to understand the importance of his struggle.[30] Before

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28 See Umberto Eco, "A Reading the *Paradiso*": "Dante's *Paradiso* is the apotheosis of the virtual world, of nonmaterial things, of pure software, without the weight of earthly or infernal hardware, whose traces remain in the *Purgatorio*. The *Paradiso* is more than modern; it can become, for the reader who has forgotten history, a tremendously real element of the future. It represents the triumph of pure energy, which the labyrinth of the Web promises but will never be able to give us; it is an exaltation of floods and bodies without organs, an epic made of novas and white dwarf stars, and endless big bang, a story whose plot covers the distance of light-years, and, if you really want familiar examples, a triumphant space odyssey, with a very happy ending. You can read the *Paradiso* in this way too; it can never do you any harm, and it will be better than a disco with strobe lights or ecstasy. After all, with regard to ecstasy, Dante's third cantica keeps its promises and actually delivers it" (Eco 2002, p. 22).

29 "Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco/al mio concetto! E questo, a quell ch'i' vidi,/è tanto, che non basta a dicer 'poco'./O luce etterna che sola in te sidi,/sola t'intendi, e da te intelletta/e intendente te ami e arridi!/Quella circulazion che sì concetta/pareva in te come lume reflesso,/da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,/dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,/mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:/per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo . . . . A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa" (*Paradiso* 33.121-32, 142).

30 Apophatic theology is a way of understanding Christian revelation that stresses the utter other-ness of God from Creation. Etymologically, "apophatic" means a denial of speech: human language is formed from human experience, and the experience of God is so different from ordinary human realities that words fail. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, (Crystal 2011) David Crystal puts the matter succinctly: "Those who believe in God are continually trying

Paradiso, Dante did not appear to struggle at all with his art, and was even a bit vainglorious.[31] Dante's failure here resonated with the experiences of young writers, and even those students who had been hard on Dante (both the Poet and the Pilgrim) up to this point were able to give a bit of sympathy for and appreciation of the sheer achievement of the *Commedia*, the great epic of the Christian Intellectual Tradition.

6. Conclusions

Teaching what Dante called "the sacred poem" ("lo sacrato poema," *Paradiso* 23.62)[32] is never easy, and any approach necessarily leaves much to be desired. I hope, however, that I have shared some helpful ways to bring Dante's essentially theological poetics into a solidly human realm, in order to reach students of any faith (or no faith). I should close by noting that this pedagogy is clearly not a violation of Dante's own epic, since what do we see in the Second Person of the Trinity?—"la nostra effige": "our [human] figure" (*Paradiso* 33.131).

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to say what cannot be said" (Crystal 2011, p. 403). While the theological tradition has developed ways of predicating statements about God (particularly Thomas Aquinas's method of analogy), one must always be conscious of the fact that these predications are never complete nor sufficient to reflect the full reality of God. Apophatic theology predates Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, but apophatic approaches in Christianity tend to trace themselves back to his writings; for a more detailed account, see Andrew Louth, "Apophatic Theology: Denys the Areopagite" (Louth 1998, No. 165).

[31] Consider his literary *hybris* in *Inferno* 25: "Be silent, Lucan, where you touch upon/wretched Sabellus and Nasidius,/and listen to the arrow I shoot now./Be silent, Ovid, with your Arethusa/and Cadmus, where you poem turns/this to a serpent, that one to a spring;/I hold no grudge, for never front to front/did you transmute two natures so their forms/were ready to change matter with each other"; "Taccia Lucano omai là dov' e' tocca/del misero Sabello e di Nasidio,/e attenda a udir quell ch'or si scocca. /Taccia di Cadmo e d'Aretusa Ovidio,/ché se quello in serpent e quella in fonte/converte petando, io non lo 'nvidio;/ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte/non transmutò sì ch'amendue le forme/a cambiar lor matera fosser pronte" (*Inferno* 25.94-102). By the end of *Paradiso*, Dante is not telling Classic poets to be silent: he himself is reduced to silence.

[32] A wonderful initial resource to opening up the *Commedia* is Jason Baxter's *A Beginner's Guide to Dante's* Divine Comedy (Baxter 2018). Baxter has written eloquently on the sacred character of Dante's poetic achievement, and thus is a particularly useful resource for non-experts interested in Dante and the Christian Intellectual Tradition.

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Article

Teaching Dante in the History of Christian Theology

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Abstract: Outside of core curriculum programs or Great Books classes, few undergraduates who are not literature majors read and discuss Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This paper describes the redesign of a course in the history of Christian theology as a model for integrating the study of Dante into additional contexts within general education. Reading Dante not only as poet but also as theologian can enhance students' learning and their engagement with medieval theology. A focused reading of *Paradiso* provides a novel and exciting way for a survey course in historical theology to balance general education's needs for both breadth and depth. At the same time, reading Dante also helps students to experience the significant intersections of culture and theology in the medieval period.

Keywords: Dante; pedagogy; history of theology; core and general education curricula; interdisciplinarity; medieval theology; literary studies

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1. Introduction

With respect to Dante, I was one of the lucky ones. As a college sophomore, I stumbled into an introductory literature course where the *Inferno* was the climax of the treatment of the hero's journey traced through Homer and Virgil to Dante. That class led me to become a comparative literature major and to enroll in an upper-level course on medieval narrative where I read the *Paradiso.* But most undergraduates in the early twenty-first century are not so blessed. Few have multiple opportunities to read and discuss the *Commedia.*

My current teaching context is a case in point. The college has two general education tracks. In the Great Books track, students read the *Commedia* in its entirety during the spring of their sophomore year. But in the more traditional distributional track that comprises nearly ninety percent of the student population, there are no general education courses where students read Dante. What is more surprising is that the *Commedia* appears on only one other reading list for a course in the college.

If my context is representative, it suggests that those of us who value Dante's central contribution to the Christian and Western intellectual traditions must be intentional about creating space for students to read the *Commedia.* This paper sketches my initial attempt to teach Dante within the context of a distributional general education program. I offer it as a model for integrating Dante into a discipline-specific course, reflecting on my institutional context, weighing Dante's role as a theologian, and outlining elements of course design and objectives before suggesting some strategies for teaching Dante across the curriculum.

2. Finding Spaces in an Institutional Context

Within our college's distributional track, students take one course from several options in the area of Western Heritage. These courses span several departments, including history, philosophy, English, classics, and religion. Religion 270, History of Christian Theology, is one course among these options. The catalogue describes this course as a "study of the ways Christian theology both shapes and is shaped by developments in Western culture from the rise of Christianity through the contemporary era."

Any instructor offering this undergraduate "History of Christian Theology" faces significant challenges. Primary among these is the course's span: "the rise of Christianity through the contemporary era." That long arc poses an inevitable tension between breadth and depth. Given this description, the typical course offering focuses on medieval theology for three to four weeks. Students normally read chapters from a secondary text on the history of Christian thought as well as primary texts. In recent years, instructors have used as secondary texts Alister McGrath's *Historical Theology* or Justo Gonzalez's *A History of Christian Thought: In One Volume,* along with primary readings from either McGrath's accompanying reader or Hugh Kerr's *Readings in Christian Thought* (McGrath 2013; Gonzalez 2014; McGrath 2016; Kerr 1990). These primary text selections may include readings from Anselm, Abelard, Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William Ockham, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, and Thomas à Kempis. Given this welter of names and related theological topics, the instructor's challenge is to find ways to help students to understand both the larger picture of medieval theology and the development of theology across time.

A second challenge arising from the stated goal is that the course will explore the ways theology and Western culture interact. This exploration is particularly significant for the medieval period. Christian theology distinctively shapes the medieval world of Christendom. As such, it provides the paradigmatic example of the interaction of theology and culture in the West. Any effective study of the medieval period requires students to integrate insights from several disciplines, so successful students of the period must bring together theological and philosophical reading with insights from the arts, agriculture, politics, and economic life.

Given these challenges, I argue that Dante deserves consideration as a medieval theologian. Redesigning this course so that students read Dante's *Paradiso* for a month as their common primary reading provides a novel and exciting response to both challenges, as it balances breadth and depth while addressing the interaction of culture and theology. A guided reading of the *Paradiso* as theology provides an innovative and creative design for teaching the history of medieval theology that can enhance students' learning and engagement.

3. Considering Dante as Theologian

Some faculty and students may object at the outset to such a project, arguing that Dante belongs in a literature course but not a course in theology. Before exploring course design in detail, therefore, I offer a brief rationale for Dante's inclusion in this course with a consideration of Dante as theologian.

Specialists continue to debate whether the *Commedia* is "theology". Zygmunt Baranski, for example, concludes that in terms of philology, it is inaccurate to label Dante as a theologian or his work as theology (Baranski 2013a, 2013b). Yet, as Vittorio Montemaggi argues, even Baranski's own work shows both that Dante intended for his poem to effect spiritual change in his readers' lives and that he was in line with prevailing theological currents (Montemaggi 2016, p. 62). Dante does not align himself with a particular theological school, since he is aware the divine mystery tempers all human conceptualization of God. Yet Montemaggi argues for the *Commedia* as theology because it "can help us deepen, enrich, and refine our understanding of what theology is or could be. From our contemporary perspective it makes sense—it can, indeed, be fruitful—to refer to the *Commedia* as theology, as discourse and inquiry about God wishing to aid us in our comprehension of our relationship with, and in our journeying into the divine" (Montemaggi 2016, p. 63).

4. Outlining the Course Design

Over the course of the five-week unit on medieval theology, students meet twice weekly for a total of ten seventy-five-minute class sessions. Individual students are responsible for leading discussion on primary texts throughout the semester. They prepare a brief biographical overview of the author as well as discussion questions and small group activities for the class in consultation with me. That pattern continues during our work with Dante and the other medieval theologians. At the

end of the unit, students produce a close reading of one canto in *Paradiso* that interacts with one or two of the theologians we have studied.

Given that framework, the ten sessions move through a reading of *Paradiso,* often paired with readings from medieval theologians. As much as possible, I use readings in the assigned collection of primary texts, but I also provide supplemental readings as needed. The following discussion provides a sketch of those pairings for some of the class sessions.

Before our initial meeting, for example, students read the first three cantos alongside selections from Augustine's *Confessions*, including the opening paragraphs and selections on time and eternity, as well as from Pseudo-Dionysius's *The Mystical Theology* (Kerr 1990, pp. 52–60, 64–65; Baxter 2018, pp. 123–33, 139–44; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, pp. 133–41). These readings lead them to a deeper understanding of the ineffability of God and Dante's inability to describe his heavenly vision fully (*Par.* 1.1–36). For the second meeting, students read selections from Augustine on free will and predestination to engage those themes in *Paradiso* 4 and 5 as Beatrice answers Dante's questions about the broken vows of Piccarda and Constance (Kerr 1990, pp. 61–62).

The third meeting features readings from Anselm and Abelard on atonement that pair with Beatrice's explanation of the way of redemption in *Paradiso* 7—a composite of the positions of Anselm and Thomas Aquinas (Kerr 1990, pp. 82–95; Hawkins 2006, p. 109). This canto also frames a broader discussion of divine love in Dante. As Peter Hawkins argues, this material provides a clear example of Dante's work as a theological teacher, as he presents the tradition through the words of Beatrice, offers a survey of possible understandings, and selects one theological position among others (Hawkins 2006, p. 109).

In the fourth meeting, readings from Thomas Aquinas and Francis of Assisi pair with *Paradiso* 10–12, where Dante the pilgrim hears the story of St. Francis from the Dominican St. Thomas and that of St. Dominic from the Franciscan St. Bonaventure (Kerr 1990, pp. 101–19). This pairing provides students with the opportunity to grasp differences between these two founders of competing religious orders but also to see how Dante's use of metaphor underscores their commonalities, creating two encircling wreaths of souls that even include Aquinas's archenemy, Siger of Brabant. Dante's heaven, as Jason Baxter observes, is a vibrant unity of song and dance that nonetheless contains "an uncompromising diversity and plurality" (Baxter 2018, p. 160).

Many of the later class meetings focus almost exclusively on *Paradiso,* and students work collaboratively in class to understand what their reading of Dante is teaching them about theology. Dante's theological examination in *Paradiso* 24, 25, and 26, for example, provides an occasion for reflection on the theological virtues. But the last class meeting returns to the pattern of pairing *Paradiso* with readings from other theologians: the final cantos of *Paradiso* lend themselves to the comparison of Dante's account with other mystical visions, like those of Dante's final guide, Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as those of Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich (Kerr 1990, pp. 96–98, 125–30).

Instructors who have less time allotted for the unit on medieval theology can easily adapt this approach, since their students can still read some cantos of *Paradiso* alongside their study of particular theologians or topics. Pairing *Paradiso* 1 with a discussion of ineffability or *Paradiso* 7 with medieval discussions of atonement, for example, works well without the rest of the framework sketched above.

5. Meeting Course Objectives

This five-week unit on the *Paradiso* preserves the breadth of theological voices and significant doctrinal discussions that students would encounter reading select primary texts alongside a secondary history of Christian thought. The process helps students to gain an appreciation for the broad consensus of medieval theology that Dante often presents, but it also enables them to grasp a range of theological positions. On the pages of *Paradiso,* they can begin to approach theology as a conversation. They can begin to see that theology is a living tradition, so that in the words of Alistair McIntyre, it is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument" (McIntyre 1984, p. 222). Dante often brings different positions together on one page, modeling the work of the theologian in presenting alternatives

and taking positions on various questions. Dante thus teaches students not only the ideas of theology but also something of the process of reflection and engagement with the theological tradition, providing a depth to the study of medieval theology other texts do not as easily convey.

Reading Dante in the history of theology also provides students with at least three ways to understand the interaction of theology and Western culture in a profound way through their encounter with Dante's "sacred poem" (*Par.* 25.1). First, any reader of the poem encounters Dante's capacious vision that reaches beyond theology to embrace all parts of life, from politics to erotic love to astronomy, all presented alongside the theological concepts with which Dante interacts. Theology is not a discipline removed from other spheres of life but integral to them—and reading Dante makes that clearer than other approaches to teaching the history of the tradition. Secondly, Dante's writing provides a crucial demonstration of the ways the Christian tradition shapes the West and is at the same time shaped by the culture, as he both receives and transforms the theological tradition he inherits. He affirms his beliefs in central theological tenets while at the same time putting his own stamp on them. As Peter Hawkins puts it, "he gave us a new account of everything old" (Hawkins 2006, p. 130). Finally, Dante provides an opportunity to examine the influence of theology on Western culture through an examination of what Hawkins has called "his afterlife". Hawkins traces Dante's influence on the subsequent literary tradition, including Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Seamus Heaney, among others. Dante's influence on the tradition of visual arts is equally extensive, ranging from William Blake to Joshua Reynolds to Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Hawkins, p. 137–50). Similarly, Joan Acocella underscores the influence of Dante on composers—Franz Liszt's *Dante Symphony* and Pyotr Illich Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini: Symphonic Fantasy after Dante*, *Op.* 32 (Acocella 2013). For some class sessions, I have students listen to parts of these compositions or read short extracts of poems where Dante's influence appears. Dante's afterlife continues even in more contemporary cultural expressions. Hawkins also notes Dante's influence on the *New Yorker* cartoons of Robert Mankoff and Edward Frascino and the comics of Gary Panter, as well as a variety of films and television shows (Hawkins 2006, pp. 131–37, 150–53, 159–63). Other authors like Rod Dreher make the case that reading Dante provides wisdom for shaping contemporary lives (Dreher 2015).

These examples, along with others, indicate that students who read *Paradiso* find themselves better equipped to meet the course goal of understanding the interaction of theology and Western culture.

6. Teaching Dante across the Curriculum

This course redesign suggests a possible model for introducing students to Dante in the context of general education. The first step is for instructors to brainstorm about places where Dante might find a foothold in their institution's current general education curriculum, even in places where connections are not immediately apparent. Instructors might consider reading Dante in a survey course in Western civilization, or in medieval history or literature. Instructors might develop a literature course where students could trace his influence in literature and the arts. Courses that examine the themes of community or exiles and refugees—in the humanities or in political science—might find room for Dante as well.

Once instructors identify possible courses, they will need to consider ways Dante satisfies and enriches the goals that a specific course description sets out, preparing to make the case for Dante's inclusion as needed with departments or college curriculum committees and students. Beyond that, they will begin to develop specific plans for integrating Dante into their course, developing reading lists, planning activities, and crafting assignments. In taking up this task, instructors will enable students to stumble across the *Commedia* in expected and unexpected places. In so doing, they may help them to discover that this poem is, as one of my students put it, a living text. In reading and discussing Dante, they—both instructors and students—may find themselves as well among the lucky ones, among the blessed.

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Article

Learning to Read Big Books: Dante, Spenser, Milton

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Abstract: The interpretive challenges posed by dense and lengthy poems such as Dante's *Inferno*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* can prove daunting for the average undergraduate reader whose experience of texts has been circumscribed by pedagogical mandates focused on reading for information. While information-retrieval based reading certainly has its place, the experience of reading these longer, more allegorical and symbolic poems can create in the attentive reader a far more valuable kind of learning, understood by Dante and his heirs, all working from Homeric and Virgilian models, as understanding. Each of these long poems pay very close attention to acts of interpretation, foregrounding the experiences of their characters to illustrate the proper way to move from sense, past speculation, to true understanding. Those who heed these lessons, and embrace the experience offered by the poet, find that the daunting task has been outlined as the necessary step to true knowledge rather than mere information.

Keywords: Dante; Milton; Spenser

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1. "Read It Well"

In the introductory poem of Ben Jonson's grouping of epigrams in his 1616 Folio, he makes a request of his reader:

> Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my book in hand,
> To read it well: that is, to understand. (Jonson 1996, p. 35)

Jonson is famously impatient with the wrong kinds of readers—those unable to comprehend his carefully constructed epideictic poems even as he pulls from all the considerable Horatian and Ciceronian resources at his disposal. He certainly held "being understood" as a focal point of his literary and critical practice; one of his greatest professional challenges came in his development of the Jacobean court masque as an allegorical vehicle for moral education. His audience, including King James himself, was predictably more taken by the visual and somatic spectacle of the masque performance than the moral instruction for which it was supposed to be a vehicle. For Jonson the poet, working in whatever secondary medium he requires as a vehicle, passive consumption of a spectacle, no matter how marvelous the invention, is insufficient without the exercise of judgment that leads to understanding. Later autobiographical poems, such as the "Ode to Himself" and his "Epistle to John Selden," express his continuing struggle to bridge the gap between poetic intent and reader response. The understanding Jonson values in his readers—or, ideally, hearers—is necessary so that they can apprehend the ethical qualities marking the very best poetry. However, as he is all too aware, this understanding is not an automatic response; it must be nurtured and trained into being.

Jonson's concern mirrors that of many a teacher facing a great poetic work while trying to educate younger or more inexperienced readers in the arts of understanding. This is particularly urgent in an era when traditional humanities disciplines appear to be a hard sell to students for whom a university degree must demonstrate obvious utility in the broader working world of professional credentialing. The task of poetic interpretation is made even more difficult when undergraduate students come

to works of the past—especially epic scale poetry—having been trained as consumers or users of informational texts. As the Tennessee state standards for English Language Arts are presented:

> The ELA standards are designed to prepare students with the most important knowledge and 21st century literacy skills necessary to succeed in post-secondary and workforce arenas. The standards emphasize critical and divergent thinking, problem solving, active listening, recognition of patterns and anomalies, and evaluation and questioning of source material.
>
> The standards reinforce the three ELA instructional shifts: regular practice with complex text and its academic vocabulary; reading and writing grounded in evidence from literary and informational text; and building knowledge through content-rich literary and informational text. (tn.gov)

The *Tennessee English/Language Arts Standards* manual for instructors promulgated by the Tennessee State Board of Education makes it very clear: All reading standards (see pp. 25–39) must apply roughly equally to "literary" and "informational" texts, because reading is defined as "a cognitively demanding skill. With careful guidance and instruction, students can fluently read words and sentences, so they can have access to the world of ideas presented to them in print" (Tennessee State Board of Education 2018, p. 26). Though it is beyond the scope or purpose of this essay to criticize the decisions made at administrative levels for primary and secondary English instruction, it is appropriate to point out that these kinds of mandates have significant cognitive effects on the students who labor under them. One effect of reading thus defined is that a student must naturally view any given piece of "serious" written discourse as a series of propositions which only need be remembered and repeated on demand in order to be "understood." Students are thus trained to be consumers of written texts in much the same way that they are perhaps less consciously trained to be consumers of electronic media.

It is unsurprising for a university student to be exposed to at least a portion of a demanding narrative poem such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*; these are standard fixtures of literature textbooks and provide touchstones for literature survey classes, as does the *Inferno* portion of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. My observations of student responses to these poems in a regional public university provides the context for what follows. The affective reach of these poems is undeniable; in the case of Milton, for instance, even the most religiously disinclined and Biblically illiterate student is impressed by the *energiea* of Milton's blank verse and the grand sweep of his ambition. Many also gladly announce, in writing exercises, that by reading *Paradise Lost* they have learned a lot about Satan and Hell that they never knew before. Though the experienced reader of Milton might gape at such a statement, the student reaction makes perfect sense and even shows that interpretive effort is not in fact lacking; the gathering of information is the only way they know how to approach the task of reading.

The sore-beset literature professor knows that this is hardly the mode of reading Jonson requests for his own relatively brief and plain-spoken poems, and it is certainly a very long way from Milton's "fit audience, though few" (Milton 1957, 7.31), strenuously sought out in the midst of evil days, "with dangers compassed round/And solitude" (Milton 1957, 7.25–28). The works listed above are not invested merely in narrow doctrinal ends enumerated as in a catechism; they are not merely parables or riddles wherein the answer or lesson is implicit in the phrasing of the beginning. In fact, each epic poem aims at making or "fashioning" (as Spenser highlights in his *Letter to Ralegh*) not only its narrative characters but also its readers: Those who are provided with a challenging, even daunting experience mirroring the quests and tests about which they are reading. If highly allusive and rhetorically dense poems such as the *Commedia* or *Paradise Lost* are valuable to undergraduates, it cannot be merely because they provide "information" about the torments of Hell, or the character of Satan, or the origins of Saint George, and frankly it cannot be because these poems provide the opportunity for instructors to gain measurable assessment data points. Instead, these weighty epics provide an experience that cannot be replicated in other forms of reading. Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* calls poetry "food for the tenderest stomachs" (Sidney 1999, p. 34). In providing tender food, Dante, Spenser, and Milton

also carefully usher their readers into scenes of instruction in reading. However dark the wood or steep the path, whatever the burden, the understanding reader will embrace it all as a totality, gaining in the experience forms of knowledge and skill that are much greater than the sum of their parts. These skills and knowledge, once gained, are never static or simple, but can inform every intellectual phase of a student's career. Thus, do epic poems manifest the greatest kind of reading possible, and the greatest teaching of that art they so dramatically require.

2. Visions of Hell

The drama inherent in renderings of the underworld, or Hell, provides a bracing example of how reading must be conceived as more than gathering data points. Generally, the poets of these works show how demanding the work can get. The self-consciousness of the narrative structure in the *Commedia* needs no elaborate unpacking; Dante describes a journey into Hell in *Inferno* that is instigated and guided by Virgil, both as literary forebear and as physical guide. Dante takes the few tableaux provided by Virgil in the sixth book of *The Aeneid* and expands on them as set-pieces by which moral and philosophical truths are explored by symbolic representation of specific cases taken from history and myth (See *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, s.v. Dante Alighieri). As such, Dante's narrator frequently offers direct admonition so that the reader of the poem will remember to look and interpret carefully. For instance, in the tense moments before the gates of Dis, we read the following right before the "herald sent from Heaven" (Alighieri 2003, 9.85) clears the way:

> O you whose intellects see clear and whole,
> gaze on the doctrine that is hidden here
> beneath the unfamiliar verses' veil. (Alighieri 2003, 9.61–63)

If the verses serve as a veil for some hidden doctrine, the narrator still urges the reasonable reader to search for what lies beneath them—that is, what the words on the page simultaneously reveal and conceal. This is only one of countless moments when readers are directly enjoined to attend closely to the descriptive imagery. As the monstrous Geryon approaches the narrator at the end of Canto 16, the narrator and author collapse into each other in a remarkably evocative depiction of authorial and interpretive anxiety:

> Knowing a truth whose face appears a lie,
> a man should always keep his lips shut tight
> as long as he can, lest he be tagged with shame
> Though he has told the truth; but I cannot
> keep silent here, and, Reader, by the notes
> of this my Comedy, I swear—and may
> They keep in favor long—through that thick air
> I saw a figure swimming in the night,
> such as would stun the surest heart with wonder. (Alighieri 2003, 16.124–32)

Certainly, one could see in a moment like this an assertion of poetic virtuosity; the description that follows will be so fantastic that the poet is describing something beyond the power of language. Such is the nature of ambitious poetry. From the standpoint of the rhetorical moment involved, such narrative frame-breaking is necessary so that the reader does not merely look, but engages the intellect to see. Geryon is certainly a remarkable and vivid sight all on his own, yet it is also true that such a long self-conscious prologue to the description has our attention firmly fixed by the time he appears. Thus prepared, we can better see the whole, rather than merely the sum, of Geryon's parts. As described in the opening lines of Canto 17, the honest, kindly countenance combined with the serpentine body and furry legs are deliberately jarring. These various parts are literally incongruous, albeit whole rather than mutilated. The arabesques on its sides seem strangely opulent, even hypnotic, perhaps deflecting the unwary pilgrim's attention from the "venomous fork" at the end of its tail (Alighieri 2003, 17.1–27).

As a monster, Geryon is also named as a sign of deceit, so the reader's struggle is to envision the monstrous while also experiencing bemused and even disgusted wonder. Though Geryon's interstitial appearance is particularly dramatic, the Hell Dante describes is full of sights carrying this same weight; there are, in fact, so many that they easily overwhelm the reader just as they do the narrator. Their number and intensity are relentless and cumulative; the pilgrim's experience becomes the reader's experience—wonder, fear, weariness—in an exemplary symbiosis that Dante deliberately emphasizes.

Edmund Spenser, on the other hand, while also pulling from Virgil, offers comparatively oblique and brief reflections of Hell in the *The Faerie Queene*—parts of the classical rendering reconfigured for the multifarious geography of "Faery Lond." Redcrosse Knight begins his quest of holiness lost in a dark wood and literally stumbles across a monstrous creature of fraud in a dark cave (Spenser 2001, 1.1), calling to mind both the Homeric and Virgilian source material but also the opening sequence of the *Inferno*. Poor Fradubio, imprisoned in a tree yet able to speak in 1.2.31–43, is a clever joining of Ovidian metamorphoses (Daphne, Syrinx, and Myrrha, for instance) with the *Inferno's* wood of the suicides in Canto 13. Both Archimago and Duessa, personifications of malicious deceit in Book 1, descend into the underworld—the former by using familiar spirits who exit "Morpheus house" with its double gates of ivory and horn (Spenser 2001, 1.1.39–40), and the latter descending into "grisly Pluto's realm" where she witnesses the same torments described by Virgil in *The Aeneid* and gathered into mythographical handbooks: Ixion's wheel, Sisyphus's stone, Tantalus's thirst, Theseus's chair of forgetfulness, and Hippolytus's dismemberment (Spenser 2001, 1.5.38–45).

Redcrosse Knight himself experiences a kind of damnation when he spends nine months in the hell that is the dungeon of Orgoglio's castle (Spenser 2001, 1.8.38). He is only freed by Prince Arthur's recreation of Christ's harrowing of Hell, wherein he breaks down the dungeon door and physically retrieves the suffering knight who cannot carry himself on his "feeble thighes" (Spenser 2001, 1.8.39–40). The spiritual damage from Redcrosse's descent into the hellish underworld is partially restored by Una's gracious reception of her wayward knight, but must be further painfully cauterized by his purgatorial confrontation with Despair in Canto 9 and his arduous ascent of Mount Contemplation in Canto 10: "Thence forward by that painful way that pas,/Forth to an hill, that was both steepe and hy" (Spenser 2001, 1.10.46).

Spenser's Knight of Temperance enters into another version of Hell in his journey through the Cave of Mammon in Book 2. Whereas Dante's pilgrim has Virgil to protect and exhort him, Guyon must make his journey without a guide. His three-day journey through the realms of night, wherein he sees many of the same classical features of Hades, creates in him a deep lassitude of body and spirit, though he does not ever explicitly fall victim to the various temptations Mammon proffers. He does, however, collapse immediately upon emerging into the daylight. Having had no guide but appetite, and no protection besides the exertion of his own considerable will, his preservation is entirely the work of divine intervention in the person of Prince Arthur, who thus reprises the role he first played in Book One when he rescued Redcrosse Knight from Orgoglio's dungeon. Spenser's versions of Hell or Hades are not the focal points of the characters' quests, though they do illustrate important constitutive aspects of their signal virtues and as such provide scenes where moral truths as character developments can be illustrated narratively.

Milton, meanwhile, dramatically departs both from the classical paradigm and from the stark silence of Dante's Lucifer, stuck in the ice of Cocytus (*Inferno* Canto 34). While Satan's very first phrase is one borne out of isolation, ruin, and confusion—"If thou beest he" (Milton 1957, 1.84)—he quickly recovers, proving restless and voluble. He commands the attention of the fallen angel and reader alike by the vividness of his character and of his heroic rhetoric, claiming to be the new possessor of Hell and asserting the primacy of his will over the circumstance of his damnation. Vain speculation also claims attention in Hell, for not only are the fallen angels busy creating for themselves castles built from the very stuff mined from Hell's guts, but they also engage in epic scale activities ranging from exploration to heroic games to philosophy (Milton 1957, 2.521–628). Those who choose the rigors of exploration discover a topography of horror that recalls the first view of Dante's pilgrim in *Inferno*:

> Thus roving on
> In confus'd march forlorn, th' adventrous Bands
> With shuddring horror pale, and eyes agast
> View'd first thir lamentable lot, and found
> No rest: through many a dark and drearie Vaile
> They pass'd, and many a Region dolorous,
> O'er many a Frozen, many a fierie Alpe,
> Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and shades of death,
> A Universe of death, which God by curse
> Created evil, for evil only good,
> Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds,
> Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,
> Abominable, inutterable, and worse
> Then Fables yet have feign'd, or fear conceiv'd,
> Gorgons and Hydra's, and Chimera's dire. (Milton 1957, 2.614–28)

Milton catalogues this hellish topography on an alpine scale so that the attentive reader might be taken aback. Like the cacophony that stuns Dante's pilgrim at the opening of *Inferno* Canto 3, the assault on the senses is overwhelming. While these scenes are disclosed to the horrified eyes of the lesser fallen angels, the reader's curiosity is not sated; again very much like Dante's pilgrim, we are not allowed to stand and gaze but must move with the narrative into a new phase requiring new responses. Satan's own heroic journey out of Hell, for instance, provides an infernal parody of the heroic voyages undertaken into and out of Hades by Odysseus and Aeneas. We are thereby given multiple frames of reference within which to view the arresting imagery of Hell: The forlorn and shuddering subordinate fallen angels, the fallen archangel adopting the pose of the classical hero, and the dark materials of Milton's literary and historical precursors, including Homer, Virgil, and Dante.

3. Interpretations of Hell

In none of these cases do we receive "information" about Hell, though the Dantean and Miltonic depictions are so intense that they seem to be assertions about its true nature, luring the unwary reader into a literalistic misreading along the lines of William Blake's (see *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). The lack of irony in tone, unflagging *enargeia* in invention, and careful command of vernacular verse forms put the reader under extraordinary tension, even temptation. In order to avoid a "fall," to borrow from Stanley Fish's famous reading of Milton, the reader must work very hard to interpret rather than merely consume (Fish 1997, p. 9). In addition to their careful placement of the reader into scenes where proper interpretation is paramount, each of these writers also provides an admonition: Beware a poor reading.

Spenser, whose epic focus is more diffuse, uses examples of consumption without judgment twice in the Legend of Redcrosse Knight. In Book One, Redcrosse Knight is effortlessly seduced by Duessa in Canto 2 because he "busies his quick eyes" with the affected and fraudulent, though not inconsiderable, beauty of her face rather than opening his "dull ears" to hear what she says (Spenser 2001, 1.2.26). Likewise, when he hears Fraudubio's lamentable tale in the latter part of the same canto he cannot tell what it means except that it seems lamentable; in addition to being distracted by Duessa's strategic swoon (Spenser 2001, 1.2.44–45), he is unable to interpret the tale at this still-early stage of his own education. That he falls victim to Duessa's blandishments in Canto 7, and then almost completely succumbs to Despair in Canto 9, makes his purgatorial education in Canto 10 even more necessary.

Dante's pilgrim cannot be allowed the same luxury of trial and error that Spenser provides to Redcrosse Knight. As such, the pilgrim is put through a rigorous course in interpretation, not allowed to merely consume what he sees. In fact, to the extent that he can see at all, his eyes are too weak to penetrate the gloom:

> So dark it was and deep and bleared with mist,

> that though I fixed my gaze upon the bottom,
> I still could not discern a single thing. (Alighieri 2003, 4.10–12)

This description is not as terse as Milton's "darkness visible" (Milton 1957, 1.63), but the effect is the same in both cases: Speculation, in the sense that it involves physical sight of whatever spectacle Hell might present to the senses, must ultimately prove insufficient. Dante's double displacement of the reader from the experience—that is, the reader must receive his or her impressions through the senses of a narrator whose own apprehension is often obscured or doubtful—means that the act of interpretation is especially crucial: As Virgil himself makes clear, sometimes Dante's pilgrim, the reader's only guide, misunderstands or allows his frailty to interpose on his apprehension. To view Hell is to view suffering in extravagant and memorable ways. The weight of such visions is not inconsiderable on an already weakened protagonist: He faints dead away when he sees those abandoned to the whirlwinds at the gates of Hell. He faints for sorrow upon hearing Francesca's story in Canto 5. The suicide in Canto 13 calls forth his pity, and he weeps for pity in Canto 20 at the wrenched bodies of the diviners; he is at this point rebuked by his guide Virgil: "Even now, with all the other fools!" (Alighieri 2003, 20.27). At the beginning of Canto 29, the "mob of souls" makes the pilgrim want to stop and weep. Virgil rebukes him again in Canto 30 when he too curiously eavesdrops on the argument between Sinon and Master Adam—it is "a base desire" (Alighieri 2003, 30.148) to eavesdrop on the wrangling that is tickling his ears. In each of these cases, to be sure, the reader is implicated in the fault criticized in the pilgrim.

Meanwhile, the rigors of the journey tax the pilgrim's moral and physical energies to such an extent that the road is often too hard for him. Sometimes he is carried, as at the end of Canto 19 and in Canto 23. In Canto 24, he simply sits down and threatens to give up; Virgil cajoles him to continue with an appeal to fame and glory: "Turn that to profit, if you understand," he says (Alighieri 2003, 24.57). In other words, though there is a considerable spectacle to be viewed in Hell, the pilgrim is not allowed to be a mere spectator. He must learn to manage his own reactions to what he sees, applying reason to perception so that he might always remember his philosophy (as Virgil enjoins him in 6.106).

Spenser's knights must also confront similar challenges. Redcrosse Knight views a tableau of *contrapasso* in the House of Pride—that is, the palace ruled by Lucifera—in Canto 4. For instance, Gluttony is depicted as a fat monk on a swine, eating, drinking, and vomiting all at the same time, swollen with fatness and suffering from the dropsy as a result of his overindulgence. Though Redcrosse does not directly take part in the parade of the seven deadly sins, the moral weariness created by his extended exposure to sin, and the combat with Sans Joy, creates a weakness exploited by Duessa when she finds Redcrosse beside the magic fountain in Canto 7, disarmed of his "yron-coted plate" (Spenser 2001, 1.7.2). His susceptibility to her particular brand of temptation is intensified by his physical and moral unreadiness symbolized in this unarmed state and his lassitude: "Crudled cold his corage gan assailed,/And cheerfull blood in faintness chill did melt,/Which like a fever fit through all his body swelt" (Spenser 2001, 1.7.6). Likewise Guyon, as he traverses the Cave of Mammon, views the punishments of Tantalus and Pilate (2.7.56–62) and like Dante's pilgrim is anxious to ask the tormented soul about his fate. However, having been three days in the underworld, he finds that his "vitall powers gan wexe Bothe weake and wan,/For want of food, and sleepe, which to upbeare,/like mightie pillours, this fraile life of man" (Spenser 2001, 2.7.65). It almost costs him his life.

Milton's Hell is not interpreted by passers-through or by outside observers; he puts the work of interpretation into the words of the fallen angels themselves, who, like some of the infernal creatures in Dante's Hell, prefer to think that they are managing their own affairs. *Paradise Lost* Book Two provides several perspectives on the nature of Hell, and though the narrator has already provided a fairly definitive statement of the power of God's providence (1.209–20), other points of view are debated and even strongly considered (if overdetermined by the manipulations of Satan). Moloch sees the topography of Hell as raw material for weapons of war and the most brutish battle instinct; Belial sees Hell as a painful refuge to be stoically endured as a punishment until the Sovereign grows bored and forgetful; Mammon prefers to colonize it and remake it into a kingdom rising in emulation

opposite Heaven. Not for nothing is Mammon's suggestion the favorite among the fallen angels until Beelzebub plays his role in suggesting what has been determined will happen anyway.

Even as Satan takes on the trappings of the heroic quest, we do find the other fallen angels engaged in the kind of futile parodies of action described in Dante's *Inferno*: Heroic games, adventures of exploration, music, and even stoic philosophy. Other parodic features include the infernal parody of the trinity in the incestuous relationships between Satan, Sin, and Death, and the parody of the Tree of Knowledge in Book 10, where the fallen angels are all subjected to a punishment worthy of Dante: Their forms, even the degenerate versions, are transformed to those of serpents, whereupon they crawl to eat of a tree "like that/Which grew in Paradise, the bait of Eve/Used by the tempter" (Milton 1957, 10.550–2). The fruit turns to ashes in their mouths:

> They fondly thinking to allay
> Their appetite with gust, instead of fruit
> Chewed bitter ashes, which the offended taste
> With spattering noise rejected: oft they assayed,
> Hunger and thirst constraining, drugged as oft,
> With hatefulest disrelish writhed their jaws
> With soot and cinders filled; so oft they fell
> Into the same illusion, not as man
> Whom they triumphed once lapsed. (Milton 1957, 10.564–71)

The fruit that turns to ashes is the synecdoche for how Milton's poem addresses false or deficient knowledge, apparently simple in its attainment but disappointing or worse in its substance. This kind of knowledge is, in fact, "illusion," a misunderstanding even of the nature of the true Tree of Knowledge—a point made manifest in Satan's recasting of Adam's "sign of our obedience" to his equivocal question, "do they only stand by ignorance?" (Milton 1957, 4. 428, 515–20). Even after they are confronted with "hatefulest disrelish"—that is, the actual bitter experience of their supposed knowledge—they continue to afflict themselves, though they should have learned better. But this is the reason so much attention is paid to Hell as a dramatic scene with its own actors: The fallen angels—from Satan to every one of his followers—are fallen precisely because they never learned to understand their condition.

4. "To Understand"

The foregoing descriptions are merely fragments of works written at such massive scale that full comprehension is almost too daunting, especially for the reader looking for mere information. One writes and speaks about fragments and sections of these poems because each single poem encompasses a mythic cosmos. Instead of making the reader traverse a chaos "without bound/Without dimension" (Milton 1957, 2.892–93) like Satan in *Paradise Lost* Book 2, each single poem provides the above exemplary depictions of interpretation and misinterpretation in order to train the reader—by experience and by example—into the arts of understanding.

One watchword for this learning process comes from a key phrase in Satan's temptation of Eve in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*. As the serpent speaks to Eve, he describes how after eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge he finds that his mind has been greatly expanded—so much so that he was able to turn his mind to "speculations high or deep" (Milton 1957, 9.602). Since the episode is made up—Satan never directly touches the Tree of Knowledge, much less the fruit; in fact, his only knowledge of it comes from Adam's discourse about it in Book 4—the speculations he refers to are entirely self-generated and fraudulent. In this way, then, the speculations are merely another birth of Sin from his head (as Sin herself memorably recounts in their reunion before the gates of Hell in Book 2). To speculate is to look, but with faulty vision; it is to peer into the darkness and rely on conjecture as the fallen angels do when they "reason'd high/Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate" (Milton 1957, 2.558–59)—words that play major roles in the discourses to follow. The result of this vain philosophy is to be lost in wandering mazes. They, like their leader, are misled by these

notions they generate, because though they seem to see details they cannot combine those details to properly inform their reasoning; the shape of the maze is beyond their ken. Neither Dante nor Spenser nor Milton encourages readerly speculation about what their characters experience; that is why each includes so many guiding and shaping segments, whether invocations or corrections or commentaries. This is also why each poet grounds his philosophical and theological discourse in powerful visual idioms that even when not directly allegorical tend to fix abstractions into shape. This is true in Hell, in the House of Alma, in Paradise—in every physical location wherein the actions are placed so as to give them a local habitation and a name. A reader avoiding the fault of speculation understands that every description, every account, is neither given only for itself nor for free association, but for the ways their combinations feed his or her reasoning powers.

The other watchword, as invoked in the opening paragraphs of this essay, is "information." The copiousness of Dante's invention, and his mythic and topical allusiveness, are unsurpassed in weight and variety—though Spenser and Milton are the English poets who most closely approach him in their own particular idioms. Avoiding broad speculation is indeed good; the other temptation is to chase down every particularity like Burton's roving spaniel from *The Anatomy of Melancholy.* The individual pictures, the descriptions, the miniature dramas are all tempting, and can present themselves as riddles to be solved. Dante chooses to place his moral exempla in historical and mythological figures, sometimes relying on a topicality that seems to be a provocation. Spenser's allegory is particularly powerful this way, tempting the unwary student into footnote seeking—as if there is a key to unlock the meaning of the whole in determining the topical referentiality of Acrasia, Lucifera, or Satyrane. Adam's discourse with Raphael begins to veer into the minutiae of angelic sex and into the particularities of celestial motion—both of which Raphael gently rebukes as beside the point that Adam should attend to. To seek for bare "information" about the movement of the celestial spheres would not actually increase his understanding about the moral task ahead of him. Taking the pointed examples each writer provides, and accepting each man's assertion that the experience of careful interpretation must be fully embraced without shortcut, is the way to read properly.

Each work also balances that topical referentiality and allegorical specificity with a narrative frame—that is, the journey of Dante's pilgrim, the quest of the Spenserian knight, or the epic spiritual struggles of Adam and Eve in the face of their tempter. Each work tests but also allures its reader, gently leading him or her into the interpretive mindset necessary to understand how the pilgrims and protagonists themselves are being educated into the right interpretations of their experiences. The richness in works like these—the value of big, capacious books—is that they are totalizing experiences, resisting any unwise reader's urge to reduce them to lists of facts. The teacher who serves as the student's Virgil, or Palmer, can show how the beauties and challenges of poetry are Sidney's cluster of grapes, providing food for tender stomachs and inviting us further into the vineyard.

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Article

"Florentino Ariza Sat Bedazzled": Initiating an Exploration of Literary Texts with Dante in the Undergraduate Seminar

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Abstract: Dante's *Commedia* provides a useful context or "frame" for a discussion of love in literature from the Middle Ages to the present day in the undergraduate seminar. Selected cantos of the *Commedia* can initiate an examination of love—lust, romantic love, *caritas*—and provide ways to analyze depictions of love by important authors. For example, *Inferno* Cantos I and III introduce the concept of the "journey"—Dante's through the three realms of the afterlife, and our "journey" through a series of texts to be read over one semester. Dante's education in *Inferno* constitutes an understanding of sin and of hell as the farthest place from God and His love. Moreover, in Canto I of *Paradiso,* Dante reiterates that God and His love can be found throughout creation "in some places more and in others less" (I: 3), and he concludes his poem with a vision of God and of the entire universe as moved by His love. Six great authors—Francis of Assisi, Vittoria Colonna, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Flannery O'Connor, and Gabriel García Márquez—articulate in their own words this very human experience of love, of loving something or loving someone. In the process, they illuminate both Dante's experience in the afterlife and ours in the modern world.

Keywords: Dante; *Divine Comedy*; pedagogy; interdisciplinarity; literary studies; undergraduate seminar; great books; love; *caritas*

In our two-semester freshman seminar program at Villanova University, professors and students lead each other through close readings of ancient and medieval literature in the fall, and Renaissance literature to the present day in the spring. Augustine's *Confessions* serves as a guide or "lens" through which we read the other "great books" over the course of the year. At the end of the fall semester 2017, my students and I still had some questions and uncertainties regarding love in three texts: the Gospel of Mark, Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, and Dante's *Commedia*. In particular we wondered exactly how to define lust, romantic love, and *caritas* and how they are connected?[1] What does it mean to love one's "neighbor," as Jesus commands us to do in Mark 12:31: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"? We can try to follow His example in the Gospels, but how exactly do we do this as sinful, imperfect human beings? What exactly do we mean when we say we love our family? A spouse or significant other? A friend? A stranger or a "neighbor"?

These texts became the foundation for an exploration of love in literature from the Middle Ages to the present day during the spring semester. In particular, Dante's experience in certain moments of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* prepared our reading of six authors over the course of that semester: Francis of Assisi, Vittoria Colonna, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Flannery O'Connor, and Gabriel García Márquez. These authors articulate in their own words this very human experience of love, of loving

1 *Caritas* is particularly important in the Augustine mission of Villanova University, where the first-year experience is centered on the Augustinian themes of *Unitas*, *Veritas*, *Caritas* (the motto of the university) and how they interact with real world values.

something or loving someone, thereby illuminating Dante's experience in the afterlife, and ours in this lonely, individualistic, modern-day world.

Indeed, we use the word "love" so much that it can become meaningless, for example in phrases expressing an interest or pleasure in something such as pizza, football, or a new hairdo or sweater. The abundant use of the word "love" can be an unconscious palliative against loneliness, a prayer in our cult of individualism. At the same time, we know we should "love our neighbor," but what exactly would that look like? What would that feel like? How do these authors help us to understand what Dante means at the beginning of *Paradiso* where he observes that God's divine glory—which we can also translate as God's goodness, light, and love—can be found throughout His creation in some parts more than in others?[2] Similarly, what does he mean at the end of *Paradiso* and of the *Commedia* as a whole when he concludes that divine love moves the universe and now also his will and desire?[3]

What follows is a synopsis of the many discussions I had with my undergraduate students over the course of the spring semester. Our conclusions regarding love in the literary works we read will not only aid in clarifying a significant part of our human experience—specifically the elucidation of the three types of love mentioned above (lust, romantic love, *caritas*)—but will also, I hope, lead to a greater understanding of what it means to live in a community and the creation of a more inclusive society.

1. Defining Love in Dante's *Commedia*: From Lust to *Caritas*

Inferno Cantos I and III introduce the concept of the "journey"—Dante's through the three realms of the afterlife, and our "journey" through a series of texts to be read over one semester. Dante's education in Canto V constitutes a definition of sin and of hell as the farthest place from God and divine love. In *Inferno* V, the monster at the beginning contrasts with the descriptions of the lustful couples in the second half. Dante describes Minòs as "terrible" and "snarling" ("Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia"), with a tail he coils snake-like around his body marking the number of circles of hell the sinner before him must descend.[4] Dante soon understands that this circle contains the souls of the lustful "who put rational thought below carnal desire."[5] These lascivious souls include among them beautiful passionate lovers such as Dido, Cleopatra, Helen, and Paolo and Francesca, among others. Dante refers to them collectively as "these fair ladies of old and their champions."[6] When Francesca tells her story, she describes how Paolo fell in love with her "beautiful form."[7] She recounts how they fell in love while reading together of the moment Lancelot kissed the smiling Guinevere: "When we read how the longed-for smile was kissed,/the smile of Guinevere, by her great lover—/this man, with whom I keep eternal tryst,/Trembling all over, placed his lips on mine" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 133–135). Here, we recall the "snarling" Minòs at the beginning of the same canto, whose image

[2] "The glory of Him who moves all things/penetrates the universe, and its splendor/reflects more in one part and in another less" (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* I: 1–3).

[3] "Here my high phantasy's power declined;/but, like a wheel whose motion never jars,/my will and desire now were turned in kind/By the Love that moves the sun and other stars" (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXXIII: 144–45).

[4] "There stands Minòs the Terrible, snarling./He judges each sinner at the entrance/and sentences him by coiling his tail" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 4–6). In the notes to Lombardo's translation, Dante's Minòs is described as a "grotesque medieval hybrid, half-man, half-beast" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* p. 350 n. 4). According to Singleton, the word choice, "ringhia" ("snarling"), suggests animal-like teeth as well: "The word is often used of dogs and implies a show of fangs" (Singleton 1970, *Inferno* Vol. 1 Part 2, p. 75, n. 4). In his annotations of 1724 on Boccaccio's commentary on the *Divina Commedia* (Boccaccio 1724), Anton Maria Salvini suggests that Minòs' "snarling" ("ringhia") should be interpreted as more of a "grimace" ("ghignare"), or even a "bitter smile" ("un riso amaro") (see Boccaccio 1724, p. 350). This last point helps us to connect his expression to Guinevere's smile ("il disïato riso," Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 133), which I will discuss below.

[5] "I came to understand that those condemned/to this torment were the souls of the lustful/who put rational thought below carnal desire" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 37–39).

[6] "After I had listened to my teacher name/these fair ladies of old and their champions,/I was seized with pity, bewildered, and lost" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 70–72).

[7] "Love, which kindles quickly in the gentle heart,/impassioned this man with my beautiful form,/taken from me in a way that still wounds" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 100–102).

contrasts sharply with this beautiful smiling lady and the other beautiful lustful souls in *Inferno* V.[8] At the end of the canto, Dante recognizes himself as having committed the same lustful sin and faints, describing, "My body fell like a corpse to the ground" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 142).

Dante's important message for our introduction to *Inferno* appears to be: do not let appearances deceive you here, for even love—lustful, corporeal, superficial love—can turn you into a monster. We can compare this scene with the moment at the end of *Purgatorio* XXXI and at the beginning of *Purgatorio* XXXII in which Beatrice reveals her smile, and thus her "deeper beauty" to Dante: the nymphs implore Beatrice to show her smile, "For grace's sake do us the grace to unveil/your mouth to him [Dante], that he may discern/the deeper beauty that you conceal" (Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXI: 133–38). Dante then describes the experience of gazing upon her as "satisfying a ten-year thirst"; the attraction of her "sacred smile" is so strong that he loses all his senses.[9] We can interpret this particular beauty as a deeper love like that of *caritas* or divine love.

2. Francis' Praise of God's Creation

Keeping in mind Dante's experience in the afterlife in the *Commedia,* we commence a close reading of six great authors, beginning with Francis of Assisi (2013). In his spiritual poem, the *Canticle of the Creatures* (*Laudes Creaturarum)*, Francis praises God's creation, which God fashioned for humans out of love. This poem encourages us to recall God's loving gesture in the creation of the world in Genesis, when God describes over and over each part as "good." On the last day of creation, God creates humans and gives the creation to them, commanding them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Evidence of God's generosity, kindness, and love continue to appear throughout the first three chapters of Genesis: for example, God creates Eve as a companion and helper for Adam so that the first man would not be alone; after the fall, God kindly clothes the couple before banishing them from the Garden of Eden.[10]

Here, in his poem, Francis requites God's love like Dante learns to do in *Paradiso*. Francis praises God through His creation: "Praised be you, O my Lord and God, with all your creatures,/and especially our Brother Sun,/who brings us the day and who brings us the light" (Lines 3–5). Each part of the creation that Francis praises serves as an indication or a symbol of God; for example, Francis finishes his praise of the sun by saying, "He is fair and shines with a very great splendor: O Lord, he signifies you to us!" (Lines 6–7). The parts of creation that Francis praises—Sun, Moon, Stars, Wind, Water, Fire, Mother Earth—recall not only Genesis but also the first and last lines of Dante's *Paradiso*, which I quoted above, where Dante describes divine love as the mover of all things.[11] In contrast to the lustful in *Inferno* Canto V, who are moved only by their earthly desire, Dante in *Paradiso* and Francis in his canticle are requiting God's love.

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[8] Barolini notes the contrast as well: "Francesca's speech to the pilgrim, then, the honeyed discourse that has seduced so many generations of readers, is at the least her second speech since she entered hell. She has spoken at least once before—to Minòs. We will never know what she said on that prior occasion: did she favor Minòs with echoes of Guido Guinizzelli and Andreas Capellanus, as she does us, or did she offer him a starker version of her tale?" (Barolini 2006, p. 150). Musa also comments on the contrasting figures of Minòs and Francesca, asserting that her speech may have been less elegant and more truthful: "Later, when the Pilgrim meets the sweet Francesca, he should have remembered Minòs and he should have imagined her standing before the monster as he passed judgment on her with his tail. Her poignant confession of her love might have reminded him that she had confessed the same love, the same sin, before the monster—probably with a lesser display of rhetoric and surely with a greater degree of veracity. In fact, her confession to Minòs may have begun where her confession to the Pilgrim left off: "quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante" (Musa 1974, p. 10).

[9] "My eyes remained fixed on her, and so intent/on satisfying a ten-year thirst that all my other senses were lost, Enclosed on every side with walls of sheer indifference, as her sacred smile/pulled them to herself with their net of old" (Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXII: 1–6).

[10] See Genesis 2:18 and 3:21.

[11] "The glory of Him who moves all things" (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* I: 1) and "By the Love that moves the sun and other stars" (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXXIII: 145).

Dante's description of his vision of God and divine love in *Paradiso* XXXIII is also a prayer in praise of God and the creation like Francis': Dante recounts how his gaze fell upon the "Infinite Goodness" and saw "that it contained within its depths,/bound by love into one volume, all that is/scattered in pages through the universe" (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXXIII: 85–87). In the last lines of *Paradiso*, Dante says that God's love now moves his will and desire.[12] Like Dante, Francis acknowledges, at the end of his poem, that those who "walk" with or follow God's desires are blessed: "Woe to those who die in mortal sin, but blessed are they who are found walking by your most holy will" (Lines 35–37). He concludes with a line of praise similar to the beginning of the canticle, giving thanks and emphasizing his humble service to God, saying, "Praise to you, O my Lord, and all blessing. We give you thanks and serve you with great humility" (Lines 40–42).

3. Vittoria Colonna's Desire to Know God and His Love

Some important recent studies (in Italian and in English) are dedicated to the life and poetry of Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547), the most famous Italian Renaissance woman poet.[13] Like Dante in the *Vita Nova*, Colonna dedicates many love poems to her beloved, her husband, and after his death he leads her to salvation in her spiritual poetry, much like Beatrice leads Dante into Paradise in the *Commedia*. Her spiritual poems "Since my chaste love for many years" ("Poi che 'l mio casto amor gran tempo tenne") and "I long to stride behind my Lord" ("Con la croce a gran passi ir vorrei dietro") constitute the first two sonnets in her 1540 gift manuscript of 103 spiritual sonnets for her good friend, the artist and poet Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564).[14] He considered Colonna his spiritual guide, for she was well-educated and connected with the most important religious leaders and reformers of the period.[15]

In the collection's opening sonnet, "Since my chaste love for many years," Colonna recounts how for a long time she sought sinful fame through her love poetry, but now she turns to God who alone can relieve the pain this sin has brought upon her:

Since my chaste love for many years
kept my soul aflame with the desire for fame, and it nourished
a serpent in my breast so that now my heart languishes
in pain turned towards God, who alone can help me,

let the holy nails from now on be my quills,
and the precious blood my pure ink,
my lined paper the sacred lifeless body,
so that I may write down for others all that he suffered.

It is not right here to invoke Parnassus or Delos,
for I aspire to cross other waters, to ascend
other mountains that human feet cannot climb unaided.

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[12] "my will and desire now were turned in kind/By the Love that moves the sun and other stars," (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXXIII: 144–45).

[13] These include (Targoff 2018; Brundin et al. 2016; Sapegno 2016; Cox 2008; Robin 2007; Colonna 2005).

[14] Brundin has translated and edited the entire manuscript (see Colonna 2005, *Sonnets for Michelangelo*).

[15] "Well read, with a certain knowledge of Latin and possibly of some classical sources as well as a close understanding of the scriptures and of a variety of interpretations thereof (through her contact with the *spirituali* Colonna had access to imported works by prominent reformers from abroad, including works by Luther in translation), Colonna had also benefited from close contact with some of the major religious thinkers of her period in Italy through correspondence and friendships forged in Naples and Rome. She was thus probably in a position of some authority over Michelangelo regarding questions of faith, as well of course as commanding a far higher social status than he did and being already well-known for her skill in poetry, and thus she assumed the role of spiritual guide and source for religious and poetic inspiration in the verses that Michelangelo addressed to her" (Colonna 2005, pp. 27–28).

I pray to the sun, which lights up the earth and the
heavens, that letting forth his shining spring
he pours down upon me a draught equal to my great thirst. (Colonna 2005, pp. 56–57)

In this poem, Colonna seeks to write down all that Christ suffered; as she says in the second part of the octave, "let the holy nails from now on be my quills/and the precious blood my pure ink, my lined paper the sacred lifeless body [of Christ]." In the first tercet, she seeks "to cross other waters," just as Dante seeks to do with the metaphor of the *pelago* ("sea" or "waters") at the beginning of each canticle of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.[16] Morever, like Dante, she aspires to undertake a journey up "other mountains," such as the purifying climb up the mountain of Dante's *Purgatorio*. However, she is ready to spiritually cleanse herself in this life, not the next, and she records the experience of purifying herself in this collection of poetry. She concludes the sonnet with the hope that Christ will quench her "great thirst." Here, students can recall Dante's "ten-year thirst" (Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXII: 2) that Beatrice satisfies at the top of Purgatory with her "sacred smile" (Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXII: 5). Like Dante in the *Commedia*, Colonna, at the beginning of this collection of spiritual sonnets, has a desire to know God and his divine love.

In the following sonnet, "I long to stride behind my Lord," she expresses her aspiration to follow Christ, "bearing his cross" in order to perceive the "one true light":

I long to stride behind my Lord
bearing his cross along the steep and narrow path,
and thus make out in part the one true light,
which opened more than just the eyes of faithful Peter;
and if I am not now granted so great a reward
it is not because God is ungenerous or insincere,
but because I fail to understand completely
that all human hope is as fragile as glass.
If I were to present my humble heart
in purest supplication before the divine table,
where with sweet and orderly constitution
the angel of God, our trusted friend,
offers himself through his love to be our food,
one day my appetite may perhaps be forever satiated. (Colonna 2005, pp. 56–59)

Colonna has initiated a spiritual journey that echoes Dante's own journey in his epic poem. Her desire "to stride" behind Jesus brings to mind the "journey of our life" in the first verse that begins the entire *Commedia*; however, the connection is clearer in the original Italian, where "journey" literally means "walk" ("cammin"): "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* I: 1). In the second part of the octave, she says that if she fails in her task, it is her fault, not Christ's, because, she explains, "I fail to understand completely/that all human hope is as fragile as glass."

[16] On the "pelago" or "sea" at the beginning of all three canticles of the *Commedia*, see Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* I: 22–27: "And as a man who, gasping for breath,/has escaped the sea and wades to shore,/then turns back and stares at the perilous waves,/So too my mind, still racing in flight,/turned back to wonder at the narrow gorge/that had never left any traveler alive"; Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* I: 1–3: "Now the little boat of my native wit/hoists its sail to run through milder waters,/leaving behind that sea so merciless"; Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* II: 1–7: "O you, who in your desire to listen,/have followed in your little bark/my vessel as it sails away in song,/Turn around to catch sight of your shores again./Do not put out on the deep, for should you/lose sight of me you might well become lost."

Her conclusion is similar to the last lines of the first sonnet, ending with the humble hope that Christ will some day satisfy her "appetite"—compare to "thirst" above—to know Him and His love. Thus, the first two poems in Colonna's collection, while meritorious in their own right, connect well to Dante, providing students another example of a pilgrim who is moved by love for something or someone, and in being so moved thirsts for the greatest of all loves.

4. Romantic Love in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare composed 154 sonnets, not including the sonnets that appear in his plays. With these poems he connected himself to an ancient Christian tradition that we can trace back to Dante in the *Vita nova* in his love sonnets dedicated to Beatrice, and to Petrarch in his 366 poems dedicated to Laura in the *Canzoniere*. This tradition was continued by Renaissance poets such as Colonna and links Shakespeare's work closely to the theme of romantic love.[17] In fact, many of Shakespeare's plays concern the theme of romantic love and, not surprisingly, some include love sonnets. In my course, I teach one comedy—*Much Ado About Nothing*—and parts of the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* that highlight and explain *Much Ado About Nothing*. Both plays encourage students to think more deeply about questions of romantic love and to compare Shakespeare's insights to those we find in Dante.

Much Ado About Nothing centers on two types of romantic love: (1) the traditional, Romeo-and-Juliet kind evinced in the quick courtship of the beautiful young characters Hero and Claudio, and (2) the unlikely match of the two other protagonists, Beatrice and Benedick, who both share a considerable dislike of each other (and of the opposite sex in general), as well as a cynical view of romantic love. The plot thickens when a villain attempts to ruin the first couple's wedding and friends take on the enormous task of getting Benedick and Beatrice together. Convinced by their friends that one loves the other, Beatrice and Benedick each write love poems addressed to the other. Only at the very end of the play do their friends exchange the poems, proving in front of everyone the true feelings of this second couple: as Benedick declares after reading Beatrice's poem, "A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts, Come, I will have thee . . . ." (Shakespeare 2017, Act 5, Scene 4: 91–92).

Although the characters in *Much Ado About Nothing* never read their poems out loud, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare innovatively has the two young lovers craft an Elizabethan sonnet in their dialogue when they first meet, kiss, and fall in love.[18] Romeo commences the first quatrain:

> If I profane with my unworthiest hand
> This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
> My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
> To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss. (Shakespeare 2016, Act 1, Scene 5: 94–97)

Juliet supplies the next quatrain:

> Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
> Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
> For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
> And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss. (Shakespeare 2016, Act 1, Scene 5: 98–101)

They share the remaining six lines between the two of them:

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[17] On sonnets in Shakespeare's plays, see the section entitled "The Sonnets" in (Dickson and Staines 2016, pp. 535–45.)

[18] "Laid out on the page—and possible to detect in performance through its rhyme-scheme—Shakespeare's lovers speak, in interweaving union and with apparent artlessness, a form known as a Shakespearian sonnet. The fourteen-line pentameter pattern is elegant: the first twelve lines rhyme across each other ("hand/stand," "this/kiss") before concluding in a two-line couplet in which the rhymes are identical ("sake/take")" (Dickson and Staines 2016, p. 537).

ROMEO

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO

O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!

They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET

Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO

Then move not while my prayer's effect I take. (Shakespeare 2016, Act 1, Scene 5: 102–107)

In the line immediately following this love sonnet, Romeo continues the metaphor of the pilgrim (himself) visiting the holy shrine (Juliet) established in the sonnet's first quatrain. In this line, he says that by kissing the holy shrine, he purges himself of sin: "Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged" (Shakespeare 2016, Act 1, Scene 5: 108). He then kisses Juliet, concluding the lovers' first dialogue and strengthening the connection Shakespeare is establishing between romantic love and a religious experience.

Many consider *Romeo and Juliet* the greatest love story ever written and Shakespeare's descriptions of romantic love in this play depict a force that is powerful, "organic," and "ever-growing" (Dickson and Staines 2016, p. 392). As Juliet explains in Act 2, Scene 2, her love and generosity for Romeo are equally deep and infinite: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea,/My love as deep. The more I give to thee/The more I have, for both are infinite" (Shakespeare 2016, Act 2, Scene 2: 133–135). These lines once again bring to mind for students Beatrice's "deeper beauty" that quenches Dante's "ten-year thirst" when she smiles at him at the top of Purgatory.[19] Romeo and Juliet's love does indeed have characteristics of *caritas*: it is infinite and generous—as we see above—and it appears true and sincere.

Students are quick to make the connection between Shakespeare's doomed lovers and the differently doomed lovers they encounter in *Inferno V.* For Romeo and Juliet and Paolo and Francesca, love leads both couples to death: Romeo and Juliet belong to two rival families of Verona, and Paolo is Francesca's lover and the brother of her spouse (who finds them together and promptly murders them in vengeance—Francesca tells Dante that Caïna awaits her husband further down).[20] Francesca points out love's role in their demise in the three tercets blaming love (not themselves) for their actions. As she states in her most famous line: "Love led us both to share in one death" ("Amor condusse noi ad una morte"—"un**a mor**te," "one death," also contains the word love, "amor") (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 106). Romeo and Juliet are not meant to be with each other on earth—it is impossible in the hostile society in which they live—but they succeed in ending up together for eternity. Paolo and Francesca will also spend eternity together, but in hell. For Shakespeare, the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* comprises the powerful social forces of the violent Veronese society they live in, which does not permit a love such as theirs.[21] However, when they die, we cannot help but feel that romantic love in a way has triumphed over death.[22] Unlike Paolo and Francesca, Romeo and Juliet experience the "deeper beauty" of true love and not simply passion.

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[19] Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXI: 138 and XXXII: 2.

[20] "Caïna awaits him who snuffed out our life" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 107.)

[21] Dickson and Staines describe the violence in the northern Italian city: "Aggression is total in Verona: the city's streets are war zones" (Dickson and Staines 2016, p. 390).

[22] Tanner says the play is only a tragedy for "earth-bound critics," because Romeo and Juliet succeed in the end at escaping their troubled world: "But Verona is just exactly where Romeo and Juliet no longer wanted to be, and they have made a 'triumphant' and lightning/enlightening escape. From the stellar perspective it is a form of 'comedy'" (Tanner 2012, p. 114.)

Hero and Claudio's courtship in *Much Ado About Nothing* is similar to Romeo and Juliet's.[23] Like Romeo and Juliet, Hero and Claudio are young and fall in love quickly. Unlike the young Veronese lovers, there are no impediments to their union (political, financial, or otherwise), until Don John attempts to spread false rumors about Hero's fidelity and chastity. This makes Claudio question her honesty and whether she is a suitable partner for him. Beatrice and Benedick provide a contrast in that they appear entirely unsuited for each other. Yet in their mutual cynicism and distrust of love and of the other sex, perhaps, my students ask, they are meant to be together? Beatrice and Benedick seem like two of a kind and their constant bickering makes us suspicious of certain hidden feelings they are too embarrassed to reveal.

The play ends with the restoration of order and of the rule of romantic love, albeit of two kinds. Hero is vindicated and therefore able to marry Claudio, and Beatrice and Benedick initiate a life together in which they will stop their constant bickering: Benedick indicates this when he finally calls for peace and stops her mouth with a kiss ("Peace! I will stop your mouth") (Shakespeare 2017, Act 5, Scene 4: 97). His advice to "sad" Don Pedro, the only single man remaining, is "Get thee a wife," which Benedick repeats twice (Shakespeare 2017, Act 5, Scene 4: 120). Marriage appears to have a number of benefits according to Shakespeare—love, happiness, and bringing order to chaos—and students understand how the playwright is directing romantic love, with all of its passions, into its acceptable social form. The several references to infidelity in the play's final lines ("double dealer" and "horn," this was one of Benedick's greatest fears about marriage, that of becoming a cuckold), recall Francesca's infidelity and its tragic results as she recounts in *Inferno* V. Shakespeare's comedy, however, ends on a high note with two couples moving toward the altar: all impediments have been removed and we, the spectators, are left with the promise of not just one future wedding but two.

5. Romance and *Caritas* in *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* also centers on romantic love, and, as we saw in Shakespeare, Austin explores human emotions and different types of love. She provides examples of both an immature kind, which we can equate to lust (such as Lydia and Mr. Wickham's feelings for each other), and *caritas*, which Elizabeth unexpectedly discovers while analyzing her feelings for Mr. Darcy.

Over the course of the novel, the protagonists, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, move past their initial feelings of "pride" and "prejudice," which, my students tell me, are common feelings, especially around people we have just met and know little about. Freshmen who have just arrived on campus at the start of their university career frequently encounter these feelings. And, as we discover over the course of the first year in the freshman seminar, we must learn to move pass our pride and prejudices in order to have fruitful class discussions.

Regarding pride in particular, students know that excessive pride is not just a sin but the root of all seven deadly sins. They recall how Dante organizes his *Purgatorio* with the proud at the bottom, closer to hell, followed by the envious, the wrathful, the slothful, the avaricious and prodigal, the gluttonous, and the lustful at the very top closer to heaven. By beginning with pride, Dante acknowledges its presence in all sins, in other words, as the foundation for all of them or as a kind of prerequisite for committing any sin, emphasizing our human tendency to be prideful.

As Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy get to know each other, they must move beyond pride. When they do so, they discover what is really going on behind the facades of their respective families, unique economic situations, and particular social statuses. Their understanding leads to respect and esteem and, most importantly, empathy and concern for each other's welfare. When Elizabeth finally realizes she is in love with Mr. Darcy, her feelings resemble *caritas*: she feels "good will" and "gratitude"

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[23] Both plays were written around the same time and derive from *novelle* composed in the spirit of Boccaccio's *Decameron* by the Italian writer and monk Matteo Bandello (1485–1561). Bandello's short stories were translated into English in the 1560s–70s.

toward him. This is clear when Elizabeth examines her changed feelings months after she has rejected Darcy's proposal:

> The respect created by the conviction of his valuable qualities, though at first unwillingly admitted, had for some time ceased to be repugnant to her feelings; and it was now heightened into somewhat of a friendlier nature, by the testimony so highly in his favour, and bringing forward his disposition in so amiable a light, which yesterday had produced. But above all, above respect and esteem, there was a motive within her of good will which could not be overlooked. It was gratitude. –Gratitude, not merely for having once loved her, but for loving her still well enough, to forgive all the petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him, and all the unjust accusations accompanying her rejection. (Austen 2016, p. 180)

Austen's novel leaves my students wondering if perhaps these feelings—good will and gratitude—are specifically the feelings Jesus was referring to when he commanded us to love our neighbors? Perhaps this is essentially what true love is: concentrated and intense between two lovers, two friends, a parent and child; less concentrated but still present between ourselves and our "neighbors"—i.e., fellow citizens and strangers?

6. Sin and Grace in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

Perhaps a society in which good will and gratitude are lacking produces a ruthless murderer such as The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find"? O'Connor recounts a family's journey across country. They take a wrong turn and end up in woods that are "tall and dark and deep": the similarity to the deadly *selva oscura*—"Death itself is hardly more bitter"—cannot be missed.[24] There, they meet an escaped convict who murders the entire family.

Like the *Commedia*, O'Connor's story explores sin, faith, and moments of grace. The second protagonist, the grandmother, is superficial and racist. She considers herself a Christian and a "good" woman. She seems especially preoccupied with the Misfit's criminal behavior: she and the owner of the barbecue restaurant both agree that times have worsened and "A good man is hard to find."[25] Naturally, the escaped convict is exactly the person she must confront later in the story. But she only does the right thing—reaches out to The Misfit—when he points a gun at her. O'Connor writes:

> [The grandmother] saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. (O'Connor 1976, p. 22)

This moment of redemption brings her an innocence and peace in death that she never found in life:

> Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky. (O'Connor 1976, p. 22)

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[24] Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* I: 7. O'Connor read Dante and considered him "about as great as you can get" (see letter "To 'A'" in O'Connor 1979, pp. 115–17). One reviewer even referred to Dante as O'Connor's "classical mentor") (see Moran 2016, p. 77).

[25] "'A good man is hard to find,' Red Sammy said. 'Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more'" (O'Connor 1976, p. 8).

In truth, both protagonists are suffering, sinful souls. As my students observe, however, The Misfit has a better understanding of good and evil than the grandmother. The Misfit observes about her: "'She would have been a good woman, [. . .] if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life'" (O'Connor 1976, p. 23).[26] Is this what we need in order to do the "right thing"? A gun pointed at us? Or perhaps an education in sin and redemption, which is what O'Connor's short story and Dante's *Commedia* provide us? Even in the first few lines of *Inferno* I, Dante declares that he found "good" in the bitter, deadly wood:

> Ah, how hard it is to describe that wood,
> a wilderness so gnarled and rough
> the very thought of it brings back my fear.
> Death itself is hardly more bitter;
> but to tell of the good that I found there
> I will speak of the other things I saw. (*Inferno* I: 4–9)

It seems impossible that there could be "good" in the "dark wood," but as the well-known saying goes, "Sometimes you have to go through hell in order to get to heaven." Where is the "good" in O'Connor's wood in "A Good Man is Hard to Find?" The question makes one cringe. There does not appear to be any good since an entire family—including children—ends up finding only death.

As we often see in O'Connor's stories, however, there is goodness, grace, and redemption in a sinful, evil world. Perhaps the "good" is the grandmother's final realization that The Misfit is another suffering human being she should love? Or perhaps it is in The Misfit's awareness that he could do the "right thing" even though he chooses not to? There is no pleasure in Dante's hell, just as there is no pleasure in The Misfit's life of crime and murder. O'Connor ends her story with a telling exchange between The Misfit and one of his accomplices who is less troubled by killing: "'Some fun!' Bobby Lee said. 'Shut up, Bobby Lee,' The Misfit said. 'It's no real pleasure in life.'" (O'Connor 1976, p. 23). Perhaps there is hope at the end that The Misfit will change his ways and encounter his moment of redemption? Perhaps he will educate his accomplices and they will change too? My students are skeptical, but they agree that there is a little more hope for him in O'Connor's story than for the souls in Dante's Hell.

7. Suffering and Loneliness in *Love in the Time of Cholera*

Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* also examines the operations of grace in an imperfect, even hellish world, and connections to Dante abound. For instance, the inscription over the entrance to a cemetery dedicated to cholera victims comes from the Gate of Hell at the beginning of *Inferno* III: "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate" ("Abandon all hope, you who enter") (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* III: 9). Less evident is the reference to Dante in the name of the novel's protagonist lover-poet, Florentino, and in the description of his beloved crossing the plaza, a crossing that clearly echoes Dante's famous sonnet from the *Vita Nova*, his collection of love poetry pre-dating the *Commedia*. Márquez writes:

> Florentino Ariza sat bedazzled until the child of his vision had crossed the plaza, looking to neither the left nor the right. But then the same irresistible power that had paralyzed him

[26] Di Renzo has already analyzed this scene with Dante's *Commedia* in mind, comparing the heroism of The Misfit to that of the damned in Dante's *Inferno*: "Far from celebrating the Misfit's dark heroism, O'Connor mocks it—just as Dante in the *Inferno* mocks the "heroism" of the damned [. . .] They are forever lost in their own heroic self-image, a self-image they maintained in life by destroying others less heroic than they" (Di Renzo 1993, p. 154). On the final confrontation between the grandmother and The Misfit, Di Renzo writes: "So the Misfit shoots the grandmother because he cannot abide the touch of her ordinary humanity; but it is that ordinary humanity, vulgar and self-indulgent, that the story values above heroism" (Di Renzo 1993, p. 155).

obliged him to hurry after her when she turned the corner of the Cathedral and was lost in the deafening noise of the market's rough cobblestones.

He followed her without letting himself be seen, watching the ordinary gestures, the grace, the premature maturity of the being he loved most in the world and whom he was seeing for the first time in her natural state. He was amazed by the fluidity with which she made her way through the crowd [. . .] she navigated the disorder of the street in her own time and space, not colliding with anyone, like a bat in the darkness. (Márquez 2003, pp. 98–99)

Similarities to Dante's poem include not only Florentino's powerful emotional reaction—his bedazzlement—when he sees his beloved ("the being he loved most in the world") in the marketplace, but also his beloved's graceful gestures and movements as she walks ("He was amazed by the fluidity with which she made her way through the crowd"). These characteristics recall the gentle and pleasant nature of Beatrice as Dante observes her walk about in his famous sonnet, "Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare":

So open and so self-possessed appears
my lady when she's greeting everyone,
that every tongue, in trembling, falters dumb,
and eyes don't dare to watch her as she nears.
She senses all the praising of her worth,
and passes by benevolently dressed
in humbleness, appearing manifest
from heaven to show a miracle on earth.
She shows herself so pleasing to the one
who sees her, sweetness passes through the eye
to the heart—as he who's missed it never knows.
So from her face it then appears there blows
a loving spirit, as if spring's begun,
which breathes upon the soul and tells it: Sigh.[27]

To Dante, Beatrice is a miracle arrived from heaven to earth ("appearing manifest from heaven to show a miracle on earth" lines 7–8), "pleasing" ("She shows herself so pleasing to the one," line 9), and filled with a "loving spirit" ("a loving spirit, as if spring's begun," line 13). Unlike Dante's description of Beatrice, Márquez ends the description of Florentino's beloved, calling her "a bat in the darkness" (Márquez 2003, p. 99). Bats are delicate animals that move between heaven and earth,

[27] (Alighieri 2012, p. 39). Here is the poem in the original Italian:
Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia, quand'ella altrui salute
ch'ogne lingua deven, tremando, muta,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.
Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente e d'umiltà vestuta,
e par che sia una cosa venuta
da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.
Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira
che dà per li occhi una dolcezza al core,
che 'ntender no la può chi no la prova;
e par che de la sua labbia si mova
un spirto soave pien d'amore,
che va dicendo a l'anima: Sospira (Alighieri 1999, pp. 142–44).

but usually in the dark and at night. Perhaps the darkness emphasizes the fact that Márquez's novel depicts an earthly, imperfect, even in many respects, infernal world—a time of cholera. We only find redemption in the final pages.

Like the *Commedia*, Márquez's novel is also a study of love, which he describes in all its possible manifestations and shades. In her review of *Love in the Time of Cholera* for the *New York Times*, "Books of the Times; Garcia Marquez Novel Covers Love and Time," Michiko Kakutani's defines the novel "an anatomy of love in all its forms":

> [...] the gushy, irrational love of adolescents and the mature love of people who have suffered loss and grief; the high-flown love, immortalized by poets, and the love without love found in bordellos and motels; marital love and adulterous love, spiritual love, physical love, even love that resembles cholera in its symptoms and its pain. (Kakutani 1988)

The most challenging part of reading and teaching this novel is that most of it depicts unhappy characters leading unhappy lives. The lowest point occurs when Florentino, in his seventies, successfully seduces his fourteen-year-old niece. She later commits suicide. The burden of this, which he must carry with him for the rest of his life, contrasts with the euphoria and grace of living the last years of his life with his beloved. Only in the final pages do we see the world back in order and justice restored, to an extent: Florentino still lives with the grief of his niece's suicide and both protagonists are shadowed by their long unhappy lives. Nevertheless, here, at the end, there is love: love as the absence of loneliness. Florentino asks his beloved Fermina if she would like to be alone and she answers: "If I did, I would not have told you to come in" (Márquez 2003, p. 329). Márquez describes:

> Then [Florentino] reached out with two icy fingers in the darkness, felt for the
>
> other hand in the darkness, and found it waiting for him. Both were lucid enough
>
> to realize, at the same fleeting instant, that the hands made of old bones were not
>
> the hands they had imagined before touching. (Márquez 2003, p. 329).

Florentino's experience also appears to be a law of love, that is, we experience love (true love) in the presence of another—a friend, a family member, a stranger, or God. My students and I recall Augustine in the *Confessions,* who writes for God and for his congregation, and note that friends were also a significant part of his journey toward conversion. We recall God as the loving creator of everything Francis sees and the friar's grateful recognition of this in his song of praise for God's generosity. We recall Dante's three guides and teachers on his journey in the *Commedia*: Virgil, Beatrice, and Bernard of Clairvaux. We recall that all of Shakespeare's comedies end with protagonists happily coupled up, ready to start a new part of their lives as husbands and wives. And when Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy finally decide to marry, we remember that they are not standing face-to-face but walking together, united in a common goal: love and happiness.[28]

8. Love in the Modern-Day World

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy would not have held hands or embraced, although many film adaptions would have us believe otherwise (for example, the 2005 film version is a good contrast to the more faithful and culturally-attentive 1995 TV series). It would not have been considered proper behavior in the society in which they lived. However, Colonna's husband takes her hand in one of her poems to give her a vision of paradise. [29] Colonna was clearly inspired by the three instances in the *Divina*

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[28] See *Pride and Prejudice* Volume III, Chapter XVI.

[29] In her "Triumph of the Cross" (145 lines long in *terzarima* like the *Commedia* and modeled on Petrarch's *trionfi*), Colonna recounts a vision she had at dawn (another reference to Dante, who tells us that dreams at dawn are true in *Inferno* XXVI line 7) in which she left earthly cares and rose to the contemplation of divine things. Midway through the triumph, her husband reaches out his hand to pull her up so that she can see and experience paradise.

Commedia when Virgil, Dante's guide and mentor, takes Dante's hand. The first of these instances occurs after Dante reads the terrifying inscription over the Gate of Hell at the beginning of *Inferno* III and Virgil places his hand on Dante's to reassure and comfort him, then takes him to see "hidden things": "And when he had placed his hand on mine/with a cheerful look from which I took comfort,/he led me among the things that are hidden."[30] The "hidden things" include Hell itself, and, as the reader knows quite well, eventually Purgatory and finally Heaven, the "good" that Dante says he found on his otherworldly journey, as we read in the first lines of *Inferno* I.[31]

Lovers frequently hold hands, as Romeo and Juliet do in their sonnet, then have their lips imitate their hands, "do what hands do," that is, press each other in a kiss.[32] But we also ask friends, colleagues, mentors, and even strangers to "lend a hand" with a project, a personal difficulty, and so on. Perhaps, in this way, love really does and should move the universe, as Dante says, even in the lonely society of the modern-day world that is much more for the individual than for the community.

Dante's poetic journey is a search for an understanding of love, but also of identity and community. Exiled from Florence, the city of his birth, in 1302, he would never see it again. Like Romeo and Juliet's Verona, Dante's city was frequently torn apart by violence, conflicts, and unrest. At the beginning of *Paradiso* XXV, Dante reveals his hope that the Florentines will welcome him back one day as "bard" of the vernacular language and that his poem will heal their "cruel" hearts:

> If it ever happens that the sacred poem,
> to which Heaven and earth have set their hand,
> so as to make me lean for many years,
> Overcomes the cruelty that bars me from
> the lovely sheepfold where I slept as a lamb,
> foe of the wolves that make war on it,
> With another voice then, with another fleece,
> I shall return as a poet, and at the font
> where I was baptized take the laurel crown. (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXV: 1–9)

He would only succeed in the few years after his death when his son Iacopo transformed the *Commedia* into "the most famous and most widely read vernacular book of its time" (Santagata 2018, p. 340). Did it bring peace to Florence? Not right away, but it did inspire quickly other Tuscan authors such as Petrarch and Boccaccio, spark many discussions and community forums (such as the Lectura Dantis), and convince the Florentines to acknowledge Dante as one of their own (although Ravenna would never give up his body—it lies there still). Dante's works would continue to be a source of inspiration for many authors over the centuries. And, as we have seen in this paper, their analyses and descriptions of love—in particular lust, romantic love, and *caritas*—help to illuminate not only Dante's experience in the afterlife but ours as well in this world. Not only that, these authors also offer possibilities for the way we understand ourselves and choose to construct our future.

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[30] See (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* III: 19–21). Virgil is the only one of the three guides to take Dante's hand. Virgil will take Dante's hand two more times in *Inferno*: in the forest of the suicides in *Inferno* XIII, "My guide and escort then took me by the hand/and led me beside the shattered bush/that wept in vain through its bleeding stumps" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* XIII: 130–132, and in *Inferno* XXXI to sooth Dante after reprimanding him for wanting to listen to a vulgar quarrel between damned souls: "Then he took me affectionately by the hand/and said, "Before we go any farther now,/so that the reality might seem less uncanny, [. . .]" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* XXXI: 28).

[31] See (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* I: 8–9): "but to tell of the good that I found there/I will speak of the other things I saw."

[32] "O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!" (Shakespeare 2016, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, Scene 5, line 104).

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Three Things My Students Have Taught Me about Reading Dante

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Abstract: Many professors who teach Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or any great text, in the general education classroom see in it an opportunity to teach their students to humble themselves before texts older and greater than students' own personal views and experiences. However, such a stance can blind professors to the important lessons their students have to teach them about Dante, about pedagogical techniques, and about the professors themselves and their own biases. This article discusses three things my own students have taught me about reading—and teaching—Dante, and invites other professors to look for the places where their students act as the Virgil to their Dante rather than the other way around.

Keywords: Dante; pedagogy; core and general education curricula; literary studies

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1. Introduction

I am often tempted to approach teaching literature, and especially teaching great texts, primarily as an exercise in teaching my students humility. I assign Dante's *Inferno* and parts of the *Purgatorio* in the general education classroom. In most cases, this is the first and last literature class my students will take in college—and in many cases, this course vies with college algebra as the last class my students want to take. I want to introduce students to texts that are valuable and great, whose value and greatness isn't dependent on my students' opinions of them, and whose importance in human history supersedes their applicability to one's business major or participation on an athletic team. I will confess, though, I often despair at the difficulty of trying to convince them that saying "this text is good" can, and often does, exist in a different category than "I like this text." This kind of humility before great cultural artifacts is hard to cultivate even in myself sometimes, and I'm quite willing to do it; it's even more difficult to cultivate in a resistant audience.

However, and happily, despite my efforts to cultivate humility in them as they read great texts such as the *Divine Comedy*, the reverse tends to happen instead: my students teach me humility through their questions and in their applications of the texts. In this essay, then, I share three things my students have taught me about reading Dante. I hope that, through sharing these stories, I might invite other teachers of Dante to consider their own classroom experiences, and explore ways in which their student have, and can become, the Virgil to their Dante.

2. My Students Teach Me about Mentors

The first of these stories starts where Dante's journey starts, where he is wandering in the dark wood and finds his way blocked by three monstrous beasts. Admist his despair, he sees a figure "in that friendless waste" (Alighieri 2003, p. 18), and, of course, discovers that it is Virgil. When I read to my students Dante's reaction to Virgil's appearance, I usually compare Dante to a fangirl squealing at a One Direction concert, which my students often tell me is no longer—if it ever was—the funny pop cultural reference I think it is. Dante says:

"And are you then that Virgil and that fountain
Of purest speech?" [. . .]
"Glory and light of poets! now may that zeal
And love's apprenticeship that I poured out
On your heroic verses serve me well!
For you are my true master and first author,
The sole maker from whom I drew the breath
Of that sweet style whose measures have brought me honor." (Alighieri 2003, p. 19)

My feeble attempts to be hip notwithstanding, Dante's first meeting with Virgil has in recent semesters become a valuable turning point at which my students start seeing how studying great literature can, despite its seeming "uselessness," connect to their lives. And this valuable turning point is not one that I intended; it's based on a conversation one of my students started a few years ago. I had been framing Dante's first encounter with Virgil as a moment when he meets his hero, and urging students to compare this meeting to a situation, real or imagined, in which they met someone they idolized. But a student led me to recognize that this wasn't the most apt comparison to make. This student, Chris, said that he saw Virgil as a mentor figure rather than an inspirational hero—a personal teacher and friend rather than someone he admired only from afar. Chris started talking about how maybe Dante saw Virgil like he saw a high school coach who had helped him through a tough time. His words immediately engaged the class.

Before I explain how this happened, some background: about ninety percent of the students at my university are somehow involved in athletics. My personal athletic giftedness is probably a negative number, and my interest in sports exists insofar as it helps me connect with my students and worry about their recovery from injuries. While I am easily able to read Dante's first encounter with Virgil quite literally and think about writers who have inspired me, Chris's comparison would not have occurred to me, given my own blind spots and lack of knowledge. But I am so glad he made the comparison because of the discussion it inspired.

Thinking about Virgil as a mentor or coach gave my students an immediate connection to the text. And using that comparison as a springboard, I asked my students a series of questions. I first asked, "Will you play your sport professionally after graduating college?"; my students, by and large, answered that no, they wouldn't be. "Well," I asked next, "if you're not going to be playing a professional sport, why is it worth playing your sport now?" These questions led to one of the most profound discussions of virtue and character development that I have had in the general education classroom. We made a list on the board. Students said that they learned teamwork and, along with teamwork, the humility required to work for everyone's good rather than only their own; they talked about learning to persist even when they were in pain or tired; they agreed that they built character by leading younger team members humbly and helpfully. They acknowledged readily that none of these things are "job skills"—if by "job skills" we mean preparation for a particular sort of career—but that they are incredibly important nonetheless; one student said that he knew playing baseball had "made him a better person." I then turned the discussion to the literary texts we were reading, and asked them another question: "Even if reading these books isn't giving you something you can put on a resume, are you learning other valuable things from them, just like you're learning from playing your sport?" And though there was still some skepticism, it was clear that they were more willing to "buy in" to the course, because they had made the connection that not everything worth learning has to be tied to career preparation.

I now use this comparison between playing a sport and reading literature in every one of my general education literature classes, and it has helped those classes "buy in." It's because of my student Chris that I myself was able to see past my own blind spots and make the connection, and I am very grateful to him for teaching me how to do so.

3. My Students Teach Me about Suicide

The second story I have to tell is not based on an experience with an individual student or an individual lesson, but something I've learned from multiple classes of students, and that I continue to learn from them today. I teach most of the *Inferno* in my general education World Literature course, and we spend significant time on Canto 13, where Dante and Virgil enter the Wood of the Suicides. Here is one of the parts we look at, words one of the shades says to Virgil and Dante about how and why he was bound:

> "When out of the flesh from which it tore itself,
>
> The violent spirit comes to punishment,
>
> Minos assigns it to the seventh shelf.
>
> It falls into the wood, and landing there,
>
> Wherever fortune flings it, it strikes root,
>
> And there it sprouts, lusty as any tare,
>
> Shoots up a sapling, and becomes a tree.
>
> [. . .] Like the rest, we shall go for our husks on Judgement Day,
>
> But not that we may wear them, for it is not just
>
> That a man be given what he throws away.
>
> Here we shall drag them and in this mournful glade
>
> Our bodies will dangle to the end of time,
>
> Each on the thorns of its tormented shade." (Alighieri 2003, pp. 107–8)

This soul's description of the suicides' eternal torment, and the symbolism inherent in it, is something I had always approached carefully. For many reasons, I think it is important to discuss this canto; one of the main ones is that I also give them Cantos 11 and 12 of the *Purgatorio*, and talk about the suicides and the prideful as the extremes that threaten a virtuous mean of properly ordered self-love. Another reason is that I know that suicide affects many of my students, and so this canto's subject touches on something deeply painful that has broken into many of their lives. Since the first time I taught the *Inferno*, I have prefaced all discussion of Canto 13 by telling my students that I do not believe that suicide is a damnable sin. By saying this, I am telling the truth about my own beliefs, and I'm also trying to save my (mostly Christian) students some pain by telling them point-blank that I'm not encouraging them to believe their loved ones have been damned. But I've come to realize that I may have been too careful in how I approached this canto, and so cut my students off from one way they could make a valuable connection to the text.

I know my students are personally affected by suicide. Every year at least two of my composition students write their research papers about anxiety, depression, and suicide among college students. I have had more than one student talk in class about their personal mental health struggles and past suicidal ideation; I am sure many readers of this essay could say the same. Just this past semester, in the fall of 2018, two of my students were absent from class on different days to attend the funerals of high school friends who had committed suicide. One of those students, Alaura, asked me whether she could write her process analysis essay on the subject of "How to Grieve." As I graded her essay, two things jumped out at me: one was the emphasis on the importance of grieving, and the frustration that she couldn't express her grief around some people close to her; the second was her insistence—backed up by the Kübler-Ross model—that anger is an important part of the grieving process.

Alaura's essay convicted me of something I had only suspected up until then. I was, and had been, leading stilted conversations about the Wood of the Suicides with students affected by suicide more intimately than I have ever been. Many of my students are grieving, and many of them are angry.

By declaring from the outset of Canto 13 that I did not agree with Dante's definition of suicide as mortal sin, I was trying to be sensitive. Instead, I was inadvertently and implicitly telling my students that their anger—at friends, at family members, at their own moments of crippling self-doubt—had no place in the discussion. Instead of using Canto 13 as a way to work through their anger and express some of their grief, I jumped us straight over it and made what could have been profound discussions impersonal and even clinical. A few semesters ago, I had at least one student, Jake, try to break through this clinical tone: "I'm *angry* at my friend who killed himself," he said. I'm glad Jake said this, but I am also keenly aware that we—that I—allowed his statement to hang without using it to deepen the discussion. Jake, and other students like him, have taught me to lean into a discussion about suicide, and the anger and grief it has brought to many of my students' lives, and to let that discussion have teeth.

I am still learning how to do this. One of the ways I have tried is to compare the opening stanzas of the first canto of the *Inferno* to some in Canto 13, guiding students to compare the place and the feeling of that first canto, and the worries of our Pilgrim, to those in the Wood of the Suicides. I give my students a handout with the following excerpts, side by side; the translation we use here is Mark Musa's, included in the *Norton Anthology of World Literature* (Alighieri 2013):

Canto 13, lines 2–6, 22:

. . . we were on our way into a forest
that was not marked by any path at all.
No green leaves, but rather black in color
no smooth branches, but twisted and entangled,
no fruit, but thorns of poison bloomed instead.
[. . .] Around me wails of grief were echoing.

Canto 1, lines 1–7:
Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
For I had wandered from the straight path.
How hard it is to tell what it was like,
This wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn
(the thought of it brings back all my old fears),
a bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer.

I ask my students to circle or underline words and phrases these passages have in common. Most readily identify that both passages take place in a forest; they also note the similarity between a forest "not marked by any path at all" and one that the Pilgrim Dante finds himself in after having wandered from the "straight path." The darkness of each wood is another similarity they notice, as is the bitterness and horror of each place. After they draw their conclusions, practicing some good close reading as they go, I ask them a series of questions. I ask them why Dante might invite us to draw parallels between Canto 1 and Canto 13 of the *Inferno*. Students, sometimes hesitantly, ask if maybe Dante was contemplating suicide when he first wandered from his path. I think this parallel leads them to think about, and empathize with, the thought processes of those in such despair that they might end their own lives. I finish the lesson with this question: "The entire *Divine Comedy* is Dante's journey away from the 'dark wood' he finds himself in in Canto 1, all the way to the hope of Paradise. What are some ways that going on this journey could help Dante get away from the pain and punishment suffered by the sinners in the Wood of Suicides?" This exercise, I hope, conveys empathy toward my students' loved ones who have committed suicide and toward my students themselves. And though I am not sure these questions, and this exercise, is sufficient to allow students to grieve and to give space to their anger, I will keep working on more ways to encourage that empathy and to provide a place for my students to respond to their own experiences of suicide.

4. My Students Teach Me about "The Good of Intellect"

The last of the stories I will tell, and the most significant lesson my students have taught me as we walked through Dante together, is based on a remark a student made one day as we descended into the lowest circles of Dante's Hell. Like many other teachers of Dante probably do, I spend a decent amount of time talking about the architecture of the Inferno and Dante's rationale for how each sin is not only punished but ranked. We start each class period on the *Inferno* refreshing our memories; I draw a trench on the board and fill in all the circles we've discussed so far before we move on. In the

Fall 2016 semester, on the day we were beginning our discussion of the lowest circles of Hell and the punishments of the fraudulent, one of my students, Andrew, looked at the board consideringly and said, "So, does that mean the smartest people usually end up in the bottom of Hell?"

I do not know why his phrasing struck me so deeply. On the face of it, his point isn't even technically correct—those in the bottom circles of Hell are those who have used their reason to commit their defining sins, rather than abandoning reason like the Lustful or Wrathful, and this difference doesn't necessarily mean the former souls were smarter than the latter. In the moment during that class hour, however, I went with it. We spent a good chunk of the class period talking about the idea that greater intellectual power could potentially lead people into worse sins; one student inevitably quoted the infamous *Spider-man* line, "With great power comes great responsibility."

But after the class hour was over, Andrew's comment stuck with me. More than that, it has made me examine my own default positions and prejudices much more closely, and nothing I have learned about myself has been flattering. I remember lamenting at the beginning of a class in graduate school in an election year, "What if only the smart people voted?"; I would be lying if I said I hadn't had a similar thought during more recent elections. I know I have frustrated my family and friends outside of my academic circles by referencing books they haven't read and then patronizingly encouraging them to read more. I, like many other academics do, rely on intellectual prowess to justify myself and to construct my identity, and I am often—no, always—tempted to equate intellect with genuine thoughtfulness and, especially, with wisdom. But it is neither of these. And the misuse of intellect can easily draw us, myself included, into the deepest of sins. Since that day in class, I seem to have encountered a new example every week, day, and year of how this can happen.

Here is a recent example. While driving to Oklahoma for a conference, I was listening to a podcast discussing the pros and cons of depending on the consensus of the scientific community to decide what is best for the public good. The hosts brought up *Buck v. Bell*, a 1927 Supreme Court decision that allowed states to sterilize people they deemed unfit. Among them, in particular, were "mental defectives," that is, those afflicted with "hereditary form[s] of insanity and imbecility" (the majority opinion of the court called the defendant "feeble-minded") (Cornell Law School 2018). Such terminology, and the studies that developed and endorsed its use, were based in scientific consensus, tied to the eugenics movement in the early 20th century. No doubt earnest in their desire to use their learning to better society, this community of intellectuals ended up engineering the continued disenfranchisement of entire sections of the population, as though the "feeble-minded" threatened society. The learned men of the court had lost, as Virgil tells Dante at the gates of Hell, "the good of intellect" (Alighieri 2003, p. 31). Intellectual prowess does not guarantee goodness. And though *Buck v. Bell* is an extreme example, I am sure all of us can think of others, whether we have seen or listened to them on the news, read about them, or been guilty ourselves of believing the keenness of our reason somehow keeps us from the grosser mistakes of those whose minds, we think, have a duller edge.

5. Conclusions

When I started teaching Dante and other great texts in the general education classroom, I was poised to try to persuade my students that the formative power of these works would hone their minds and make them better humans. I still believe this; I would probably be suspicious of any teacher or scholar in the Humanities who did not. But Andrew's comment made me realize that I would be teaching wrongly, and reading Dante wrongly, if my efforts stopped at the cultivation of the mind. It is Reason that guides Dante through Hell and Purgatory, but then Virgil disappears. It is Divine Love that brings him through to Paradise. It is by recognizing that "neither Creator nor his creatures move ... but in the action of ... love" that I am able not just to help my students reproduce a map of Dante's Hell or understand the connection between his organizational system and his view of Divine Providence, but also to love them. That might mean giving room for their anger and grief, or making more deliberate connections between the texts we read and their out-of-class interests. It also means confronting, daily, my intentions, allowing Dante to teach me as much as I hope he teaches my

students, and allowing my students to teach me, too. And so, finally, my students have taught me to pay more attention to what Virgil was trying to tell Dante in Canto 17 of the *Purgatorio*, what Dante is trying to communicate to all his readers: "love alone/is the true seed of every merit in you, / and of all acts for which you must atone" (Alighieri 2003, p. 431).

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Article

Not the Same Old Story: Dante's Re-Telling of *The Odyssey*

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Abstract: Dante's *Divine Comedy* is frequently taught in core curriculum programs, but the mixture of classical and Christian symbols can be confusing to contemporary students. In teaching Dante, it is helpful for students to understand the concept of noumenal truth that underlies the symbol. In re-telling the Ulysses' myth in Canto XXVI of *The Inferno*, Dante reveals that the details of the narrative are secondary to the spiritual truth he wishes to convey. Dante changes Ulysses' quest for home and reunification with family in the Homeric account to a failed quest for knowledge without divine guidance that results in Ulysses' destruction.

Keywords: Dante Alighieri; *The Divine Comedy*; Homer; *The Odyssey*; Ulysses; core curriculum; noumena; symbolism; higher education; pedagogy

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When I began teaching Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the 1990s as part of our new Cornerstone Curriculum, I had little experience in teaching classical texts. My graduate preparation had been primarily in rhetoric and modern British literature, neither of which included a study of Dante. Over the years, my appreciation of Dante has grown as I have guided, Vergil-like, our students through a reading of the text. And they, Dante-like, have sometimes found themselves lost in a strange wood of symbols and allegories that are remote from their educational background. What seems particularly inexplicable to them is the intermingling of actual historical characters and mythological figures. In their academic preparation, there is a rather strict division of history and literature, fact and fiction. We don't expect a story about the Vietnam War to include references to Apollo and Zeus. Indeed, the whole idea of mythological characters seems somewhat suspect. Shouldn't we be more concerned with real people and real events than fictional ones?

And for students who are serious about their Christian faith—the majority of my students at Samford—the inclusion of Greco-Roman mythology in a work about a Christian's progress from Hell to Heaven seems fraught with difficulties. Why should Vergil, a pagan poet, be our guide through the Underworld? And, perhaps more to the point, why does Dante get to invent a Hell that seems his own fanciful creation? Shouldn't our knowledge of Hell be limited to what we know from the Bible? I am not saying that students vocally object to reading Dante, but I do think, especially for Protestant students in the South, there is a sense that all of this is just a little bit silly—certainly not on par with courses in physics or management or occupational therapy where you are learning to do something real.

1. The Noumenal Essence of the Classical Myth

What is necessary, then, is for students to have some understanding of why Dante, and by extension, all those writers who use mythological foundations for their work, from Sophocles to James Joyce, are worthy of our time and energy. Dante is certainly fanciful, if by that we mean that he creates a mythological framework that does not have any real-world equivalent. What must become apparent

to students is that it is almost impossible to talk about spiritual truth, and I am using this term in its broadest sense, without some kind of symbolic structure.

For instance, when a man or a woman wears a ring on the fourth finger of the left hand, we all know that this has a special meaning that goes beyond just ornamentation. Given a little time, students can usually identify a host of meanings associated with the wedding ring. Its circular shape is symbolic of the pledge to spend eternity together (and thus, it suggests a belief in eternal life). The gold of the ring often signifies virtue and purity. The diamond, permanence and beauty. The exchange of the rings is a way of demonstrating their commitment to love and honor one another. This simple act of exchanging rings is thus laden with deeper theological truth.

On further examination, we might observe that the exchange of rings was also conducted in pre-Christian cultures. We might note as well that the fourth finger was selected because it supposedly contained the *vena amoris*, the vein of love. In other words, the symbolism of the wedding ring has been appropriated by Christian cultures in ways consistent with biblical beliefs about monogamy and fidelity. This stacking of Christian truth on pagan foundations can be seen in numerous social customs from candlelight ceremonies to Christmas pageants. Dante is not an exception to this tradition, but simply a highly visible example of it.

Helping our students understand mythology as a means of expressing human values is a fundamental goal of our core curriculum. As the example of the wedding ring demonstrates, some of our most sacred beliefs are deeply tied to symbolic expression. In *The Divine Comedy* we encounter whirlwinds of passion and the pits of despair. Although the physical object which expresses such a belief may be fanciful—even in Dante's case, a bit grotesque—the value of the symbol, and by extension, the value of myth–is in its noumenal, rather than physical, presence. We fear those things that go bump in the night even when we can't put a name to the things themselves. We can appreciate Dante's point that the human spirit is diminished by sin without necessarily believing in the instruments of retribution described in *The Inferno*.

One way of exploring the noumenal essence of mythological references is by examining their manipulation over time. For my purposes, the example of Odysseus is particularly useful because it shows how comfortable Dante is with bending the mythological story to advance his own poetic and theological purposes. And the changes he makes are not subtle renderings of character, but a complete inversion of the Homeric account. My goal in discussing these changes with students is not to make them scholars of medieval alterations to classical texts, but to help them understand the nature of myth as fluid and malleable. Rather than being bound by classical precedents, medieval writers felt free to adapt the myths for their own purposes.

2. The Homeric Hero and Odysseus' Return to Ithaca

In Book XII of *The Divine Comedy* Dante borrows from a classical story that has been circulating for some 2000 years. Before we take a closer look at Dante's use of the story, it is helpful to know how and why the story was originally told. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus is a heroic character, famous for his exploits in war and particularly for his stratagem of the Trojan Horse. In Book VIII of *The Odyssey*, while at a banquet on the island of Scheria, a bard named Demodocus recounts stories of Odysseus and his prowess in battle. Athena herself has invited the islanders to come hear the stories of their famed guest, and a great crowd of people have gathered at King Alcinous' palace. It is clear that Odysseus' fame has preceded him even on this remote island. As Tennyson would later observe, Odysseus has "become a name" (Tennyson 2013, p. 124).

But Odysseus is not only famous for his feats in war; he is known to us primarily as a mariner who spends ten years trying to return to his home in Ithaca. Indeed, the desire to return home is the major theme of Homer's work. From the time that Odysseus leaves the shores of Troy, he is constantly being tempted to forget his home and family, and his ability to overcome these temptations is part of what makes him the hero of the epic. In this struggle between the call to adventure and the desire to return home, Calypso and Penelope represent the opposite poles.

> Calypso the lustrous goddess tried to hold me back,
> deep in her arching caverns, craving me for a husband.
> So did Circe, holding me just as warmly in her halls...
> But they never won the heart inside me, never.
> So nothing is as sweet as a man's own country. (Homer 1996, p. 212)

The events leading up to Odysseus' falling under Calypso's spell on the island of Ogygia all reveal this inner tension between the thrill of exploration and the desire to return home to family and social responsibilities. The first island that Odysseus reaches on his journey is the land of the Lotus-Eaters. Odysseus and his men are on their way home to Ithaca on the western coast of Greece and have just rounded the Cape of MELEA when a terrible storm drives them off course for nine days, finally landing them on this dangerous island. Here, for the first time, Odysseus and his men are tempted to settle outside their native land. The Lotus-Eaters are described as a gentle people who subsist on the fruit of the lotus—a fruit so delightful that those who taste it lose all desire to return home:

> Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit,
> lost all desire to send a message back, much less return,
> their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters,
> grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home
> dissolved forever. (Homer 1996, p. 214)

It is only by imprisoning his men aboard his ship that Odysseus is able to avoid a general mutiny. The idea of an island so charming that it makes men forget their homes is a recurring theme in *The Odyssey*.

Sailing away from the land of the Lotus-Eaters, Odysseus and his men endure misfortune after misfortune. They are shut up in a cave by the dim-witted Cyclopes, devoured by the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, and turned into swine by Circe the sorceress. At one point, they are within sight of Ithaca, but are once again blown far away by contrary winds. But their longest layover (seven years) is on the island of Ogygia, the home of Calypso.

It is only on Ogygia that Odysseus seems to lose his desire to return home. Ogygia is described as an idyllic retreat from the world, an Edenic paradise where Odysseus is sheltered from his enemies and can live his out his days in tranquility. Furthermore, Calypso offers him the greatest gift than can be bestowed on mortals. As long as he lives with her, he will live forever. Why should he not want to end his striving? Why should he not dwell in such eternal bliss? This idea is so important to *The Odyssey* that it forms the connective tissue of the epic. In Book I of *The Odyssey*, we find the hero trapped on Calypso's island. In Book V, Hermes is sent to rescue Odysseus from his captivity. And in Book XII, we find out how Odysseus drifted to Ogygia after all his ships were destroyed and all his men drowned. But why is it necessary that Odysseus escape from paradise? Why must he leave Calypso's loving arms?

Homer's answer is clear. There is only one thing stronger than Calypso's promise of never-ending bliss—it is the return to his home and to his beloved wife. For Homer, not to return home is no different from death. The wanderings of Odysseus are often represented as the world's great tale of adventure, but for Homer they are something else. They are a story of continuous diminution. For Odysseus, to leave home, to leave his beloved Greece, is inevitably to become less than what he was. At the beginning of the war, Odysseus sets sail from Ithaca with a fleet of ships and an army of men. But by the time he arrives on Ogygia, he is alone and powerless. To live on the island of Ogygia is to lose his identity. Without his language, his people, his native lands, Odysseus becomes, in the Greek, *outis*, or nobody. In a prophetic moment early in the tale, Odysseus uses *outis* as his pseudonym when identifying himself to Polyphemus, the one-eyed son of Poseidon. By the time he arrives on Ogygia, the prophecy has come true.

As every reader of *The Odyssey* knows, Odysseus does eventually return home to his wife. And she, despite being pursued by a houseful of impatient suitors, never gives up on being reunited with the

great love of her life. When he arrives in his homeland of Ithaca, on the western edge of Greece, he returns not as the conquering hero, not as the mastermind of the Trojan War, but in the guise of a beggar. No one recognizes him except his old faithful dog. But it is only by coming home that Odysseus can once again be who he was: the King of Ithaca, the husband of a devoted wife, and the father of a loving son. It is only here that he can tell his tales of wandering and captivity in his language, to his people. Only by returning home can he once more become Odysseus. In teaching *The Odyssey*, it is important for students to realize that the stories about one-eyed giants and alluring sorcerers are devoted to Homer's poetic vision of what represents the highest good: to do one's duty, to serve one's country, and to live in the warm embrace of family in your native homeland.

Although the ending of *The Odyssey* finds the hero safely enveloped in the comforts of home and family, the myth of Odysseus does not end there. In Book XII, in the middle of his journey, Odysseus makes a visit to the Underworld. There he meets with the famous Theban prophet, Tiresias, the one who foretold the destruction of Oedipus and the death of his sons. Odysseus learns from the prophet that he must go on one last voyage before he can finally die peacefully at home.

> But once you have killed those suitors in your halls—
> by stealth or in open fight with slashing bronze—
> go forth once more, you must...
> carry your well-planed oar until you come
> to a race of people who know nothing of the sea. (Homer 1996, p. 253)

Although Homer makes no further mention of this final voyage, it looms over the final chapter of *The Odyssey* like a great, unanswered question, the unfinished business that demands a sequel to be made. And it is Dante who takes up that challenge, and in the process, turns Odysseus from a heroic warrior, and wanderer, into a wayward soul.

3. Dante's Re-Telling of Ulysses' Final Voyage

In taking up the myth of Odysseus' final voyage, Dante will create a vision of Odysseus and his journey that is radically different from the one foretold in Book XII of *The Odyssey*. By comparing the two accounts, students can begin to see the importance of myth in engaging readers in the discussions of value and meaning. For Dante, that meaning is derived from a proper relationship with God, rather than the familial values of Homer. Instead of returning home, Dante must leave home behind in pursuit of God. In fact, in *The Divine Comedy* Dante places Purgatory—the place where he will learn how to be in right relationship to God—on the opposite side of the Earth from Jerusalem. He imagines it as an enormous mountain that was created when Lucifer was cast out of Heaven and fell to the Earth. The distant sea that is the setting for his island of Purgatory is as remote from his Mediterranean world as Alpha Centauri is from ours. Its very remoteness makes it the ideal place for a place of penance and forgiveness, a place that, like the medieval conception of Heaven, must exist, but is beyond our ability to reach in an earthly body.

Perhaps to lend an air of authenticity to his imaginary island, Dante connects it with the Homeric myth about the last voyage of Odysseus. By foreshadowing the existence of this place in *The Inferno*, he sets the stage for his own journey there when Dante and Vergil make their way to Purgatory. In *The Inferno*, we learn that Odysseus ("Ulysses," as Dante knew his name in the Latinized form) sailed within sight of Purgatory while he was still alive. But Dante's Ulysses is different in both name and actions from Homer's creation. Lying deep within the circles of Hell, he appears as a flame and speaks to Dante with a tongue of fire. He explains to Dante that he never returned home to the island of Ithaca. For neither "fondness for my son, nor reverence for my aged father, nor Penelope's claim to the joys of love, could drive out of my mind the lust to experience the far-flung world." Ulysses' return to

Ithaca, so praised by Homer as the fulfillment of his quest, is now completely eliminated by Dante.[1] In *The Inferno*, Ulysses is literally enveloped in the flame of his unquenchable desire. He has ignored his duty as a father, a son, and as a husband in order to satisfy his wanderlust, and this is his punishment. In reading Dante's version of the Homeric myth, students can begin to understand how myth can be reinterpreted by a later poet in order to convey an entirely different noumenal truth than the one underlying the original version of the story. In telling his story to Dante, Ulysses describes a journey that corresponds to the prophesied journey that appears in Book XII of *The Odyssey*. On this voyage, Ulysses and his intrepid companions sail far beyond the bounds of the Mediterranean Sea to "a world beyond the sun" (Alighieri 2003, p. 207). This place, we will discover in the epic, is the island of Purgatory. Like some primeval interstellar traveler, Ulysses spies the island from afar, "dark in space, a peak so tall/I doubted any man had seen the like" (p. 207). This is it, the ultimate destination—the island beyond all islands—but reach it, he never shall. Just as a cheer goes up from the crew, a sudden squall overtakes the ship. They are spun about three times, and on the fourth revolution, sucked beneath the sea. Ulysses has sought for glory, but his end is oblivion. The sea closes over him, and he is never heard from again. This is a direct contrast with the prophecy of Tiresias, which predicts "a gentle painless death" for Odysseus; "far from the sea it takes you down... with your people there in blessed peace around you." Homer depicts a hero's death for Odysseus in the company of his family and devoted nation. To Dante, however, Ulysses is no hero, but a cheat and a liar. By means of the wooden horse, he cheats the Trojans out of their kingdom. By forcing Achilles to go to Troy, he cheats Greece out of its greatest warrior and Achilles out of his life. And in his final journey, he sacrifices the lives of all of his men in his own maniacal pursuit of adventure and glory. Moreover, because the island of Purgatory is an exclusively Christian destination, he, like Lucifer in Eden, has sought to enter a place where he does not belong.

But why does Dante imagine such a bitter end for Ulysses? After all, other pagan heroes are singled out for praise throughout the epic, and Vergil, the pagan Roman poet, serves as Dante's guide and interpreter as he journeys down through the Inferno and up the slopes of Purgatory. Why, then, is Ulysses treated with such disdain?

One answer is that there is a strong connection between the fate of the Trojans and Dante's Italy. It is Vergil who promulgates the myth that from Aeneas, the warrior who escaped burning Troy, would come the founders of Rome and the Julian emperors. Not surprisingly, Hektor, the greatest of the Trojan warriors, is placed in Limbo, a special place outside the torments of Hell where virtuous pagans reside. Thus, Dante's placement of Ulysses in the Eighth Circle of Hell does fit with his general repudiation of the Greeks in favor of the Trojans.

But it seems something more is at play here than simply Dante's scorn for the Greeks. The Eighth Circle of Hell is where those who have committed acts of fraud or deceit are punished. Here are thieves and corrupt politicians, simoniacs and hypocrites. Matt Wheeler notes that Ulysses' punishment is to be held within a "lingua" or "tongue" of fire (Wheeler 2014, p. 3). The connection between the instrument of punishment and the offense—Ulysses' deceptive tongue—is undeniable. Dante places those guilty of fraud deep in the pit of Hell because they have undermined the very concept of truth. Without mutual trust, it is impossible for civil society to exist. Dante prefaces his visit to this region with a jeremiad against the deceivers of his own day, the corrupt politicians of medieval Florence who have condemned him to a life of exile. Ulysses and his companion Diomedes must be consumed with an eternal flame because they have acted immorally in seeking victory above honor, and they have destroyed others in doing so.

[1] It should be noted that there were alternate accounts of Odysseus' fate after leaving Calypso's island which were circulating during the late medieval era, and which also failed to include the happy homecoming described by Homer. Although these may have served as some inspiration for Dante, his own account varies in significant ways from the accounts given by Dictys Cretensis and other Latin sources (Rossi 1953, p. 195). The point remains that Dante has crafted a story of Ulysses that fits his own particular purposes.

4. Myth and the Search for Truth

As the story of Ulysses' quest demonstrates, myths are symbols that have noumenal meaning, but those meanings need not, and often do not, remain constant from generation to generation. Myths and the meaning they convey are subject to elaboration and alteration, even to the point—as Dante's retelling of *The Odyssey* so vividly demonstrates—of completely changing the outcome of the original story. By examining Dante's re-envisioning of Homer's heroic warrior, we can begin to focus the discussion not on the apparent contradictions between the two stories, but on the work that myth performs in helping us explore our own cultural values. How we tell Odysseus' story—and by extension how we tell any myth—is based in large degree on what we want the story to tell about us. Homer extolls the Odyssean hero who seeks to return to his home at all costs, not only to lead his people, but also to reclaim his own identity. Dante sees Ulysses as a moral failure who tramples on the rights of others in order to assure his own success. Indeed, John Guzzardo considers Ulysses' quest for the unknown to be the antitype of Dante's own quest for truth: "For Dante, as for St. Augustine, Ulysses represented the archetype of the presumptuous philosopher who would seek the truth unaided" (Guzzardo 1949, p. 58). And, whereas Dante's quest cannot be fulfilled without the assistance of divine truth in the form of Beatrice, Ulysses, in Dante's version of the story, leaves behind his Penelope in hope of achieving that which is beyond human striving.

But despite how dissimilar the two accounts of Ulysses turn out to be, both Homer and Dante recognize the power of myth to explore the deepest wellsprings of human nature. Mythology, rightly understood, is not about Golden Fleeces and three-headed dogs or mythical voyages and imagined islands; it is about exploring what it means to be human, and by studying poets such as Homer and Dante, our students can learn to value the noumenal truth that guides not only mythological accounts of ancient heroes, but the one that helps direct their own journey through life.

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Article

"Where Are We Going?" Dante's *Inferno* or Richard Rorty's "Liberal Ironist"

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Abstract: This paper elucidates the structure of moral action by arguing that Dante's explanation in the *Inferno* of why people end up in their respective circles of hell is superior in terms of accounting for the structure of moral reasoning to Richard Rorty's promotion of the "liberal ironist." The latter suffers an internal contradiction—it wants a well-lived life without any overriding aims, but such a life is understandable only in light of affirming life-aims. The former convincingly shows that the structure of action reveals the truth of the well-known apothegm—"we reap what we sow." The main point for Dante is not who is rational (for even the rational can be vicious, as depicted in the *Inferno*), but whose aims actually fulfill the practical life. This comparison of Dante and Rorty can have larger pedagogical aims, helping students to understand better what Albert William Levi calls "the moral imagination" and deepening their appreciation of how metaphors and paradigms of moral excellence provide, or fail to provide, an overriding unity and purpose to our actions.

Keywords: Dante; Richard Rorty; ethics; philosophy; interdisciplinary; pedagogy

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My aims in this essay are twofold. First, I want to show that Dante's *Inferno* exemplifies an important point about the relationship among human nature, moral order, and the vices—that is, people can be what the University of Chicago philosopher Candice Vogler calls "reasonably vicious" (Vogler 2002). Dante's *Inferno* is not filled with ignorant people or the pathologically insane (no Charles Manson-type people are there). It is filled with people who deliberately and intentionally aim for goals that contradict human nature, and thus suffer the natural consequences of seeking perverted aims.[1]

To highlight this lesson from the *Inferno*, I contrast Dante's story with the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty and his account of the contingency of language, selfhood, and community. Rorty claims that what he calls the "liberal ironist" represents the truly modern person, one who is emancipated from traditional problems of truth, God, and natural law, and who continually remakes her or himself by adopting new metaphors for living. However, as I hope to show, in comparison to Dante's story, Rorty has no way to prevent or correct the "reasonable vicious" person.

Moreover, it is also my aim to use this contrast between Dante and Rorty as a pedagogical lesson to elucidate the development of what Albert William Levi calls "the moral imagination." Behind every attempt to explain and justify our moral actions is the "moral phenomena," the experience of the morally ideal, of what we ought to be. These phenomena are pervasive and influential throughout a culture, though not quantifiable and measurable in the way the objects of natural science are. This ideal indicates our sense of when we as humans are at our moral best. Levi says, "the moral imagination is what produces the ideals dominating vast historical epochs and it always seems to require both a subjective factor of individual philosophical thought and an objective reference to the characteristic

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1 For a contemporary rendition of this point from a professional psychological point of view, see (Schimmel 1992). Although the seven deadly sins are more explicitly the topics of Dante's journey through purgatory, Schimmel's insights help to explain Dante's journey through the inferno. "The deadly sins are not arbitrary, irrational restrictions on human behavior, imposed by a remote deity indifferent to human needs ... [They] concern the core of what we are, of what we can become, and most importantly, of what we should aspire to be" (Schimmel 1992, p. 5).

details of actual social living" (Levi 1995, p. 16). The most fruitful cognitive capability we have to express this conjunction of "thought" and "actual social living" is the imagination—that is, the forming of metaphors and paradigms of moral excellence that both highlight concrete actions of our lives and picture an overriding unity of those actions.

In comparing and contrasting Dante and Rorty, we see conflicting metaphors and paradigms (i.e., the "pilgrim" versus the "liberal ironist") attempting to elucidate the moral phenomena of our lives. My plan is by the end to show that Dante's imagination, as opposed to Rorty's, better explains the moral phenomena understood in terms of the inherent necessities of moral action, and that, by this exercise, we can help our students to understand more deeply how the moral imagination shapes and directs their lives.

1. Overview

The first three chapters of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* are titled "The Contingency of Language," "The Contingency of Selfhood," and "The Contingency of a Liberal Community" (Rorty 1989). Although Rorty writes readably about many subjects and many authors, these chapters express the kernel of his thinking.

According to Rorty, language is contingent because truth is not out there. Because words are not pictorial images of reality, we cannot mirror nature, and, consequently, we lose the habits of using certain words because they no longer interest us, words like "truth," "God," and "nature." We must reconcile ourselves to the fact that reality is indifferent to us and our linguistic efforts, and instead of worrying about truth, we should worry about apt metaphors expressive of our desires. Thus, we should be more like poets than physicists or theologians. Poets create realities with words, rather than attempt to find one-to-one words to objects. Truth, subsequently, becomes uninteresting and not a deep matter. Hence, Rorty says, we should think of "intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are" (Rorty 1989, p. 9). Language is a tool without ontological connections and without teleology, and thus malleable enough for whatever creative use it takes to both de-divinize the world and to promote the self-created person, who worships nothing. Rorty often quotes Nietzsche at this point: "truth as a mobile army of metaphors" (Rorty 1989, p. 17). Our vocabulary, then, must be forceful enough to resist any extraneous impositions of how life ought to be lived, but formative enough to express our desires to live authentically without presupposing any conceptual or ontological realism.

The self is also utterly contingent. If, as Rorty claims, truth is only the creative use of metaphors, then self-knowledge leads to self-creation, and if we still want certainty in our search for truth, we should not look to the world but to the fact that "we willed it." Even though this sounds like a traditional promotion of autonomy, it is not Kant's idea of it, because Kant sought to secure the moral self in an indifferent world by divinizing the self's moral sense. However, if we are utterly contingent, we are also not divine in any way. The distinctively human is what each person's idiosyncratic fantasy reveals about each person, not in the sense that everyone dreams of a fantastical end of human pursuits, but in the sense of having a project of continual recreation. Yet, for a society of such projects to continue, there is only one primary disposition in respect to others: "the realization that at a certain point one has to trust to the good will of those who will live other lives and write other poems" (Rorty 1989, p. 42). This trust does not require any strong moral tradition or divine command to make it sensible for the "liberal ironist." It is just what emancipated, self-creating modern persons do.

The best society in which poets can flourish is a liberal community and, not surprisingly, this is thoroughly contingent as well. A genuine liberal community has moved beyond even the Enlightenment model of social scientists molding people into progressive citizens based upon scientific rationality. There is not a rational foundation on which to build such a society. We are poetically free only in a community without foundations in science, philosophy, or religion. This is why "freedom is the recognition of contingency" (Rorty 1989, p. 46). Consequently, we do not need to guide society rationally, for the distinction between rationality and irrationality is archaic and uninteresting. Rather,

to have a community of many paradigms of humanity freely living together, we should accept only one social value: "one can come at it from the point of view of an ethics of kindness, and ask whether cruelty and injustice will be diminished if we all stopped worrying about 'absolute validity' or whether, on the contrary, only such worries keep our characters firm enough to defend unflinchingly the weak against the strong" (Rorty 1989, p. 51). For Rorty, if we all accept the utter contingencies of language, selfhood, and community, then we would naturally eschew cruelty and seek kindness as a necessary condition to live as strong poets, recreating ourselves. Moreover, to keep us from slipping into any foundationalism and thus finding ways to be unkind and cruel to those not like us, we should be a "liberal ironist" (Rorty 1989, p. 61), constantly exposing the vacuity of all foundational theology, philosophy, and politics and, hence, making more social room for free people.[2]

The world of Rorty thus consists of self-created people, that is, the "liberal ironists," who adopt opportune metaphors so as to live freely alongside other poetically-fashioned people, while all along committed to tolerance, kindness, and the avoidance of cruelty.[3] Any introduction of an overriding telos or metaphysical foundation to the contingent language, selfhood, or liberal community would lead to their demise. Contingency without telos: that is Rorty's world.[4]

However, this is not Dante's world.[5] The *Inferno* is an imaginary descent (told by a philosophical poet) into the natural outcomes of certain choices people make and the actions they take. Even though the inhabitants of each of the nine circles are there because they deliberately and voluntarily acted upon their aims, they create consequences they must endure. They act, but a destiny (resulting from their actions) determines their future. Each step down, as depicted by Dante's aesthetic imagination, indicates a greater depravity awaiting those who enter it. Dante creates an imaginary space beckoning readers to position themselves in whatever circle and then to wonder, "there but by the grace of God go I."[6]

For instance, the second and third circles, lust and gluttony, are sins of the flesh, which obviously lead to great sorrow and self-made quagmires, but, with Dante, we are sympathetic and realize that "there but by the grace of God go I." No doubt a life of lust and gluttony cannot bring fulfillment, and cannot complete our fundamental human aims for happiness and joy, but their root causes are something everyone struggles with—intemperance in romantic love and the eating of fine food. The sinners in these circles err because they fail to recognize that we desire romance and eating, not as ends in themselves but as means to more comprehensive and fulfilling aims, like love and health.

The fourth circle is more troubling to our sense of a well-lived life. There, Dante sees people circling each other, screaming and cursing each other for not fulfilling what each seeks. The greedy persons realize that what they have is never enough and despise themselves for not finding contentment in their state of life. The luxurious persons resent that part of themselves that cannot keep feeding the insatiable desire for more consumption. The desire driving greed and wastefulness is not a natural, physical desire like sex and eating, but it is a misconstruing of ownership. It is a failure to see rightly that possessions are always transitory and contingent, and it wants them to be

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2 Rorty consequently adds that because we have disinvested the world of any metaphysic or religious basis, we must "disenchant" it, i.e., treat it as though it is only boringly contingent, not offering to us any mysteries of life or utopian or eschatological hopes. See (Rorty 1991, p. 193).

3 For what Rorty thinks about bullies and oligarchs, see (Nystrom et al. 2002).

4 Rorty likens the society of "liberal ironists", to functioning as though they were bargaining in a "Kuwaiti bazaar", in which no price is normative or established. Everything (for example, the meaning of life, truth, semantics, and ethics) is open to negotiations. See (Rorty 1989, pp. 96–97).

5 A teleology defines the world for Dante, even language, and Dante always attempts to express faithfully that teleology. T. S. Eliot recognizes this faithfulness in the way Dante is a poet. "The whole study and practice of Dante seems to me to teach that the poet should be the servant of his language, rather than the master of it . . . [The] great master of a language should be the great servant of it." See (Elliot 1961, pp. 116–17).

6 Albert William Levi correctly interprets Dante according to what he calls "the teleological imagination"—that is, Dante envisions a great cosmic and moral order. Levi says, "for *The Inferno* is no empirical journey mythologized, but a constructed artificial space in which the furniture of the imaginary landscape becomes the living symbol of a moral hierarchy" (Levi 1962, p. 70).

permanent and to satisfy the longing of the soul for a final aim, for what would be the comprehensive and self-sufficient aim of life. Such people, Dante warns us, begin to believe a falsehood.

Although it deals with a natural fact as do the other circles, the fifth circle, wrath, once again shows us sinners believing a falsehood. People in this level of hell put themselves in ignorance, due to their rage over what they do to others and thus believe that they can fashion a moral law to accommodate their natural anger. Anger per se is not the problem. Everyone gets angry, but when it turns to wrath, people become deluded into thinking they can suspend the natural order of peace and respect among friends and others. They become so obsessed with their rage, they put themselves into another moral order and expect to be excused for their cruelty and harm. However, this supposed moral order contradicts the true order, and whether one diabolically opposes that order or whether one makes oneself ignorant of it due to one's rage, the consequences are self-inflicted, a constant tearing of one's soul. Curiously, Dante conjoins sullenness to the vice of wrath. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante separates the deadly sin of acedia from wrath, but in the *Inferno* they occur together. Perhaps Dante reasons that the conclusion to a life of wrath is exhaustion, a defeated and hopeless disposition, depleted of energy and commitment.

In the sixth circle, where the heretics dwell in torment, we see clearly the cause of the deadly sins. The issue is truth about God and the world, and the heretics reject the truth and instead believe an idolatrous account of God and the world. The heretics may be eloquent in the defense of a false doctrine, may be piously sincere, and may even be representatives of ecclesiastical authority, however, the heretics believe and teach a falsehood against God and the world and, thus, promulgate a perverse understanding of reality, erroneously turning a penultimate reality into an object of ultimate concern. Using language this way is a sin, according to Dante, because language is a divine gift, structured in a way to represent correctly and to communicate the true glory of God and the goodness of creation.

The seventh circle is filled with people who use violence against themselves, their neighbors, nature, art, and God. Because they seem primarily concerned with their own narcissistic aims, they render apart what God had created to be whole. Violence is more than the scarring of an object or person. It is an assault against God's created order. This is why "sodomites" are loathed by Dante, because they try to adjust nature to their desires, rather than the other way around, and consequently harm and mar the natural sexual order. The violent against art do the same. Art, for Dante, is an offspring of God's beautiful and moral ordering of the world, and thus can and should be done to witness God and nature's glory. Some people, however, can fraudulently make objects, labelled as art but, in truth, these sinners grotesquely depict nature and the human experience for profit. Instead of imitating the underlying order of nature, these violent artists assault nature with works depicting an inverse ordering of nature: lust, greed, and cynicism become the aims of art.

It is in the eighth and ninth circles of hell that we see clearly the fullest expression of sin: deceit and treachery. Those in the eighth and ninth circles are worse than the heretics, because a heretic may mistakenly worship a false doctrine, but the deceitful and treacherous deliberately and rationally contradict the truth. It is because of their rational viciousness to the truth that God hates their fraudulent thoughts and actions the most of all the vices. It is understandable that Dante would put Judas in one of the mouths of Lucifer, but it is not as clear why the Roman traitors Cassius and Brutus are in the other mouths. Frankly, Judas' rejection of the truth clearly revealed in Jesus Christ seems more rebellious than Cassius and Brutus' rebellion again Caesar. Regardless, Dante sees these rationally vicious people experiencing the full extent of perverting and corrupting the rational order of nature and the proper order of human pursuits and loves. They are eternally devoured without being consumed by Lucifer, the perverse archetype of rebellion against the great chain of being and divine holiness. Lucifer, who in a macabre way attracts the reader because of his self-imposed damnation and his boundless desire without any aim or restraint, epitomizes the end result of rejection and rebellion against the truth of nature and God.

2. The Choice

I know of no place where Rorty wrote on Dante. Maybe he lectured on him, but it is no surprise that he did not find Dante instructive for his agenda. Dante's pilgrimage through the *Inferno* is opposite to Rorty's "liberal ironist," and, frankly, would not be interesting to one totally committed to the contingency of language, selfhood, and a liberal community. The "liberal ironist" has to reject what the pilgrim has learned as essential to the quest for human fulfillment. Yet, why the "liberal ironist" has to ignore and dismiss the pilgrim shows the vacuity of Rorty's agenda.

The "liberal ironist" contends to model for us how to live as a self-made person in a modernity that has lost interest in pursuits of the truth, the good, natural law, and God.[7] Such a person is contingent all-the-way-down, but assumes her or himself to be exemplifying how a free person ought to live among other free persons who do not lean on normative claims about human nature, but who find fulfillment in approaching life alone as one who with dexterity always finds the fitting metaphors for self-creation, and who looks upon others in community as a common bargainer in a bazaar of traders and hagglers. It seems that the "liberal ironist" has an aim to be in a perpetual mode of self-creation, as would a poet self-create each new poem, and who must also disenchant the world and de-divinize the self so as to be flexible enough to identify and adopt the next needed metaphor of self-creation relative to the demands of living in a liberal community.[8]

Even though Rorty is an attractive writer of prose and a wide-ranging and acute interpreter of selections of the intellectual makers of modern thought, his agenda is untenable, and Dante's pilgrim shows why. As a writer, Rorty has an agenda, and an agenda assumes a structure based on how to build an argument toward a comprehensive and satisfying aim.[9] However, in the end, Rorty wants the agenda, but rejects the final aim, but since the structure of having an agenda presupposes an aim, Rorty must do more than simply claim that it is not modern to seek final aims.[10] It is circular reasoning for Rorty to trump every other claim to truth than his own account of contingent language, self, and community, but also dismiss any need to justify such trumping with anything more than the claim that a liberal like him believes this way.[11]

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[7] For Rorty, we must reject that our language and thoughts can "mirror" reality. In fact, we must reject even a passing interest in such. See (Rorty 1979, p. 7).

[8] Even though Rorty's "liberal ironist" is a poet, she or he is not a poet like Dante is a poet. As an epic poet, Dante creatively uses language to depict a grand vision of individual and communal destinies, and also a grand scheme of a universe governed by a moral and religious law. Rorty's poet rejects all such epic pretensions and, instead, is concerned with exposing the contingency of language and using language toward the aim of self-creation. Dante poetically uses language to clarify moral and theological realities. Rorty's poet uses language to free her or himself from any holdovers of moral and theological commitments.

[9] Charles Taylor correctly criticizes Rorty's implicit double standard when he says of Rorty's agenda, "we cannot but operate with a notion of truth; that the way we live our transitions, and struggle with potential re-descriptions, unfailing makes use of these notions of overcoming distortion, seeing through error, coming to reality, and their opposites" (Taylor 1990, p. 272).

[10] Brad Frazier is right when he claims that Rorty actually comes across as parochial with his view that we must reject all forms of realism, primarily because that is what a liberal democracy does and needs (Frazier 2006, pp. 197–200).

[11] Even when Rorty tries to explain that the liberal ironist has compelling and self-defining aims, he cannot overcome the internal contradiction to his agenda. For instance, in "Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism" he tries to defend his notion of the modern intellectual against the charge that in marginalizing herself from the absolutist and foundationalist claimants of society, she is acting irresponsibly to the community and cultural ethos. Rorty's defense is that the intellectual does not need an ahistorical vantage point to explain her actions as a liberal. Rorty develops this defense by contrasting a Kantian way with a Hegelian way of justifying the ethos of one's community. The Kantian way appeals to an ahistorical moral law that determines the rightness or wrongness of all communities. The Hegelian way looks to what is needed to form solidarity with one's community. The Hegelian thus does not need a metaphysic or metanarrative to justify its loyalty. "I hope thereby to suggest how such liberals might convince our society that loyalty to itself is moral enough, and that such loyalty no longer needs an ahistorical backup. I think they should try to clear themselves of charges of irresponsibility by convincing our society that it need be responsible only to its own traditions, and not to the moral law as well" (Rorty 1991, p. 199). It is enough to appeal to anecdotes and conventions to justify why liberal society would, for example, welcome strangers and not be cruel. Yet, even though Rorty is right to use Hegel to promote a historicism about cultural morality, he misuses Hegel by ignoring the central claim of Hegelianism: history has a teleology, an internal logic towards more comprehensive explanations of human self-understanding, and any denial of this teleology results in decadence of the human-cultural move towards greater freedom. This is Hegel's historicism: "the goal, Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm.

Against this, Dante's agenda is to show what happens to people who reject the natural order and God, who do not necessarily fail due to their personal weaknesses or due to extenuating circumstances, but who fail because they aim for the wrong aims and rationally direct their lives toward perverse goals. In a similar way, Eric Auerbach correctly summarizes the moral lesson of Dante's *Inferno*: "thus it became necessary that the characters in Dante's other world, in their situation and attitude, should represent the sum of themselves; that they should disclose, in a single act, the character and fate that had filled out their lives" (Bloom 2011, p. 11). Moral action follows a certain life-logic that determines the success or failure of one's life based on the aims one's seeks.

The *Inferno* is like a yearbook of what happened to our not-seen-lately-classmates who had self-destructive habits back in high school, those with whom we lost contact because they lost contact with the proper road towards human fulfillment. By seeing their pictures, their fates, we learn great truths about human experience. We reap what we sow. Their sufferings are not extraneous to their life choices, but the natural consequences of being reasonably vicious. Their actions were not blind choices, but deliberations according to certain aims. Internal to every choice for what is good, for the reward that comes from a well-lived life, is the need to aim for what fulfills the desire for it. But the citizens of the *Inferno* are failures, not because they were insincere or hesitant to choose a life or because they are undeliberate and unreflective in their actions. They suffer their particular circles of hell because they aim for the wrong aims.

For instance, the pitiable Francesca, in her own hell of unrequited lust, seeks happiness and longs for union with her beloved, but she breaks the natural order of marriage to do so, and thus bears the reverberations of a violation of nature and loses all freedom because she "fell in love." Filippo Argenti in the hell of wrath acts as though his unrestrained anger can refashion his theft against Dante into a well-ordered and just situation, but he instead experiences the constant agony of biting himself. Pope Anastasius II, residing among the heretics of level six, thinks that a supreme ecclesiastical authority can redefine the church's dogma of the divine paternity of Christ and thus force heaven to adjust to the demands of the earth, but he now finds himself rotting in a stinking pool of foul words that cause a canker on the conscience. Simon Magus, of the biblical book of Acts, tries with a magical slight-of-hand to use money to buy the Holy Spirit, conferring upon natural money an occultic power, but in the end, he lives in torment perversely upside down with his feet burning. Pope Boniface VIII undergoes the same inevitable result. He thinks his position of protected privilege enables him to belie his spiritual calling and instead to amass great wealth and, thus, to act no differently than any other petty politician and despot who is most ignorant of what he is most assured. And Judas, in the hell of treachery, who has betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver, blatantly rejects the manifest revelation of Christ and perhaps devises an alternative reality of God militarily defeating the armies of Rome. He endures the devouring ravaging of a satanic being who refuses to accept the truth of God and the goodness of creation, and in doing so locks himself in eternal hate and rage. Each of these characters experiences the sum of their wrongful lives and reveals the link between moral action and destiny. Harold Bloom insightfully puts the point this way: "as seer, Dante identified character and fate, *ethos* and *daemon*, and what he saw in his contemporaries he transferred precisely to the three final worlds of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Dante's friend and enemies alike are presented . . . as being consistent with themselves, beyond change, their eternal destinies overdetermined by their fixed characters" (Bloom 2011, p. 15). Character, revealed by a life ordered toward final aims, is always destiny.

Their preservation, regarded from the side of their free existence appearing the form of contingency, is History; but regarded from the side of the philosophically comprehended organization, it is the Science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance" (Hegel 1977, p. 497). Additionally, "all things have a permanent inward nature, as well as an outward existence. They live and die, arise and pass away; but their essential and universal part is the kind [e.g., humanity for individuals]; and this means much more than something *common* to them all" (Hegel 1975, p. 37). This is a historicism that recognizes that cultural progress rests on more than convention and anecdotes; it occurs because culture evolves by the appeal of a final aim.

The issue all the way down the *Inferno* is the structure of moral action, and this is what is missing from Rorty's construction of the "liberal ironist." The "liberal ironist" rejects any telos, but still seeks the end of self-creation. She rejects any correspondence between language and reality, but changes her life by the evocative power of metaphors to guide her to the kind of person she should be. She rejects any sense of natural or revealed law but wants a democratic community committed to kindness and devoid of cruelty in which people respect and honor each other enough that they are willing to bargain among themselves for the best way to live with each other. The "liberal ironist" directs people but without a final aim. She cultivates a certain way to deliberate about actions, but will not say what actualizes the motivating needs and desires of that deliberation.

However, it is consistent with all seeking, guiding, wanting, aiming, and deliberating beings to elucidate their end results. Those end results are intentions, and intentions have an internal directivity toward an external state of affairs. The activities are forms of life that follow certain practices aimed toward a fulfilling state, just as each player on a baseball team acts according to a relevant form of playing aimed to playing and winning the game (Thompson 2008). This is what Dante is describing how the game of life is played. Alasdair MacIntyre rightly describes Dante as "the philosopher *par excellence* of the practical life itself" (MacIntyre 1990, p. 80). Dante allegorically depicts that we "reap what we sow." Consequently, the one who makes more sense of the practical life, that is, the life shaped and determined by formulating fulfilling aims and establishing the proper ways to reach those aims, is the one who can both give a coherent and cogent narrative of a well-lived life and show why the rival views fail at the practical life (just as Dante depicts rival views in the *Inferno*). In fact, according to MacIntyre, Dante's *Divina Commedia* is a challenge to those who reject and ignore the demands of the properly-lived practical life: "tell me your story and I will show you that it only becomes intelligible within the framework provided by the *Commedia*, or rather within some framework provided by that scriptural visions which the *Commedia* allegorizes" (MacIntyre 1990, p. 144). Dante thus sets forth a "form of life" that reveals how peoples' endgames determine their actions, that those who aim to corrupt the natural order through greed, lust, and pride, though they are socially persuasive and influential, suffer the effects of a life poorly-lived. Because they fail to see that a moral order governs the pursuit of human flourishing and well-being, the reasonably vicious people of greed, lust, and pride create their own "inferno".

Even though Rorty wants to dismiss the role of the structure of moral action in his exhortation to become a "liberal ironist," he nonetheless plays the game of exhorting for a particular way of living the fulfilled life and dismisses and belittles other ways of living. Yet, when it comes to being responsible to a final aim, Rorty refuses to acknowledge what he in practice assumes with his exhortations. Consequently, Rorty does not help us to understand why some people can be informed, deliberate, and rationalizing of their behavior but be also committed to cruelty and harm of themselves and others. He may think that modern liberals are welcoming to strangers and not cruel, but he cannot keep a society of liberals committed to such, because if the truth of social progress is only determined by solidarity among its liberals, then those same liberals could evolve into becoming cruel and unwelcoming to illiberal persons. Both human history and our own experiences are replete with examples of educated and cultured people, many of whom would be called progressive liberals according to Rorty's agenda, contributing to catastrophic crimes against humanity. Although Rorty does not advocate for such people and hopes they will not appear among us, because he rejects even considering the structure of moral actions with final aims, he has no way to use his ideas to prevent the reasonably vicious from happening; he gives no basis for a prophetic ethic that would warn us of the "inferno" that awaits all who aim for the wrong aims, even if they are sincere and rational in doing so.[12]

[12] I hope the reader by now understands that I am not merely criticizing Rorty for not being an Aristotelean and thus not reasoning like the Aristoteleans Dante, Thompson, and Vogler. Rorty misses an important aspect about our experience of the moral phenomena (as I explain above), that a logic inheres in our experience of being moral selves. That is, moral actions are based on intentions to fulfill our nature as persons with life-forms definitive of our sense of being human. Although I

Dante does give a prophetic ethic that warns us of the "inferno" that follows from seeking the wrong aims, because in his graphic telling of the lives in the *Inferno*, he depicts in the nine circles of hell the basic structure of moral action. That is, that our rational deliberations are formed by certain aims, and if those aims are a corruption of nature, self, and true worship, then we will find reasons to support the corrupt aims. Moreover, if the moral actions affirm the goodness of the natural order and the rightful praise of God, then practical reason completes its internal drive toward that which fulfills human life and nature. The primary issue is not if we are rational, able to justify our actions, the primary issue is whether we know the proper aims.[13]

3. Conclusions

Where are we going? Toward what do our practical lives aim? All of us ask these questions, but as professors we should be particularly attuned to how a good liberal education will make these questions increasingly important, and pressing, to our students. For instance, if it is true, as mentioned in the introduction to this essay, that our ethical principles and justifications are rational expressions of a moral ideal imagined in the moral imagination, by contrasting Dante and Rorty, we compel students to consider the accuracy and effectiveness of their own moral ideals. In the *Inferno*, Dante imagines a journey of a pilgrim guided by reason (that is, Virgil) and aiming for the final aim (that is, paradise with God), witnessing the motives and consequences of failed moral experiments. The pilgrim is more than an idle wanderer through the many and complicated expressions of the human efforts to find fulfillment. The pilgrim understands the full range of the efforts to find happiness, because the pilgrim realizes the inner-logic of the moral life, that desires and intentions are shaped by the goals people have. Does the metaphor of Dante's pilgrim clarify the moral choices that people must make in their defining and forceful relationships of love, work, faith, and social responsibilities? Does it force our students to examine the most likely practical ends of their own motives and intentions?

The same can be asked of Rorty's morally ideal person, who as a poet constantly recreates her or himself so as to be self-determining and not manipulated by the social oligarchs and metaphysical bullies, which Rorty fears so much. This image, according to Rorty, must disenchant the world of all theological and metaphysical claims so that, like shopping in a Kuwaiti bazaar in which no prices are fixed, all options are open for a happy and free life. Consequently, Rorty's poet must explore removing what is serious about serious relationships—that is, the inherent practical logic expressive of the unique lifeform of a relationship (for example, as fidelity and long suffering are necessary for family life to produce fulfillment). However, for Rorty's poet, this practical logic is negotiable and amenable to the interests of a person's continual self-creation. Does this imagination of an ideal person force our students to examine their own motives and goals with others and society? Does it present them with the kind of life they want, and are they willing to live with the consequences of having relationships that should not be serious—that is, demanding certain virtues so to reach final aims, and to live in a world disinvested of any ultimate concerns and explanations?

Finally, Rorty's "liberal ironists" have aims, but they reject any justification for them in terms of the natural structure of moral actions, and thus such ironists cannot prevent the reasonably vicious persons from claiming as much a place in the liberal society as the reasonably virtuous. However, Dante's *Inferno* poetically and imaginatively presents what happens to people (otherwise intelligent,

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do not intend any self-importance in this claim, my argument is in the vein of Elizabeth Anscombe's criticism of modern moral philosophy (because it lacks a philosophy of psychology, it cannot secure moral concepts on real human experience and thus cannot come up with an argument against harming innocent people (Anscombe 1958)) and Alasdair MacIntyre's similar criticism of modern moral philosophy (because modern moral philosophy severs moral concepts from the historical reality of the development of virtuous people shaped by final aims, it cannot keep from absolutizing its own individualist morality (MacIntyre 1966)).

[13] Aristotle's ethics has been the underpinning of this paper. Especially see *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 2 & 3, on the decisions and deliberations necessary to identify and perform a virtue (Aristotle 1999).

deliberate, and socially important) who contradict this structure of moral action. Learning from Dante's moral imagination can perhaps keep us from going to our own "inferno".

This presentation of the contrast between Dante's *Inferno* and Rorty's "liberal ironist" reminds us of the ancient truth taught by Sophocles in the conclusion to *Oedipus Rex*:

> "Behold him, Thebans: Oedipus, great and wise,
> Who solved the famous riddle. This is he
> Whom all people gazed upon with envious eyes,
> Who now is struggling in a stormy sea,
> Crushed by the billows of his bitter woes.
> Look to the end of mortal life. In vain
> We say a person is happy, till he goes
> Beyond life's final border, free from pain."

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Article

“And Lo, As Luke Sets Down for Us”: Dante’s Re-Imagining of the Emmaus Story in *Purgatorio* XXIX–XXXIII

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Abstract: This essay will suggest that Dante’s journey through the earthly paradise in the *Purgatorio* is a figural representation of the journey of Cleopas and the unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus in *Luke* 24. By making several references to the *Gospel of Luke*, Dante seems to be setting the stage for the reader to understand his own pilgrimage through the Garden of Eden as a retelling of the Emmaus story in the context of the Church Triumphant. Indeed, reading *Luke* 24 alongside Cantos XXIX–XXXI of the *Purgatorio* helps students to unpack the complex images of Dante’s experience in light of the themes present in the Emmaus story. For example, the concealment of Beatrice’s face and the gradual unveiling of her beauty mirrors Christ’s gradual revelation of his nature to Cleopas and the unnamed disciple. Cleopas and his companion also walk away from the promise of God revealed in Christ by leaving Jerusalem, just as Dante “took himself” from Beatrice and “set his steps upon an untrue way” (XXX 125, 130). In developing these and other parallels as well as elaborating on their significance for the latter cantos of the *Purgatorio*, this essay will attempt to establish a pedagogical approach to Books XXIX–XXX that draws on students’ recollections of the familiar Gospel text of Emmaus, which Dante clearly intends (among others) as a resource for appreciating his vision of an essential passage in Christian life.

Keywords: Dante; Beatrice; *Purgatorio*; *Gospel of Luke*; Emmaus; *figura*; Christ; Eric Auerbach; pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Students in a Great Books Colloquium often find the latter books of the *Purgatorio* to be difficult on a number of levels. This is expected as Dante’s experience in the earthly paradise is described in complex and layered imagery, which is meant to depict the path of his soul from its triumph over the will to the higher challenges of faith meeting understanding. However, beginning in Canto XXI, Dante the poet provides a window through which the reader can interpret the pilgrim’s journey in the third and final part of the *cantica*. The story of Emmaus is presented as a simile for the appearance of Statius to Dante and Virgil in Canto XXI. The poet writes:

> And lo, as Luke sets down for us that Christ,
> Just risen from the cave that was his sepulcher,
> Revealed himself to two He walked with on the road
> There appeared a shade, coming up behind us.[1] (XXI 7–9)

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[1] All citations from the *Purgatorio* are taken from the translation by Robert and Jean Hollander. See (Alighieri 2003).

This reference to Emmaus in *Luke* 24 is followed by two other references to his Gospel and his person in Canto XXIX. In lines 85–87, during the procession of the Church Triumphant, the elders sing a phrase from the Magnificat in *Luke* 1:28: "Blessed are you/ among the daughters of Adam/ and blessed is your loveliness forever!" (XXIX 85–87). In lines 136–38, Luke is the only one of the four evangelists to be highlighted in his guise as a physician and author of the *Acts of the Apostles* in this case.

In the following sections, I will present a figurative interpretation of *Purgatorio* XXIX–XXXI, suggesting that the pilgrim Dante's experience in the garden of Eden is meant to be read in light of Luke's description of Cleopas and the unnamed apostle encountering Jesus. Jesus himself was veiled in the guise of a stranger who is only gradually but nevertheless fully revealed in a stunning moment of recognition that is similar to that of the *figura Christi* of Beatrice. Indeed, reading *Luke* 24 alongside Cantos XXIX–XXXI of the *Purgatorio* can aid students in unpacking a number of the complex images of Dante's experience while simultaneously engaging them in a significant form of European medieval interpretation. In suggesting a figurative approach to Cantos XXIX–XXXI, I am following Eric Auerbach, who argues that Dante's "figural system" in the *Commedia* was firmly rooted in the medieval allegorical tradition. In Auerbach's view, the figural interpretation "combines two events, causally and chronologically remote from each other, by attributing to them a meaning common to both" (Auerbach 2014b, p. 116).

2. Beatrice as *Figura Christi*

The setting of both the appearance of Jesus and that of Beatrice are attended by a series of images that serve to map one story onto the other. Cleopas and the unnamed disciple who accompanies him on the road to Emmaus together form a *figura* of the figure of Dante the pilgrim who has "cast aside all hope of going forward" according to Beatrice in a similar way to the apostles (XXXI 26–27). Cleopas and his companion have left Jerusalem, disappointed and disillusioned, and have abandoned "the way" on the very day that the promise of Jesus' entire life was being fulfilled (the day of the resurrection). As a *figura Christi* from whom Dante has likewise strayed, Beatrice arrives on the scene following a grave loss as Dante had informed her that "Virgil had departed ... leaving us bereft" (XXX 49). In turning away from Jerusalem following the death and burial of Christ, the two disciples walk away from the promise of God revealed in Christ. They tell the stranger: "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:2 New Revised Standard Version Catholic edition). Dante likewise "took himself" from Beatrice and "set his steps upon an untrue way" (XXX 125, 130). In her chastisement of Dante, Beatrice even refers to her own burial, telling Dante "just how my buried flesh should have directed you to quite a different place" (XXXI 47–48).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the two texts is the veiling of the Christ figure. Jesus draws near to the two disciples and walks with them but he is a stranger to them as "their eyes were prevented from recognizing him" (Lk 24:16). If Beatrice is indeed a *figura Christi*, the poet's repeated use of the word veil in addition to the images of Dante's restricted sight and "the hidden force that came from her" (XXX 38) suggest that being veiled is an important aspect of the Christological aura that surrounds her. Dante describes his first glimpse of Beatrice as being similar to watching the obscure face of the sun rising in "tempering mist." She appears within a "cloud of blossoms," wearing "a veil of white" and Dante tells us, "I could not see her with my eyes" (XXX 25–37). In *Luke* 24, both disciples are prevented from seeing the true nature of Christ until they have been properly chided by the veiled Christ, who declares, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Lk 24:25–27).

In chastising Dante for failing to realize that his desire for her should have led him to Christ, Beatrice turns "the point of her words" (XXXI 2) on him just as Jesus rebuked Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. Finding him weeping after the departure of Virgil, Beatrice

remarks, "there is another sword to make you weep" (XXX 57). In alternating passages in *Purgatorio* XXX, she both accuses Dante of betraying his potential and interprets her earlier role in his life:

> He sank so low that every instrument
>
> For his salvation now fell short—
>
> Except to see souls in perdition.
>
> And so I visited the threshold of the dead
>
> And, weeping, offered up my prayers
>
> To the one who has conducted him thus far. (XXX 136–41)

Beatrice's pointed and lengthy chastisement of Dante provides a gloss to Christ's rebuke of Cleopas and his companion, who are called "slow of heart to believe." What, we may ask, is signified by the juxtaposition of slowness of heart with belief in Christ as the Son of God? Although Luke's text is brief, it does suggest that belief requires more than a trembling sense of awe in someone's presence, i.e., more than simply feeling, as Dante does upon first seeing the veiled Beatrice, "the overwhelming power of that ancient love" (XXX 39).

The slowness of heart of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is a *figura* of the torpidity of Dante the pilgrim and indeed all Christian pilgrims, who fail to understand that the recognition of their true good is an affair of the heart. True recognition (*epignosko*) of the person of Christ occurs in the context of the disciple's recollection of their love for Christ. "Were not our hearts burning within us when he was . . . opening the scriptures to us" (Lk 24:32), they recall and it is this burning of heart that leads them to offer hospitality to the stranger. As the veiled Christ walks "ahead as if he were going on" (Lk 24:28), the two apostles ask him to stay with them because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over. Given the fact that Jesus is depicted at the table far more in Luke's Gospel than any other part of the bible, (eight times, including the Last Supper), it makes sense that the disciples would recognize the stranger as the resurrected Christ in the very moment "he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them" (Lk 24:30). Luke writes, "Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him (*epignosan*)" (Lk 24:31).

3. The Horizon of *Epignosko*

Although the two texts clearly point to one another, they also point to something beyond. As Auerbach notes:

> In figural understanding, . . . meaning must at all times be sought vertically, from above and events are understood individually, not as part of an unbroken sequence, but as torn apart from one another and always waiting for a third thing that has been promised but has not yet come to pass. (Auerbach 2014a, p. 100)

The lengthy delay in the unveiling of Beatrice signifies both the slowness of heart of Dante and the promise inherent in Luke's notion of *epignosko* or deep and penetrating recognition of the person of Christ. In the *Purgatorio*, this authentic recognition occurs when the griffin, who symbolizes Christ in its two natures, shines forth in the eyes of Beatrice and is seen by Dante in a mirror. However, this unveiling is more than a recognition of Beatrice as the revelation of Christ as it simultaneously opens out onto a third plane, namely a further horizon. In gazing at the nature of God incarnate, Dante is both satiated and left yearning for more. The poet describes the moment in this manner:

> While my soul, filled with wonder and with joy
>
> Tasted the food that, satisfying in itself,
>
> Yet for itself creates a greater craving. (XXXI 127–29)

Focusing on a figurative interpretation, the pilgrim's craving suggests that even the revelation of Christ in Beatrice is a provisional event, namely a *figura* of the eternal reality that, while always already fulfilled perfectly in God, is a matter of hope and anticipation for us. The concealment of Beatrice's face and the gradual unveiling of her beauty points to Christ's gradual revelation of his nature to Cleopas and the unnamed disciple and vice versa.

The fact that Dante's recognition of Christ in Beatrice takes place within a procession of the Church Triumphant, which Hollander tells us "exists as an ideal out of time and can only be gathered once history is done" (XXXII, n.109–60, p. 734), is also significant. Such placement provides evidence that the two texts constitute what Auerbach would call "a historically real prophecy or *figura*, of a part of a divine reality that will occur in the future and that will at that point be perfected in all its immediacy" (Auerbach 2014a, p. 110). While the ideal of the Church Triumphant has already been fulfilled in God through God's providence, it exists beyond time and as an historical event, it is veiled and obscure and will remain so until we see Christ face to face. Dante underscores the timeless ideal of the Church Triumphant by noting its ascent into the Empyrean in *Purgatorio* XXXII after the first pageant (89–90). This divinely ordered pageant is juxtaposed with a second pageant, which amounts to an allegory of what we might term "the Church Devastated" in historical times. This corrupt pageant ends with a "disheveled harlot," namely the Church, "casting provocative glances this way and that" (XXXII 150) while being dragged away by a giant, Phillip the IV of France, whom Dante viewed as being responsible for moving the papacy from Rome to Avignon. In the final image of the *Purgatorio*, the penitent Dante is cleansed in the river of Lethe and his power to access good memories is restored in the waters of Eunoe. These events of the pilgrim's own journey are again placed within the context of a promised eternal reality as Dante states that he has been "made pure and prepared to rise up to the stars" (XXXIII 145), thereby reminding his readers of the divine order in which all souls and events inhabit the place assigned to them.

There is one final way in which the story of Emmaus prefigures the final canto of the *Purgatorio*. Toward the end of *Luke* 24, the narrator says of Jesus:

> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Lk 24:29)

Once again, *Luke* prefigures the *Purgatorio*. The message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins is embodied in the experience of Dante as there is no doubt of his repentance:

> The nettle of remorse so stung me then
>
> That whatever else had lured me most to loving
>
> Had now become for me more hateful. (XXXI 82–84)

The ritual of bathing in the river Lethe, which erases his memory of sin—or at least most of it as Beatrice has pierced him with the arrow of remorse—mimics the forgiveness of sins that Jesus preached, thereby returning Dante to a state of innocence. After this, Matilda immerses him in the river Eunoe in order to revive his power to recall good memories. In a similar manner to Jesus asking the disciples to proclaim forgiveness and the repentance of sins to which they have been witnesses, Beatrice, as a *figura Christi*, commissions Dante to mark her words: "set these words down for those/who live the life that is a race to death" (XXXIII 53–54).

Sensing that a petrified Dante is "confounded" by her words, Beatrice softens her command, telling Dante that if nothing else has been made clear, he has "seen the moral sense of the justice of God" (XXXIII 71):

I wish that, if not written, then sketched out

You carry what I've said inside you, just as

A pilgrim brings his staff back wreathed with pain. (XXXIII 76–78)

What does it mean to bear witness to Christ's message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins? The doubling that has marked the encounter between the two texts merges into divine mystery in the final words of both texts, opening into the promised but not yet eternal reality. Ultimately, Dante finds this in Beatrice's message as her "longed-for words/soar up so far beyond my sight/the more it strives the more it cannot reach them" (XXXIII 82–84). Once again, this suggests that Dante's experience has been mediated to the *Purgatorio* from within the horizon of *Luke* 24. Similar to Jesus in the final passages of *Luke*, Dante the poet withdraws before this final figuring of God's divine order and is revealed as the mysterious witness to God's mercy that has enfolded him throughout the *Commedia*. It is notable that he undertakes this withdrawal in his role as poet, writing, "since all the sheets/readied for this second canticle are full, /The curb of art lets me proceed no further" (XXXIII 139–41). However, as a pilgrim, he comes away remade, "as are new plants/ renewed with new-sprung leaves" (XXXIII 143–44). This promise of renewal also marks the end of Luke's Gospel as well as Jesus not only withdraws from the disciples but is "carried up into heaven" just as Dante will be carried up by his Christ figure, Beatrice.

4. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I have suggested in this present essay that Dante clearly intends *Luke* 24 as one resource (among many others) for appreciating his vision of an essential passage in Christian life. In developing the above parallels and elaborating on their significance for the latter cantos of the *Purgatorio*, this pedagogical approach to Books XXIX–XXXIII draws on individual students' recollection of the familiar Gospel text detailing the journey to Emmaus. In addition, it brings them into the Medieval European world of interpretation. This becomes a dance of figuring and prefiguring that gives meaning to the text of *Purgatorio* while simultaneously preserving that mystery of slowness of heart giving way to conversion, repentance and forgiveness, which forms the soul of the entire poem. In coming to appreciate how Dante incorporates a range of Gospel *figuras*, narrative patterns and eternally present yet historically receding theological horizons, students of the *Purgatorio* may just be encouraged to ask what Dante's narrative process—layered as it may be—could mean for their own recognition of Christ.

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Article

Educating Desire: Conversion and Ascent in Dante's *Purgatorio*

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Abstract: In Cantos 17 and 18 of the *Purgatorio*, Dante's Virgil lays out a theory of sin, freedom, and moral motivation based on a philosophical anthropology of loving-desire. As the commentary tradition has long recognized, because Dante placed Virgil's discourse on love at the heart of the *Commedia*, the poet invites his readers to use love as a hermeneutic key to the text as a whole. When we contextualize Virgil's discourse within the broader intention of the poem—to move its readers from disordered love to an ordered love of ultimate things—then we find in these central cantos not just a key to the structure and movement of the poem, but also a key to understanding Dante's pedagogical aim. With his *Commedia*, Dante invites us to perform the interior transformation which the poem dramatizes in verse and symbol. He does so by awakening in his readers not only a desire for the beauty of his poetic creation, but also a desire for the beauty of the love described therein. In this way, the poem presents a pedagogy of love, in which the reader participates in the very experience of desire and delight enacted in the text. In this article, I offer an analysis of Virgil's discourse on love in the *Purgatorio*, arguing for an explicit and necessary connection between loving-desire and true education. I demonstrate that what informs Dante's pedagogy of love is the notion of love as ascent, a notion we find articulated especially in the Christian Platonism of Augustine. Finally, I conclude by offering a number of figures, passages, and themes from across the *Commedia* that provide fruitful material for teachers engaged in the task of educating desire.

Keywords: Dante; *Purgatorio*; love; education; Virgil; Augustine; *Confessions*

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1. Introduction: Love and Learning

I wish to offer some reflections on the theme of "educating desire," and I should begin by noting the double meaning that I intend in that phrase. We might characterize a truly liberal education as one that aims at two goods: it helps us discover anew the perennial questions about human existence, guiding us as we struggle to answer these questions for ourselves; and it helps us become critical and independent thinkers, enabling us to distinguish truth from appearance. A liberal education, then, is liberal (from the Latin *liber*, "free") because it *frees*: it provides us with a new way of looking at and understanding the world; it shakes up the routine abstractions of common sense and re-awakens astonishment before the profound and perplexing givenness of things. But a liberal education is also an education that *is freed*: it is not for anything else, it has no utility, it is not useful. That is to say, it is useless for anything else, but it is not useless in itself. It has value precisely in and for itself, and not for the sake of some further end.

In this way, a liberal education is like love. For love is *freeing*: love, especially love as *attention* (an idea to which I will return), is an openness to the world as it is and not as we would like to pretend it is. And love is also *freed*: it makes no sense to treat love as a means to something else; as every true lover knows, to instrumentalize love is to kill it. Philosophy is the love of wisdom; and one does not love wisdom for the sake of some further end, but in and for itself.

In saying all this, I am merely stating my agreement with the longer philosophical tradition—especially as it has been articulated by Plato, Augustine, and, as I hope to show, by Dante—that the measure of a true education is *metánoia*, i.e., the radical conversion of mind and life that each of us must achieve in a personal and decisive way. If this is so, then the primary task for the teacher is not so much to impart information as it is to awaken desire for the good in her students, providing thereby the conditions for the possibility of individual transformation. Of course, such a wedding of *love* to *learning*, of *desire* to *education*, can take many forms; in my own teaching, for instance, I have labored to present the "great books" as beautiful in their own right, as beckoning engagement through their own intrinsic worth. In this way, I think I share a deep conviction with Plato, Augustine, and Dante (among others in the tradition) that rhetorical finesse is needed to arouse desire for what is true, good, and beautiful in my students. And it is in this spirit that I look to these authors, and to Dante in particular, to teach me how to better occasion conversion to the higher things through love.

Plato's *Symposium*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Commedia*: taken together, these texts form a sort of masterclass on how we can educate our desires, and also (and perhaps more crucially) how desire can educate us. In the following essay, I would like to consider what it would mean to teach Dante's *Commedia* for the sake of conversion or *metánoia*. In doing so, it will become clear that I read Dante as an inheritor of the Platonic-Augustinian tradition of educating in and through love (although I will focus almost exclusively on what Dante's text has to offer on its own terms).[1] And my primary concern will be to examine what is at stake when we teach the second canticle of Dante's poem, the *Purgatorio*, both for how we conceive of the end or goal of our teaching, and for how we might imagine anew the practice of our teaching in light of Dante's own intrinsic pedagogical methods and practice.

Why the *Purgatorio*? As first-time readers discover with surprise in the closing cantos of Dante's *Inferno*, Hell is defined primarily by stasis. Where there is motion in Hell, it is only the tormented self-circling of a will that cannot love anything beyond itself. Hell is the place that Dante scholar Peter Hawkins has memorably described as "repetition-compulsion, an endless replay of the sinner's 'song of myself.'"[2] It is certainly true, as Dante saw, that conversion *requires* an underworld itinerary: we cannot overcome the drive to get what we mistakenly think will bring us happiness through intellectual understanding or sheer will-power alone. But to journey through Hell as Dante would have us do, one must experience one's sin and failure without getting trapped in it; and this means one must face all the darkness in oneself without becoming entombed by fear, despair, or gawking fascination. This is a heavy task for anyone, let alone for the average undergraduate.

By contrast, Purgatory is, in Hawkins' words, "dynamic, dedicated to change and transformation. It concerns the rebirth of a self free at last to be interested in other souls and other things."[3] It is fruitful to dwell in *Purgatorio* with students because it is in Purgatory that we now reside. I mean this: in Hell there is no time, there is only infinite stasis; in Paradise there is no time, but rather the dynamic over-abundance of eternity; only in Purgatory is there time, because only here is there the possibility of

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1 For a recent manuscript-length study of the Augustine's "constant presence" in Dante's thought, see (Marchesi 2011). On the notion of love and the respective role it plays in the thought of Augustine and of Dante, see Phillip Cary, "The Weight of Love: Augustinian Metaphors of Movement in Dante's Souls" in (Cary 2006). In a similar vein, but with a more critical interpretation, Martha Nussbaum writes of the transformation of Platonic metaphors of ascent in "Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love" in (Nussbaum 1999). I will have occasion to return to Nussbaum below. The presence of Augustine's thought in Dante's poem is a complex one, and I can hardly do justice to it in the present essay. Nor am I advancing the claim that Dante is *only* structuring his poem according to a Platonic-Augustinian anthropology of desire. Dante's philosophical inheritance is highly eclectic, and the affirmation of strong Augustinian elements is not intended as a denial of other philosophical influences. We could list, e.g., Aristotle, Cicero, and Boethius, not to mention Dante's scholastic contemporaries, such as Bonaventure and, especially, Thomas. For a recent study of the philosophical structure of the *Commedia*, see (Moevs 2005).

2 (Hawkins 2006, p. 51).

3 (Hawkins 2006, p. 51).

change and growth. If we read the *Commedia* to learn how to love better here and now, in this world, it is the *Purgatorio* that will provide the blueprint.[4]

2. Virgil's Discourse on Love

Let us turn to the middle canticle of Dante's great poem. Here is the scene: we find ourselves midway up the slope of Mount Purgatory. "Already," the poet tells us, "the sun's last rays before the night/were slanting so high above us/that stars were showing here and there" (*Purgatorio* 17.70–72).[5] Caught in that chiaroscuro twilight signaling the descent of darkness and so, according to the spiritual law of this mountain, the halting of upward progress, Dante the pilgrim is surprised to find that his strength wanes more than usual. Summiting the stairs, he stops to puzzle over his lethargy. Virgil, his guide, is ready as ever with an explanation: "A love of good that falls short/of its duty is here restored, here in this place. /Here the slackened oar is pulled with greater force./That you may understand more clearly,/pay close attention. Then you shall pluck/some good fruit from our stay" (*Purgatorio* 17.85–90). Virgil then launches into 103 lines of verse that unfold a theory of moral motivation, will, and defect in a discourse on the nature of love:[6]

> Neither Creator nor His creature, my dear son,
> was ever without love, whether natural
> or of the mind,' he began, 'and this you know.
>
> The natural is always without error,
> but the other may err in its chosen goal
> or through excessive or deficient vigor.
>
> While it is directed to the primal good,
> knowing moderation in its lesser goals,
> it cannot be the cause of wrongful pleasure.
>
> But when it bends to evil, or pursues the good
> with more or less concern than needed,
> then the creature works against his Maker.
>
> From this you surely understand that love
> must be the seed in you of every virtue
> and of every deed that merits punishment. (*Purgatorio* 17.91–105)

This is how Dante's guide begins his discourse, and it is, we must say, quite a remarkable beginning. In the span of that first, single tercet, Virgil gives us the central animating idea of the entire *Commedia*: "Neither Creator nor His creature . . . /was ever without love, whether natural/or of the mind." As Dante scholar and theologian Vittorio Montemaggi remarks in the opening chapter of his *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology*:

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4 "Because of the ongoing popularity of the Inferno at the expense of the other two canticles, most people identify the poet and his religion with the horrors of Hell. It is as if a vision of damnation were Dante's great contribution to the Christian imagination—as if he were, in fact, Nietzsche's savage caricature of him as a 'hyena who writes poetry in the tombs' [Twilight of the Idols, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," I]. The truth is quite the contrary, if one takes in the whole of the *Commedia*. For what Dante has given the tradition is a notion that joy is at the heart of reality, even at the heart of God" (Hawkins 2006, p. 123).

5 (Alighieri 2004, p. 373). All citations of the *Commedia* in the present essay are taken from the Hollander and Hollander translation.

6 In his commentary on *Purgatorio* 17.91–139, Hollander calls attention to the importance of this discourse, which is remarkable both for its location ("the poem is now entering its second half and this *cantica* is arriving at its midpoint") and for its unbroken length ("It misses only by a little being the longest speech we have heard spoken in the poem since Ugolino's in *Inferno* XXXIII.4–75"). I shall return to the way in which Dante emphasizes Virgil's discourse by means of its place within the *Commedia* as a whole. See Hollander's notes at (Alighieri 2004, p. 383, n.82–87, n.92–139).

> God is love: there can be little doubt that this realization lies at the heart of Dante's *Commedia*. It is from divine love—"l'amor divino"—that creation issues . . . and it is in and as that love that Dante's journey famously ends: [with] "l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele" [the love that moves the sun and other stars] (*Paradiso* 33.143–145).[7]

While the entire poem, as Montemaggi rightly observes, can be read as unfolding the idea that God is love, the drama of that idea lies in the linking of divine and human love, a link that Virgil makes explicit in the opening verse: "Neither Creator nor his creature ... was ever without love." And Montemaggi knows this, because he goes on to point out that the drama of divine love, as it unfolds in the *Commedia*, is the drama of the human community itself which chooses to reject, strives to understand, and finally accomplishes participation in the love that made it.[8]

In what follows, I want to explore this human side of love. In particular, I want to ask what difference it makes for us if we accept Virgil's claim that human beings are essentially and inescapably lovers. For this is Virgil's startling assertion in these verses: love, he says, is the seed of every virtue and of every deed that merits punishment. What can this mean for how we ought to live our lives? Moreover, if I am necessarily a lover, and it turns out I can only love what is in some measure good, then to what degree am I morally responsible for my actions? Finally, for those of us who dare to step into the role of Virgil, what difference does such an anthropology of desire make for the way we teach our students, especially if we consider our vocation to be the same as Virgil's, i.e., if our aim is not only to impart information, but also to accompany our students on their difficult journey of intellectual and moral conversion?

It will be useful at this point to summarize what I take Virgil to be saying to Dante (and to us) in his discourse on love. The discourse weaves together themes from Greek philosophy (eudaemonism, virtue theory), Late Antique Patristic theology (especially Augustine's theory of an "order of love"), and Scholastic accounts of nature and grace, and I will not be able to do justice to all of these elements.[9] But here is the basic idea: all spiritual beings, whether human or divine, possess a love of the good by nature; creatures, however, are capable of misusing this love, and this in three ways. We might (1) love truly good things, but love them excessively; or we might (2) love good things, but love them deficiently; or, finally, we might (3) love the harm of another, perversely imagining that the diminishment of my neighbor somehow increases my own good. In every case, our love *intends* something good. But in each case, we err morally and intellectually, directing our desire toward a good that fails to make us happy: often by loving too much; sometimes by loving too little; and, in the more pernicious cases, by loving a counterfeit which is but a twisted image of the good. Virgil urges Dante to allow the beauty of more perfect goods to draw his soul's natural love upward, "as fire, born to rise,/moves upward in its essence" (*Purgatorio* 18.28–29). The penitents on the various terraces of Mount Purgatory purify their love by means of humble acts meant to redirect their desire in just this way. Their goal is the attainment of a perfect form of freedom in which the heart will set itself on that which is truly good and fulfilling. Loving-desire will thereafter serve as an infallible guide for right action.

So that is the big picture. Now, it is noteworthy that Virgil's discourse runs from Canto 17 to Canto 18 of the *Purgatorio*; in other words, it is located precisely at the midpoint of the second canticle, and this means that it is at the very heart of the *Commedia* as a whole. Because Dante calls our attention to

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7 (Montemaggi 2016, p. 31).

8 "And so as we move from the 'cose belle' [lovely things] of *Inferno* 1.40 to union with the love that gives them being in *Paradiso* 33, we are taken through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and invited to reflect on human community as it fails, learns, and succeeds to live in full participation of the love that grounds (its) existence" (Montemaggi 2016, p. 31).

9 For a detailed account of the theory behind Virgil's discourse on love, see especially the commentary by Singleton at *Purgatorio* 17.91–139. There, he refers us both to Dante's earlier account of natural love (at *Convivio* III.iii.2–5), as well as to a number of Thomistic texts that provide the form of Virgil's argument here. See (Singleton 1973, pp. 390–409). While the structure of the discourse is clearly Thomistic, the link between desire, sin, and freedom has deeper roots in the thought of Augustine. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the scholastic distinctions presented here—between natural and elective love, for instance, or between excessive and deficient love—result from Thomas' characteristic and daring synthesis of Aristotelian and Platonic-Augustinian concepts.

this discourse by placing it at the heart of his *Commedia*, he invites his readers to use it as a hermeneutic key to the text as a whole.[10]

In fact, Dante performs elaborate artistic feats in these central cantos to really drive the point home. For instance: the exact midpoint of the poem is located between verses 118 and 119 of *Purgatorio* 17. Now the previous canto, Canto 16, occupied the Terrace of Wrath, in which penitents suffered the blinding darkness of an acrid cloud of smoke: "Gloom of hell or of a night deprived/of all the stars, beneath a barren sky/which everywhere was overcast with clouds,/had never put so dark a veil across my eyes/or been so harsh and stinging to my sight/as was the smoke that covered us/so that I could not keep my eyelids open" (*Purgatorio* 16.1–8). Through this darkness, a light glimmers as we transition into the middle canto of the *Commedia*, and Dante evokes the way that fog in the mountains begins to burn off as the sun rises: "Remember, reader, if ever in the mountains/you were trapped in fog and could not see/except as moles do, through their eyelids,/how, when the strands of mist, humid and dense,/began dispersing, the sun's disk/dimly glimmered through." (*Purgatorio* 17.1–6). Dante then begins to experience visions of the wrathful exemplars, completing what has come to characterize the purgatorial circuit on each terrace (progressing from exemplars of virtue, through an encounter with suffering penitents, and ending with exemplars of sin). Suddenly, a light strikes his face ("a light,/far brighter than the light we know"), breaking up his mental images. The light speaks, "Here is your ascent," and Dante experiences a profound desire: "It raised in me the overwhelming wish—/a wish that cannot rest short of its goal—/to behold the one who spoke." And so he turns and moves toward the Angel guarding the passage to the next terrace, a Divine Being Dante encounters as an overpowering beauty: "But as before the sun, which weighs upon our eyes,/veiling its form in an excess of light,/so, before him, my power of sight fell short" (*Purgatorio* 17.44–54). Notice: gloom of hell; fog dispersing on a mountain; excess of divine light enkindling the flame of desire. As if to underline that we have arrived at the center of the poem, and to prepare us for the discourse that follows, Dante gives us a synecdoche of the *Commedia* as a whole: movement from deepest darkness (*Inferno*) into twilight (*Purgatorio*), and then on to unbearable brightness (*Paradiso*).

And there is more. As Dante's readers learn early on, the geography of the *Commedia* is not insignificant; it is in fact laden with spiritual meaning—so much so that in the world of the *Divine Comedy*, we might say that geography *is* theology. Location is intensely personal and moral. Space is defined according to who is in it, and conversely each person is defined by where she or he is in Dante's world. Think, for instance, of how gravity functions, and of what this says about the locales in which we find various sinners, penitents, and saints. There is a gravity of sin, a gravity *to* sin: in the *Inferno*, the closer one moves to the center of the earth, and therefore the farther one moves from the heavenly empyrean, the more intense the gravity of sin becomes; and so it is not surprising that the upper and outer-most circles are given over to sins of weakness, while the lower and inner-most circles

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[10] Singleton has called our attention to Dante's deliberate and elaborate numerical structuring of *terzone* around the center of the *Commedia*. He notes in particular that Dante links Virgil's discourse on love to the crucial Augustinian and Thomistic notion of *libero arbitrio*, "free choice," by placing this term, in Latin, precisely 25 tercets in either direction from the central tercet of Canto 17. So, at *Purgatorio* 16.70–72, exactly 25 tercets *before* the central tercet of the poem, we find the following verses spoken by Marco Lombard: "If that were so, free choice [*libero arbitrio*] would be denied you,/and there would be no justice when one feels/joy for doing good or misery for evil." Again, at *Purgatorio* 18.73–75, 25 tercets after the middle of the poem, we find another reference to *libero arbitrio*, here in a statement by Virgil linking this crucial notion with Beatrice herself: "That noble power is called free will [*libero arbitrio*] by Beatrice,/and so make sure that you remember this/if she should ever speak of it to you." Singleton finds it significant that the sum of the numerals of these 25 spacing tercets (2 + 5) is 7, a number that seems to hold special significance for Dante. We find 7 again as the sum of the "triform" pattern (3 [pride, envy, wrath] – 1 [sloth] – 3 [avarice, gluttony, lust]) which makes up the division of terraces according to love in Virgil's discourse. As Singleton writes: "If the poet has so deliberately framed these 7 cantos at the center in this way, we should not fail (this poet being Dante) to inquire if they may not hold in themselves perhaps a 'center' of the action and argument of the poem in some sense. . . . [W]hat is thus framed amounts to nothing less than the central pivot of the whole poem in terms of the action, in terms, that is, of what happens to the wayfarer Dante as he 'passes through the center' (Singleton 1965, pp. 6–7). For a more recent and extended discussion of these issues, see (Moevs 2017).

are reserved for sins of malice.[11] On Mount Purgatory, there is a crucial reversal of Hell's geography: here, sins being purged on the lower terraces are the most grave; as one ascends, the hellish weight of malice grows lighter, giving way terrace by terrace to mere weakness.

But there is another force at work on the mountain. For on this slope, where light is breaking through the fog of sin, there is not only sin pulling penitents downward, but also the "weight" of love, the upward pull of desire, counteracting the gravity of sin.[12] As Dante passes through each threshold and is touched by the guarding angel, he feels himself growing lighter as the relevant sign of the *peccatum* (sin) is cleansed from his forehead. For fallen human beings, no doubt, sliding down into Hell is easy, and climbing back out exhausting; nevertheless, for the repentant sinner, there is the grace of a purifying love, a force stronger than the gravity of sin.[13]

Now as it turns out, Virgil's discourse on love will provide us with a map of the theo-geography of Purgatory. Recall the three ways that love might go astray: to love the good excessively; to love the good deficiently; or to love a perverted form of the good. Take this latter love. Virgil describes the forms that such disordered love might take. First, "There is the one, hoping to excel by bringing down/his neighbor, who, for that cause alone, longs/that from his greatness his neighbor be brought low" (*Purgatorio* 17.115–117). This is Pride, the first terrace. Then "There is the one who fears the loss of power, favor,/honor, fame—should he be bettered by another./This so aggrieves him that he wants to see him fall" (*Purgatorio* 17.118–120). This is Envy, the second terrace. And finally, "there is the one who thinks himself offended/and hungers after vengeance,/and he must then contrive another's harm" (*Purgatorio* 17.121–123). This is Wrath, the third terrace. These three sins—which take the form of loving a mere simulacrum of the good—are lower down, closer to Hell, because they comprise, so to speak, a more twisted and misdirected use of natural desire. Unlike deficient love or excessive love, both of which pursue a real good but in the wrong manner, here, love misses its object almost completely, aiming not at what is good for the self, but at the counterfeit good that takes the form of causing another to suffer.

Compared with these first three lower terraces, Dante's current terrace (Sloth), and those three terraces to follow (Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust, respectively) are motivated by a fundamentally different orientation to the good.[14] The sin of Sloth takes the form of a deficient love, one that knows what is good, but does not pursue it with the striving desire of a lover who longs for his beloved. Above this place of deficient love are the terraces of excessive love, where the good that is loved is a true good, i.e., something rightly ordered for our use and enjoyment (material objects, sustenance, the pleasure and union of sex); here, the problem is that when such a good is loved excessively, it "fails to make

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[11] Cf. *Inferno* 11, which is given over to a discourse by Virgil explaining the geographical division of Hell according to sins of incontinence, malice, and fraud. That Virgil's discourse there parallels the exposition we find in *Purgatorio* 17, see the note Singleton provides for *Purgatorio* 17.90 (Singleton 1973, p. 390). We should observe, following the near universal consensus of the commentary tradition, that the "theo-geography" of Hell relies upon a distinction made by Aristotle in Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cf. Hollander's commentary at (Alighieri 2000, pp. 214–15, n.77–90). For the contrasting geographical organization of the seven deadly sins on Mount Purgatory, see (Wenzel 1965). It is significant that Dante represents sin and its purgation as structurally located and organized on the mountain according to love. In Hell, the division emphasizes instead weakness of will (incontinence) or hardening of will (malice).

[12] We learn of the countervailing force of love at work on the slope of Mount Purgatory from some elliptical remarks made by Virgil at *Purgatorio* 4.88–96: "This mountain is so fashioned/that the climb is harder at the outset/and, as one ascends, becomes less toilsome./When climbing uphill will seem pleasing—/as easy as the passage of a boat/that lets the current float it down the stream—/at that point will this trail be done./There look to rest your weariness./This I know for truth. I say no more."

[13] Recall the words of warning spoken to Aeneas by the Sibyl just before they venture into Hades: "Easy—/the way that leads into Avernus: day/and night the door of darkest Dis is open./But to recall your steps, to rise again/into the upper air: that is the labor;/that is the task" (Virgil 2004, pp. 6.175–6.180). Like Virgil before him, Dante agrees that the gate to Hell is always open and easy to pass through; and like Virgil he agrees that the great labor for the pilgrim is to rise again, ascending into the upper air. For the Christian pilgrim, however, there is a necessary (and freely offered) grace to assists in this difficult task.

[14] Hollander makes the point this way: "Just as the poem is now entering its second half and this *cantica* is arriving at its midpoint, so the experience of repentance of the seven capital vices has come to its central moment with Sloth. . . . [T]here is a gulf separating the vices below, all of which begin in the love of what is wrongful, from the rest, all of which result from insufficient or improper desire to attain the good" (Alighieri 2004, p. 383, n.82–87).

men happy,/for it is not the essence or true source,/the root of happiness or its proper fruit" (*Purgatorio* 17.133–135).

At this point in the Discourse, we, like Dante, might need a word or two of further explanation. When I insist to my students that Dante really does believe that all the sin and evil in the world stems, ultimately, from love, they tend to balk. Objections usually come in two forms. The first (and loudest) objection comes from the romantics, the idealists, and the relativists: "How can I help what I love?" they say. Or (a personal favorite): "If you really love someone or something, how can it be wrong?" The second objection comes from the reasonable, fastidious rule-followers: "I thought being good was about making choices, acting rightly. What does desire have to do with it?" And: "The kind of love Dante is talking about doesn't seem to be very practical, or to have anything to do with being a good person." Virgil seems to anticipate these objections, because at the opening of Canto 18, he broadens his explanation of love into a full-blown theory of moral motivation and action.

> The mind, disposed to love at its creation,
> is readily moved toward anything that pleases
> as soon as by that pleasure it is roused to act.
>
> From real forms your perception draws
> an image it unfolds within you
> so that the mind considers it,
>
> and if the mind, so turned, inclines to it,
> that inclination is a natural love,
> which beauty binds in you at once.
>
> Then, as fire, born to rise,
> moves upward in its essence,
> to where its matter lives the longest,
>
> just so the mind, thus seized, achieves desire,
> a movement of the spirit never resting
> as long as it enjoys the thing it loves.
>
> Now you see how hidden is the truth
> from those who hold that every love
> is in itself deserving praise,
>
> perhaps because such love seems always good.
> But every seal is not a good one,
> even if imprinted in good wax. (*Purgatorio* 18.19–39)

Contained in this exposition is a response to the relativist and the moralist alike. For what Virgil is describing here is the classical ethical system of eudaemonism. When Dante's Virgil speaks of a natural love that desires what is good, we should no doubt have in mind the Aristotelian–Thomistic ethical world, so foreign to our modern sensibilities, which sees the human being as naturally oriented toward happiness. Josef Pieper describes the philosophy that underwrites Virgil's discourse as follows:

> The functioning of [love] is exactly of this kind . . . : a desire that cannot be diverted or invalidated and that naturally dominates and permeates all our emotions and all our conscious decisions, above all our loving concern for the world and for other human beings. [As Thomas says]: "Man desires happiness naturally and by necessity." "To desire to be happy is not a matter of free choice." Happiness can virtually be defined as the epitome of all

those things that "the will is incapable of not willing" [*Summa Theologiae* I, 94, 1; I, 19, 10; I, II, 10, 2].[15]

As I tell my students, if what it means to be human is to be fundamentally oriented toward happiness, then what we need is to be *more* self-concerned, not less; only we need to be concerned with obtaining for ourselves the right things, i.e., those things that will truly lead to our happiness. To love false goods, to love too little, or to love good but finite things too much: each makes the mistake, both intellectual and volitional, of forfeiting the very thing we want most, namely our true happiness.

Now recall a claim I made above: by placing the discourse on love at the heart of the *Commedia*, Dante invites his readers to use it as a hermeneutic key to the text as a whole. I now want to expand this claim, and in doing so, I will (at last) state my thesis. As teachers, we find in Virgil's Discourse on Love not just a key to the structure and movement of the poem, but also a key to understanding Dante's pedagogical aim. Intending to move its readers from disordered love to an ordered love of ultimate things, the *Commedia* invites us to perform the interior transformation the poem dramatizes in verse and symbol.[16] The beauty of poetic image, the gradual conversion of its characters' affective and volitional faculties, the progress from ignorance (*Inferno*) through awareness (*Purgatorio*) to intellectual contemplation (*Paradiso*)—these dimensions of the *Commedia* function to effect in the student a love for ultimate things. In short, Dante intends to awaken in his readers not only a desire for the beauty of his poetic creation, but also a desire for the beauty of the love described therein. In this way, the poem *seduces* the reader for the sake of an intellectual-ethical-religious conversion regarding the meaning of love—a conversion occasioned by the very experience of love enacted in our encounter with the text.[17]

To unpack this connection between loving-desire and transformative conversion, I turn now to a consideration of the philosophical anthropology that lies behind Dante's pedagogy of love: and this means taking up the notion of love as ascent which we find articulated especially in the thought of St. Augustine. Once I have explored the role of love in the Christian Platonism of Augustine, I will return to the *Commedia*, offering a few examples of figures, passages, and themes that provide fruitful material for the task of educating desire.

3. Augustine on the Weight of Love

Begin by recalling the most celebrated line in Augustine's corpus: "You rouse us so that we delight in praising you, for you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[18] Notice that this invocation of the human heart, moved by self-surpassing desire, finding rest only when it delights in the highest Good, is a fundamental departure from the characteristically modern description of the human person as radically self-determining.[19] The restless heart is not the autonomous will: what the heart wants is not *choices*, but rather unity with the beloved. The "rest"

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15 (Pieper 1997, p. 234).

16 See (Montemaggi 2016, p. 32): "Dante wrote the *Commedia* to help save us. Whether or not we agree with his particular vision, we cannot read his text accurately ... if we adopt interpretive practices that do not allow for the questioning open-endedness of Dante's challenging invitation to his readers to undertake the journey toward divinity of which his poem speaks."

17 Montemaggi puts the matter succinctly as follows: "There can be little doubt that the journey on which the *Commedia* takes us is one its author hopes will be transformative for us. Dante would not have seen his poems truthfulness to reside simply in what it speaks of but also, and primarily, in its contribution to the animation of love in us: the conscious realization of divinity within individual human beings and within humanity as a whole" (Montemaggi 2016, p. 33).

18 *Tu excitas ut laudare te delectet, quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*. Translation my own. For a sense of the rich depth of meaning this sentence contains, compare the variant translations of Henry Chadwick and Maria Boulding: "You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (Augustine 2008, p. 3); "You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and draw us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you" (Augustine 1998, p. 3). *Excitare* has the sense both of setting in motion and of summoning or calling forth. Being made *ad Deum* indicates at once that man has his end or purpose in God ("you have made us for yourself") and is dynamically in motion toward him ("you draw us to yourself"). In the quotations of the *Confessions* that follow I will rely on the translation provided by Chadwick (Augustine 2008).

19 On self-determination or autonomy as the supreme modern value, see (Desmond 1998). For more on the historical development of the modern notion of the human person (and Augustine's ambiguous role in shaping the notion of "self"), see (Taylor 1992, pp. 127–42).

Augustine speaks of is not freedom of choice, but rather an encounter with a good that is radically other, a good that delights just insofar as it lies beyond our anticipation or mastery. So the beginning of the *Confessions* reminds us that we are moved by a power that is "ours," but that is nevertheless not self-determined: when I love, it is certainly I who wills to love; but when I interrogate my experience of loving-desire, love appears in the first place not as a motion I initiate or control, but rather as something I undergo, even suffer.

In Book 13, the final book of the *Confessions*, Augustine says that by love we are moved toward what delights us, much as the stone is moved by its weight toward its natural place. Augustine goes on to clarify what he means by "weight," so as to better employ it as a metaphor for human love. The central feature of weight here seems to be its *intentionality,* its purposive movement toward a goal: what it means for a natural body to move "by its weight" is for it to move "towards its proper place."[20] While a stone does indeed move downwards by its weight, we could just as well say, in the view of the ancients, that fire tends to move upwards by *its* weight. Water poured on oil sinks, even as the oil rises: the movement by which each strives to find its place, indeed the very striving itself, Augustine identifies simply and directly with the term 'weight.' Weight in the *Confessions*, therefore, is a master metaphor for the dynamism of a body seeking out balance, order, equilibrium. Weight is what pulls everything toward its proper place. So long as things are still striving toward their respective goals—the stone toward the ground, the flame toward the heavens—they can be said to be restless. But as each thing finds its ordained place, it ceases its striving; in the achievement of its goal, it finds rest: "Things which are not in their intended position are restless. Once they are in their ordered position, they are at rest."[21]

Now for the Augustine of the *Confessions*, as for Dante's Virgil, the starting point for understanding the self is to recognize that human beings are essentially *lovers*, moved by the delight that we experience in our encounter with a good. Insofar as we are still striving for our ultimate good, we are restless; but as we ascend in praise, confessing both our iniquity and the goodness of our created contingency, we strive to find our place—our rest—in the transcendent source of our being. The motion of the soul, then, according to Augustine in the *Confessions*, is not simply self-determining will, but *love*; and *love* is *weight*: "My love is my weight," he writes. "Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me."[22]

To put this in terms of a moral psychology: freedom, taken as self-determination, seems to involve a reduction of all that appears to move me without my consent or control (this is basically a Stoic conception of freedom). Love, by contrast—especially love in its desiring form—is ecstatic, a response to the good that exceeds my own self-determination (this is basically Platonic). But if what love desires is rest in the binding unity of the self with what I love, then—in a certain sense—the more I love, the *less* I am free: if what I mean by freedom is the unrestricted possibility of determining myself. For there is a paradoxical character to loving-desire: it is not simply striving borne out of lack; it is also a responsiveness to the good that exceeds the self. In the language of the *Confessions*, desire grants a new life that is not grasped but is endowed.[23] This is a ratification of a Platonic idea: loving-desire is a lack, but it is an ambiguous lack, not simply acquisitive striving, but rather a seeking that is already intimate communication with the good that it desires, a good that is secretly at work in drawing us to itself.

It is important to note that when Augustine speaks of love, he does not have in mind an affective or emotional quality opposed to a rational or intellectual faculty. In fact, for Augustine, we would do better to think of love as a fully integrated orientation of the entire human person, one which has both affective and noetic dimensions.[24] For this reason, I sometimes describe Augustine's account

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[20] *conf.*, 13.8.9. See also *civ. Dei*, 11.28.
[21] *conf.*, 13.10. See (Williams 1994), on the importance of *pondus* for Augustine's integration of physics into his theology of creation.
[22] *Pondus meum amor meus; eo feror, quocumque feror*. *conf.* 13.9.10.
[23] Cf. *conf.* 9.2.3, and 13.9.10.
[24] At *Purgatorio* 24.49–54, Dante recalls a sonnet he composed as a younger man, one that is found in the *Vita Nuova* and that begins with a line addressing "*Donne ch'avete intelleto d'amore*" (Ladies that have intelligence of love). He goes on to specify

of the moral life as an effort to overcome disordered love through the cultivation of *love as attention*. The moral life, on this telling, is concerned above all with achieving freedom as liberation from delusion, especially from self-delusion. What Augustine offers us, then, is an account of freedom that we can describe *negatively* as "being freed" from habitual illusion, and *positively* as the freedom of "original participation in the good."[25]

For Augustine, love is not only desire, it is also the coupling or binding of the self to the object that is loved. This binding takes the phenomenological form of delight or enjoyment, which is the self's active appropriation of the determining power of the good. That is to say, the experience of delight is a kind of necessity—Augustine will say that "we necessarily act according to that which most delights us"—but it is a "free necessity" insofar as what we love determines us not through coercion but rather through the intrinsic consent of our will.[26] (Recall Dante's Virgil: "The mind, disposed to love at its creation,/is readily moved toward anything that pleases/as soon as by that pleasure it is roused to act" [*Purgatorio* 18.19–21].) Here, then, is the punch-line: if the will always acts under some representation of the good—and if the good *qua* good necessarily (but not coercively) binds us through delight—then our choice is not between self-determination or extrinsic determination, but rather between whether we bind ourselves to something that enslaves or to something that liberates.[27] True freedom, as Augustine says in the *De vera religione*, consists in the power to abide in the good.[28]

In this way, Augustine develops a line of thinking that Dante will take up in Virgil's discourse: love is a weaving together of activity and receptivity; it is a response which "lets the good be," so to speak, while also actively participating in a "yes" to this good. This makes each genuine choice a co-act, where both the will and the object willed are mutual (but asymmetrical) agencies that together bring about a free moral choice. The closest and best analogue we have is that of education, in which both the teacher and the student must co-operate in order to bring about learning.[29] And the analogy is apt for our wider discussion, too, since the student's role in education is that of attentive receptivity, which is decidedly not the same as passivity, but is rather the inward reception and appropriation of what is outwardly given.

Now, if we think through what it means to say that freedom is a co-actual participation in the good by means of loving attention, then we arrive at a somewhat startling implication. In his *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine makes a famous distinction between the goods of use and goods of enjoyment.[30] The former are things that are good for the sake of something else; the latter are things that are good

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that his poetic creation depends upon the linking of love with intellect, describing himself as one who writes down what it is that love dictates to him internally. As Nussbaum remarks, "It is clearly Dante's view that all forms of love involve cognitive representation" (Nussbaum 1999, p. 89, n.50). See also (Williams 2005): "It must however be stressed that this image of Beatrice is 'of so noble a virtue' that it does not allow Love to triumph without Reason . . . 'We are come', says Virgil to Dante at the opening of the *Inferno*, 'where I told you you should see that unhappy people who have lost the good of intellect'—'il ben dell' intelletto.' And at the close of the *Paradiso* Beatrice says to him: 'We are come to the heaven which is pure light—intellectual light full of love'—'luce intelletual piena d' amore.' . . . The greatest Romantic poet, like every other true romantic, insists on the intellect at every step of the Way" (p. 21). I will return to Williams' reading of Dante, and especially to his articulation of the role that Beatrice plays for the relationship between intellect and love in the *Commedia*.

25 For the notion of freedom as "original participation in the good," see (Schindler 2002). As it will become clear, I follow Schindler's reading on the relationship between desire, beauty, and freedom in Augustine's philosophical anthropology.

26 See (Schindler 2002, p. 634). Cf. Augustine's comments on John 6:44 ("No one comes to me unless the Father draws him"): "Do not think that you are drawn unwillingly; the mind is drawn also by love. . . 'How do I believe by will, if I am drawn?' I say, it is not enough by will, you are also drawn by pleasure. What does it mean to be drawn by pleasure? 'Take delight in the Lord, and he will grant you your heart's desire' (Ps 36:4). There is a certain pleasure of the heart to which that heavenly bread is sweet. Moreover, if it was allowed to the poet to say, 'Each man is drawn by his own pleasure'—not need but pleasure, not obligation but delight—how much more ought we to say that a man is drawn to Christ who delights in truth, delights in happiness, delights in justice, delights in eternal life (and all this is Christ)? Do bodily senses have their pleasures and the mind does not? . . . Give me one who loves, and he knows what I'm saying. Give me one who desires, one who hungers, one traveling and thirsting in this solitude and sighing for the fountain of an eternal homeland, and he knows what I'm saying. . . He is drawn by loving . . . by a chain of the heart" (*Jo. ev. tr.* 26.4–5).

27 See, again, (Schindler 2002, p. 634).

28 *ver. rel.* 54.113.

29 On teaching as an asymmetrical but genuine "co-act," see (Schindler 2002, pp. 640–41).

30 *doct. Chr.* 1.3.

in themselves. These latter goods, the goods of enjoyment, are in an important sense "useless" or "gratuitous," which is to say, they are good not with reference to anything else, but simply because they are. If, as we have said, what it means to love a good is to bind oneself to what one loves, then the degree of freedom one experiences in a choice will correspond proportionately to the "absoluteness" of the object that is loved. If we choose what is merely useful, we bind ourselves, in a certain sense, to that which determines the goodness of the object (that for the sake of which it is). If, instead, we adhere to what is good in itself, then in a real sense, we make the freedom of the object *our own* freedom. When the will participates in the goods of enjoyment, then it becomes more actually good, and thereby becomes an object of enjoyment itself.[31] For Augustine, it is beauty that is the preeminent good of enjoyment, because beauty is the radiation of a goodness beyond our immediate control, a goodness that resists all instrumental use. It is by being absolute that beauty invites freedom, and it is in loving beauty that we become truly free.

4. Returning to the *Commedia*: Conversion as Purifying Love

For Dante, of course, beauty took the form of a particular Florentine girl. When Beatrice appeared, Dante experienced for the first time the *surprise*, the *advent*, of a particular good; and it is Dante's genius that he so allowed the good of this beauty to transform his love that Beatrice became the motive force of Dante's intellectual, ethical, and moral conversion. Here is how he describes in the *Vita Nuova* the experience of encountering Beatrice for the first time:

> Let me say, from that time on, Love governed my soul, which became immediately devoted to him, and he reigned over me with such assurance and lordship, given him by the power of my imagination, that I could only dedicate myself to fulfilling his every pleasure. . . . And through her image, which remained constantly with me, was Love's assurance of holding me, it was of such a pure quality that it never allowed me to be ruled by Love without the faithful counsel of reason, in all those things where such advice might be profitable.[32]

In his marvelous and underappreciated study, *The Figure of Beatrice*, Charles Williams remarks on the word "image" that Dante uses of Beatrice in the passage just quoted. Beatrice was for Dante an image in two crucial regards. In the first place, she was not a subjective disposition; she was someone *beheld*, a real and objective fact in the world that *surprised* Dante, that was there *prior to* his desire; she was, therefore, a real cause in his loving. In the second place, Beatrice was an image in the sense that she *referred* Dante to something that exceeded herself, *precisely while remaining herself.* Here is how Williams puts the matter:

> Beatrice was, in her degree, an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself. But she also remained Beatrice right to the end . . . . Just as there is no point in Dante's thought at which the image of Beatrice in his mind was supposed to exclude the actual objective Beatrice, so there is no point at which the objective Beatrice is to exclude the Power which is expressed through her.[33]

In the particular intensity of his love for Beatrice, Dante shows us the unique opportunity that loving attention affords us. To quote Pieper again:

> If we look to the well-documented experience of great lovers, we learn that precisely this intensity of love turned toward a single partner seems to place the lover at a vantage point from which he realizes for the first time the goodness and lovableness of all people, in fact, of

[31] See (Schindler 2002, p. 650).
[32] (Alighieri 1973, p. 2.4).
[33] (Williams 2005, pp. 7–8).

> all loving beings. ... Dante says precisely the same thing in regard to Beatrice: When she appeared “no foe existed for me any more.”[34]

The in-breaking of the good, then, the *advent* that I mentioned above, entices the lover to actively participate in the good, precisely to the extent that it re-orients the lover away from self-insistence, and out into an affirmation of the other as real and good. Williams summarizes the demand of love this way: “Dante himself, at the girl’s greeting, becomes love. That moment may last for the flash of her smile or for an evening or for six months. But it desires more than such a miracle; it desires the total and voluntary conversion of the lover. Dante has to become the thing he has seen in Beatrice, and has, for that moment, been in himself.”[35]

It turns out that the *passion* of love as something *suffered* now blossoms forth into an *activity* of self-transcendence in which the lover ventures to become what he is. The philosopher William Desmond describes this movement as the transition from *advent* to *adventure*: “Transcendence comes to us as an *advent*; this is the patience of an original opening. But, one must add, what comes to us in this advent makes us, in turn *adventuring* beings, beings ventured towards (*ad*) something of which we are not sure, though we are with it, or it is elusively with us from the outset—with us, though in no sense mastered.”[36] One is put in mind of the enigmatic claim by Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium* that *eros* has as its goal begetting in the presence of beauty.[37] I have always read this as a sign that true love of beauty begins with a receptive *passio*, but then turns into a responsive *activity*, a participation in beauty that wills new and more beauty to be, and this most of all *within the lover herself*.

Dante knows that, for the Christian pilgrim, passion and endeavor, humility and creativity must go hand in hand. There is much to say about how Dante lives the tension between the endeavor of (audacious) poetic creativity and the patience of loving humility. But let us just note that perhaps it is this very tension which finds Dante the pilgrim, as he labors up the slope of Mount Purgatory, repeatedly taking the posture of the penitents, his comportment subtly mirroring the purgative penance that undoes each vice in turn. I mention one instance, although we need not look far to multiply the effect.[38] On the first terrace, the Terrace of Pride, Dante witnesses “crouching figures” “hunched over more or less,/depending on the burdens on their backs,/and even he that showed the greatest patience/weeping, seemed to say: ‘I can no more.’” This sight causes Dante the poet to interject:

> O vainglorious Christians, miserable wretches!
> Sick in the visions engendered in your minds,
> you put your trust in backward steps.
>
> Do you not see that we are born as worms,
> though able to transform into angelic butterflies
> that unimpeded soar to justice?
>
> What makes your mind rear up so high? (*Purgatorio* 10.121–127)

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34 (Pieper 1997, p. 200).

35 (Williams 2005, p. 37). Earlier, in commenting on Dante’s description of the effect that Beatrice’s ‘salutation’ had on his soul, Williams makes the point that the two particular virtues the girl’s greeting engendered in Dante—humility and charity—these can only develop when one turns away from oneself and towards a greater good: “The sight of Beatrice ... filled him with the fire of charity and clothed him with humility; he became—and for a moment he knew it—an entire goodwill. Neither of these great virtues is gained by considering oneself; and the apparition of this glory, living and moving in Florence, precisely frees him from the consideration of himself. Love is greater than he: his soul was right when it exclaimed: ‘A stronger than I dominates me’ and trembled ... .” (Williams 2005, pp. 22–23).

36 (Desmond 1995, p. 5).

37 *Symposium* 206b.

38 We might consider, for example, the pilgrim’s declaration to Sapìa, on the Terrace of Envy, that on his next “visit” to Purgatory, he will spend a longer time on the Terrace of Pride below (*Purgatorio* 13.136–138). There is also the “real,” rather than virtual, purgation that Dante the pilgrim undergoes in passing through the final wall of fire at the summit of the mountain (*Purgatorio* 27.14–57).

In this memorable metaphor, we see illustrated the very point that Virgil will go on to make in his discourse on love: the proud man, the one who longs that "from his greatness his neighbor be brought low," suffers from a failure of vision, desiring an imagined but counterfeit good that seems to move the lover forward, but only drags the sinner away from his true good. Dante's "angelic butterfly" is the one who is transformed in mind and heart, cooperating with grace to grow the wings of unencumbered and true desire. The means of this transformation is the purgative suffering that the penitents here undergo, "purging away the darkness of the world" (*Purgatorio* 11.30), bending the knee in humility under the weight of their previous sin. As Dante encounters these humbled penitents, Virgil announces him as one who is likewise encumbered: "he that comes here with me,/burdened with the weight of Adam's flesh,/though eager to ascend, is slow at climbing" (*Purgatorio* 11.43–45). This weighty pilgrim, slow at climbing, must bend down his face to converse with sinners, taking on the penitential posture, "all hunched, trudg[ing] on beside them" (*Purgatorio* 11.78). Dante the poet does not spare himself the penance of humbly acknowledging, in word and in imaginative deed, that he suffers from the disordered love of pride. To write himself into the poem in this way is to begin to redirect his love toward the Beauty that alone is salvific.

I present a final example of the way in which the weight of love can be brought to bear on particular moments in the *Commedia*. Recall that the midpoint of the poem, the Terrace of Sloth, is a place of transition from disordered love to rightly ordered love. From this point forward, desire will only intensify, until it finds its satisfaction, and its perpetual increase, in the Beatific Vision. As love gains strength, of course, there is the accompanying possibility that it might become excessive with respect to lesser goods. But that is to anticipate; here on the Terrace of Sloth, the problem is no longer one of desiring what is not to be desired; here, instead, the problem is that of apathy, indifference, spiritual torpor—*acedia* in Latin, *accidia* in Italian.[39]

In this way, the Terrace of Sloth recalls that other great liminal space in Dante's theologically saturated world. Canto 3 of the *Inferno* is one of the more imaginative constructions in Dante's underworld. Here, we are not yet quite in Hell proper, even though we have entered through that gate which promises only woe and everlasting pain. We are, so to speak, in the antechamber of Hell, the waiting room of the damned. This is the realm of the neutrals, those souls who "lived/without disgrace yet without praise." "Loath to impart its beauty," Virgil tells us, "Heaven casts them out,/and depth of Hell does not receive them/lest on their account the evil angels gloat" (*Inferno* 3.36; pp. 40–42).[40] Dante heaps scorn upon this enormous line of unfortunates, calling them "hateful alike to God and to His foes," describing them as "wretches, who never were alive." Their physical suffering—to follow a whirling banner blindly, to be stung into useless action by flies and wasps—is not so terrible, Dante seems to suggest, as the psychological torture of spending eternity *in no discernible place at all*: nameless, placeless, set adrift forever in the afterlife as they once drifted through their former life.

When I ask my students where they think they might end up in Dante's great vision of the world to come, an overwhelming number identify themselves with the neutrals. I suspect that there is a wisdom here: indifference, neutrality, sloth; however we name it, this is the great danger of our age. I am reminded of a remark (is it Kierkegaard who makes it?), that ours is an age that has forgotten how to sin. Contrary to all appearances, and in keeping with Virgil's discourse on love, we can now diagnose this problem as a failure to love. Ours is a thoroughly *de-eroticized age*: we confuse the petty pleasures of sexual gratification with the grand adventure of desire, and we settle for little compromises when what awaits us is the joyful ecstasy of Beauty.

The human being, like the sun and all the other stars, is moved by love. When that love lessens, when the heart loses some of its restlessness, then it is beauty and beauty alone that will rekindle the

[39] Hollander provides a helpful gloss on the meaning of *acedia*, i.e., "a kind of spiritual torpor accompanied by (or even causing) physical weariness" (Alighieri 2004, p. 383, n.82–87). He also lists the relevant secondary literature on the topic, including a manuscript-length study by (Wenzel 1967).

[40] (Alighieri 2000, p. 49).

flame of desire. It is not accidental that on Mount Purgatory, art—in the form of music, sculpture, dream, and image—serves to present exemplars of virtue to Dante and to the repentant sinners. As Peter Hawkins acutely observes: "One of Dante's many innovations in the second canticle is his demonstration that art and artists play a significant role in the transformative process of salvation. The point should not be lost on us, for if this is true of craft in the purgatorial afterlife, might it not be true of the world of the living?"[41] The beauty of Dante's poetry, like the beauty of all truly great art, can surprise us, and in this shock it can awaken in us a renewed desire for the good beyond our limited imaginations.

> Then, as fire, born to rise,
> moves upward in its essence,
> to where its matter lives the longest,
>
> just so the mind, thus seized, achieves desire,
> a movement of the spirit never resting
> as long as it enjoys the thing it loves. (*Purgatorio* 18.28–33)

5. Conclusion: Love as Advent and Adventure

I conclude with an image taken from one of my own teachers, the philosopher William Desmond, whom I have already mentioned. In the following passage, he is speaking about the Greek notion of *theoria* or contemplation, a notion that accords well with what I have been referring to throughout this paper under the sign of loving attention, enjoyment, and ecstatic participation in beauty. Here is what Desmond says:

> [W]ith *theoria*: the memory of its origins with the religious festival is essential. The *theoroi* were religious delegates sent by the city states to the games, which were themselves religious festivals, celebrations of the largess of being, largess evident in the great performances and deeds of outstanding humans. *Theoroi* were sent to enjoy the [excess] of being as ritualized in the religious festivals. There is a watching here, a being spectatorial, but it is a joyful vigilance; it is entirely active mindfulness that represents the divine powers of consent and celebration. Festive being is an amen to being in its gift and largess.[42]

As Virgil teaches in his Discourse, as Dante dramatizes throughout his entire poem, and as Augustine developed in his philosophical reflection on freedom, conversion comes not from the screwing up of will but from the honing of loving-attention in festive celebration and "entirely active mindfulness," a consent and celebration of the good of being. This consent is the hardest thing in the world; it is the easiest thing in the world. The more we can help our students give themselves over to that "consent and celebration," to the "essentially joyful vigilance" that is "celebrating mindfulness of the ultimate powers," the stronger their voices will become. Radical conversion will be the response of a soul shaken awake.

This is what I have being calling *advent*, the breaking through into the every-day of such excessive beauty that it transforms, converts, forever changes a life. As teachers, we must sing of this disclosure, must pass through the dark abyss of doubt and (even more difficult) the banal mediocrity of the "ordinary" to remember always what is Real, True, Original, Good, and Ever-Present. And for those students who can hear, what is asked in response is the adventure of finding their voice: in syllogism and lyric, in prose and poem, to witness again and again, in joyful vigilance, to what has been disclosed. Attention. Sight. Vigilance. Love. These are all in the end the same act, a stretching in the between that desires out of a full-lack, longs for what is disclosed—ambiguously, mysteriously, but truly—in the

41 (Hawkins 2006, p. 55).
42 (Desmond 1995, p. 42).

midst of things. To educate our students *with* love, to educate them *in and through* love, is to invite them into the dangerous, adventurous space of ecstatic self-transcendence. If we perform our task rightly, then perhaps we too might one day echo Virgil's valediction to Dante:

> 'I have brought you here with intellect and skill.
> From now on take your pleasure as your guide.
> You are free of the steep way, free of the narrow.
>
> . . .
>
> No longer wait for word or sign from me.
> Your will is free, upright, and sound.
> Not to act as it chooses is unworthy:
> Over yourself I crown and miter you. (*Purgatorio* 27.130–132; 139–142)

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