

Article

Understanding Dante's Comedy as Virtuous Friendship

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Received: 5 February 2019; Accepted: 20 March 2019; Published: 22 March 2019



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

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 competing⁴—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.

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 selling a picture of the good life which 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 new device).

⁴ For example, we follow Dante with a study of Friedrich Nietzsche and a graphic novel that 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 Virtue⁷

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:

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 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,

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).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the reviewers of this manuscript for their feedback, to Chris Metress for his keen editorial eye, and to all of the good folks involved in organizing and hosting the Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition conference on teaching Dante at Samford University in October 2018. I am also grateful for the intellectual friendships that have shaped my own reading and teaching of Dante’s *Comedy*, especially those with Julie Ooms, Rachel Griffis, Karl Aho, Kevin Hughes, Anthony Nussmeier, Albert Ascoli, Leonard DiLorenzo, David Russell Mosley, and Vittorio Montemaggi. Lastly, my gratitude to the students at Loyola University Maryland with whom I am honored to learn and re-learn how to better understand the *Comedy* each semester.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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