religions

MDPI

Article

Three Things My Students Have Taught Me about Reading Dante

Julie Ooms

Department of Humanities, Missouri Baptist University, One College Park Drive, Saint Louis, MO 63141, USA; julie.ooms@mobap.edu

Received: 28 January 2019; Accepted: 7 March 2019; Published: 12 March 2019

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

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).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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

References

Alighieri, Dante. 2003. *The Divine Comedy (The Inferno, the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso)*. Translated by John Ciardi. New York: New American Library.

Alighieri, Dante. 2013. Excerpt from *The Divine Comedy*. In *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3rd ed. Translated by Mark Musa. Edited by Martin Puchner, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Wiebke Denecke, Vinay Dharwadker, Barbara Fuchs, Caroline Levine, Pericles Lewis and Emily Wilson. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, vol. 1, pp. 1053–172.

Cornell Law School. 2018. Buck v. Bell. *Legal Information Institute*. Available online: www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/274/200 (accessed on 24 October 2018).