

Article

# Pilgrim Readers: Introducing Undergraduates to Dante's Divine Comedy

John Edelman

Nazareth College of Rochester, 4245 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14618, USA; jedelma3@naz.edu

Received: 12 January 2019; Accepted: 8 March 2019; Published: 14 March 2019



**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

## 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,<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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?<sup>2</sup> (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,

<sup>2</sup> 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 *Purgatorio* 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.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

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

## References

- Sayers, Dorothy. 1950. *The Divine Comedy: Hell*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Sayers, Dorothy. 1955. *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Sayers, Dorothy. 1962. *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Sinclair, John. 1939a. *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*. Italian Text with Translation and Comment. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, John. 1939b. *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*. Italian Text with Translation and Comment. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, John. 1939c. *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*. Italian Text with Translation and Comment. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Singleton, Charles. 1970. *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*. Vol. 1. Part 2. Translated, with a Commentary. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Singleton, Charles. 1973. *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*. Vol. 2. Part 2. Translated, with a Commentary. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Virgil. 1935. *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid 1-6*. Translated by Henry Rushton Fairclough. Revised by George P. Gould. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).