

Article

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

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

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.

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.

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 “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*).

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 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*

⁴ "E dietro le venia sì lunga tratta/di gente, ch'ì 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'eterno 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 ridi 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'eterno/per una lagrimetta che 'l mi toglie'" (*Purgatorio* 5.94-107)

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: “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,

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 scoperto/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.

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:

... "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

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

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'ì '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.

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,
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;

¹³ "Né creator né creatura mai," / cominciò el, "figliuol, fu senza amore, / o naturale o d'animo; e tu 'l sai. / Lo natural è sempre senza 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 exemplary 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 di sarà sì chiara." References to a clear body at the last judgment convince me that his future salvation is assured by the text.

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;
 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,

¹⁵ Ed elli a lui: "Tu prima m'inviassti 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 progenie scende da ciel nova.'/Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano" (*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 virtù, 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'ambidue:/tu duca, tu signore e tu maestro" (*Inferno* 2.139-40).

¹⁹ "Il temporal foco e l'eterno/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).

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

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,

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 rimasto che non tremi:/conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma'./Ma Virgilio n'avea lasciati scemi/di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo padre,/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

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: 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.

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 battesimo/ che tu vedesti da la destra rota,/ dinanzi al battezzar più d'un millesmo" (*Paradiso* 20.118-29).

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,/ si 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).

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. 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

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 cowl 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.

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 *alagon* of Plato's *Meno*) are 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

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 eterna che sola in te sidi, / sola t' intendi, e da te intelletta / e intendente te ami e arridi! / Quella circolazion che sì concetta / pareva in te come lume riflesso, / 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).

himself, even non-religious students began to understand the importance of his struggle.³⁰ Before *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 sacro 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 effigie": "our [human] figure" (*Paradiso* 33.131).

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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 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/convertete petando, io non lo 'nvidio;/ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte/non transmuto sì ch' amendue le forme/a cambiar lor matra 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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