ARTICLE

Dante's *Inferno*: Big Ego, Small Self

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SUMMARY

This article focuses on how Dante's *Divine Comedy* is taught at Gilman School in Baltimore, Maryland. It includes references to folk music, as well as prompts and examples of writing assignments. Two key scenes (*Inferno* V and X) from Dante's story are examined carefully, with a focus on the soul's "damned-ability" revealed at the center of each encounter. Finally, the essay clarifies Dante's unique exit route from Hell.

KEYWORDS: Beatrice, Harry Chapin, Competition, *Contrappasso*, Dante, Farinata, Grace, Francesca, Sam Keen, Satan, Virgil

When I first read Dante's *Divine Comedy* about forty years ago, I felt like Dorothy coming out of the house from black-and-white to color, and that until then I had been intellectually asleep ("Clip Joint"). My passion for the *Divine Comedy* grew considerably in 1990, after attending an especially stimulating NEH Dante Summer Seminar for School Teachers, chaired by William Stephany.

I am honored to have offered Dante's *Divine Comedy* in translation every year as one of my high school English classes at Gilman School in Baltimore. However, the true teacher on this journey is Dante's narrative itself. (In these articles, the name "Dante" will be used referring to either Dante pilgrim and/or Dante poet.) I am especially fortunate when I share this trip with my first-time Dante students because their comments during class discussions are often more thoughtful than they realize.

At this point, I would like to share a few examples: for instance, students are curious about which translation of Dante is the best and how reading a translation affects the substance of the story. They learn that, like with the Bible, we do not know of any extant, autographed manuscript of Dante's work. In addition, they are surprised to learn that there have been over one-hundred attempts at translating Dante into English—and counting. Allen Mandelbaum (1980–84), whom I will use in these three articles, has been consistently our translation of choice, for it is "user-friendly" on multiple levels: readability, scholarship, handling and price. Other excellent translations worth exploring include those of Robert Durling (1997–2011), Robert Hollander (2002–07) and Stanley Lombardo (2009–17) (cf. biblio).

Although I teach in an all-boys school, there is a system in place of curriculum coordination that includes two neighboring schools, Bryn Mawr School and Roland Park Country School. Thus, a number of girls are regularly enrolled as part of our Gilman Dante class. This collaboration, first and foremost, helps to contribute to more diversity, and such an atmosphere is conducive to

stimulating reading discussions. Usually, my Dante class consists of around eighteen students, and often the gender ratio is 50/50. For the intellectual growth of everyone, the girls consistently bring voices that propel our discussions "further up and further in" (Lewis, *Battle* 203).

In an effort to facilitate meaningful "Dante talk" from day one, the students are asked to stretch their minds towards the idea that each reader possesses a unique key to an interpretive door into the text, and class discussions allow everyone present to have multiple Dante doors unlocked, in order to explore the text with a fresh and distinctive understanding. In fact, Emilie Berman (Bryn Mawr, 2017) raised poignant comments on the topic of competition and later wrote powerfully about its oft insidious presence within school communities. Such reflection certainly enriches the substance of our coordinated system, for it provides an opportunity for the students to interrogate their own attitudes and possibly even to help heal divisive issues among the three schools. Her examples demonstrated perfectly how well Dante can allow for personal discovery. Also, Alex Bauman (Gilman, 2017) brought up comments about his own frustrations in sports, and, subsequently, he wrote a reflective paper on how reading Dante provided the occasion for him to review the "game film of his life." This student now, thanks to reading Dante with care, is more intellectually equipped to read his own life as he continues growing into the best version of himself possible.

To jump start one of our conversations, the students were asked to write for approximately thirteen minutes about whatever was on their "Dante minds." Once the time expired, Jason Moscow (Gilman, 2017) shyly raised his hand, offering to be the first to read aloud his thoughts. His reading took about two minutes to complete. (It must be remembered that this assignment was merely an informal writing prompt.) He shared his paper in such an unpretentious voice, and the piece was truly stunning that its thoughtfulness left the rest of the class utterly silent. Jason discussed ides like "rediscovering your '*subsisto* trail' can be nearly impossible, but it is the most important part of any human's experience," and "to be enlightened is to be unbelievably powerful as you now understand that the order of your life is a circle, leading you back to the innocence and wholeness that you were granted at birth." I asked the other students for a response, any response. Total stillness ensued for what seemed near to a full, lonesome minute, a period of time which certainly can seem like a lifetime in a classroom. Emerging from the quiet, Marsie Salvatori (Roland Park, 2017), who was sitting right in front of Jason, did not say a word but in a simple, focused way, looked sheepishly around the room and tenderly applauded for about five life-saving seconds. Just like Dante's own struggle often in his narrative, I could not and cannot do justice to this experience (*Inferno* XXXII, 1-9). After class, I asked Jason, "Where did that come from?" He looked at me and kind of shrugged a smile, and then, with no fanfare, simply tapped his head and then his heart. This kind of special moment can happen with students if they let Dante in. The whole thing had just stopped me in my tracks, for the story had worked its way deeply into the mind and heart of a teenager and forged a new and stronger place within him. These meaningful comments require that I pay really close attention to what my students say, for often their insights are profound, and they open doors to a larger reading of a canto or an episode.

Dorothy Sayers writes that "[n]either the world, nor the theologians, nor even Charles Williams had told me the one great, obvious, glaring fact about Dante Alighieri of Florence—that he was simply the most incomparable story-teller who ever set pen to paper" ("…And" 2). Dante's poem has a reputation of being daunting, the kind of literature one reads only in graduate school. The *Divine Comedy*, in fact, is composed of 14,233 lines, three canticles and one-hundred cantos,

and, while it goes without saying that even the best of scholars will never understand all of its many layers, I assuredly have benefitted from the many rich insights and deep personal wisdom internalized from my own reading, as well as from listening to the students' courageous comments over the years. Therefore, anyone embarking on reading the *Divine Comedy* should not succumb to fear and surrender at the parts that seem a bit tough, for that would deprive the reader of the segments that offer potential for intellectual and spiritual growth. Hang tough!

As a teacher, I stress that every good educational experience should begin and end in music. In Italian, *cantare* means "to sing"; thus, the power of music is affirmed by Dante's structure of one-hundred cantos. George MacDonald's words can help appreciate the role of music while on this journey. MacDonald, a writer who influenced C. S. Lewis significantly, as described in Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* (181), challenges the reader to consider that "[t]he best way with music . . . is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear upon it but to be still and let it work on that part of us for whose sake it exists" (321–22).

Therefore, in order to set the stage for Dante "working on us" (MacDonald 321–22), on the first day I play some music. I want for the students to realize that reading Dante will afford them a chance to find that space inside that is bigger than they currently know. Music is also incorporated throughout the semester which culminates in a music-based, final exam experience. For this concluding assignment, students choose a single song out of three options and write for an hour—their assigned prompt: How could this particular piece of music be considered a source of solace for Dante as he takes a breather, having completed his 14,233-line retrospective? How would Dante reflect upon musician/humanitarian Harry Chapin's assertion in "There Only Was One Choice" that the "journey [was] worthwhile?" (Track 14)?

An additional way to honor music at the beginning of our course is to think hard about a poignant verse from "Pass the Music On," a song with which Chapin's younger brother, Tom, sometimes opens his concerts: "I did not learn this music / At my grandma's knee, / But from some old musicians / I never got to see. / I know them by their records, / Their voices and their songs / And I am blessed to be with you tonight / To pass the music on" (Track 1). What I stress with the students is that Tom Chapin conveys exactly what we all try to do every day through living and sharing our lives; we "pass [our own] music on," and Dante is part of that tradition through his "story in cantos." Readers are the fortunate beneficiaries in taking to heart Dante's rhythms in verse. If students develop a love of close reading, they will be able to detect and to interpret what history teacher and friend Dave Neun calls "the music behind the words." Dante's narrative takes us to the center of all things, and music can help readers to remain centered. High school students, in particular, "get it." If they unplug long enough to be with Dante and then plug back into their own music, they likely will be more astute listeners.

The second song I play for them is a wonderful, hidden gem by the late John Denver entitled "Looking for Space." My pedagogical hope, also, is that Denver's voice become familiar and cherished for the students. The key messages are captured in the first few lines:

> On the road of experience, I'm trying to find my own way
> Sometimes I wish that I could fly away
> When I think that I'm moving, suddenly things stand still
> I'm afraid 'cause I think they always will

And I'm looking for space
And to find out who I am
And I'm looking to know and understand
It's a sweet, sweet dream
Sometimes I'm almost there
Sometimes I fly like an eagle
And sometimes I'm deep in despair. (Track 4)

A helpful lens for grappling with this idea came from a conversation I had in 1998 with Harry Chapin's cellist, Yvonne Cable, who said, "Harry Chapin was larger than life, but his bigness made everyone else around him bigger." When attentively and carefully traveling with Dante, readers' new and fruitful space within will be opened both in breadth and in depth. It will be, however, a challenging and arduous process. In Dante, there is no "cheap grace" as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to it; a shot at a glimpse of Paradise can only be attained as an earned "costly grace" (47). By honoring that newly-recognized larger space within, students can, while working within the power of "costly grace," participate in what poet and Dante translator, John Ciardi, considers "serious joy" (117–23).

Students consider the potent shift of adjectives by Bonhoeffer as they prepare to become "fellow pilgrims on the road" with Dante. Since Dante is such a talented wordsmith, it is necessary and prudent for the students to move towards not merely playing *on* words but rather playing *with* words. Classroom discussions focus on "healing stories," where "anecdotes" assist as "antidotes"—the *Divine Comedy* being most definitely a powerful Western literary restorative narrative. Readers are encouraged to work with the meaning, sounds and inter-connective power of Dante's words.

Because of their power to challenge, these aspects of Dante's work help create the necessary energy to propel the reader towards wholeness, and to embrace the power of probing questions. Rainer Maria Rilke puts this charge perfectly, "now seek [not] the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now" (27). Having stories "happen to [us]" (Schwartz 52) honors the quest by inspiring readers to ask formidable questions, thereby mirroring Sam Keen's "quest-I'm-on" (*Hymns* 15). Dante's cosmic-story plot provides an open-minded reader with stimulating and motivating platforms through which to pursue thoughtful, intellectual and spiritual growth. Actively asking sharp questions is equally important to simply reading the text, as was articulated poignantly by the essayist Anne Fadiman, during a Q & A session following her talk circa 2006 at the bookstore Politics and Prose in Washington, DC.

Having been asked whether she thought the contrast between being a reader and being someone who merely reads mattered or whether it was simply a "distinction without a difference," she made the following, deeply thoughtful observation, seamlessly explaining the following: "Whenever a writer writes anything, she extends a hand out to the world. Someone who just reads does not see the hand; a reader, however, not only sees the offered hand, but also reaches out, takes that hand and squeezes back!" Fadiman's comment hits the mark: Literature teachers try to instill in students the challenge of learning how to "squeeze back" well, and Dante's story offers a mighty hand, requesting an active reader-response in return. Perhaps, somewhat as a surprise to the students, we start our Dante class by reading C. S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed*, whose ending captures

a quotation from Dante's *Paradiso*, "Poi si tornò a l'etterna fontana" (Translated: "Then she turned back to the eternal fountain," *Paradiso* XXXI, 93; Lewis 76). This memoir chronicles his spiritual struggle against profound despair after the death of Lewis' wife, Joy, on 13 July 1960. Ultimately, the narrator reaches the conclusion that darkness will not be allowed to gain final victory, and due to the aid of a permeating, healing love, this insight will appear in light-hearted anticipation of the "comedy of the *Comedy*" (Sayers, "Comedy" 151), like "a chuckle in the darkness" (Lewis 71).

The rationale to beginning the *Divine Comedy* course by reading C. S. Lewis is to model for the students a "mini-journey," taken on "reading training wheels," a prequel of sorts to the Dante challenge to follow. Once we conclude with Lewis, and before the Dante portion of the class begins, students receive a packet of materials containing quotations by Harry Chapin and other musicians, an outline of Dante's poem and copy of a conversation that Sam Keen imagines having with his own fear—the point of which being that one should face any inner ghosts and deal with them, just like Dante is embarking to do in his *Divine Comedy*.

For high-school students, writing in response to their reading is an essential part of a full Dante experience because writing helps them appreciate how "books can read them." I ask the students to search Dante's narrative for a key insight and then explain how that particular moment has been a source of meditative momentum, energizing the students to think hard about how that freshly gleaned reading clarity can provide a viewing lens into a personally stronger, more alert life. Over the course of many years, this genre of "personal-response" writing has yielded a treasure trove of papers proving that high school students can span a spectrum of healthy intellectual analyses while, at the same time, generate thoughtful writing, the kind of prose revealing a unique, self-probing courage that clearly shows inner, meaningful growth, towards a fuller expression of their humanity. By exercising honest introspection while talking with and writing about Dante, students can cultivate the intellectual habits needed to aid them in shaping for themselves an authentically examined life. Is this not one of the main goals of the study of the Humanities?

The stage is now set for the Dante reading and discussion to begin. Two key points appear immediately in the first tercet: First, "When I had journeyed half of our life's way, / I found myself within a shadowed forest, / for I had lost the path that does not stray" (*Inferno* I, 1–3). "When I had journeyed half our life's way" alludes to Psalms 90:10, indicating that Dante, in his narrative, is thirty-five years old when he finds himself astray. In contemporary wording, Dante finds himself embedded in what is termed a "mid-life crisis." Even though this phrase has become somewhat trivialized in modern times by being associated with people wanting to drive fancy convertibles or dressing so as to remain connected to the mythical fountain of youth, in very real terms, however, many people in Western societies are, in fact, crushed just around the age of thirty-five by a psycho-spiritual, existential, disorientating urgency of no laughing matter. Dante makes this abundantly clear by asserting that, at least as far as his sense of losing personal value goes, the suffering rose to a level of being just barely above death itself (I, 7). Students learn early on in the first canto of *Inferno* that this journey with Dante will insist on a seriousness of purpose that will likely be unfamiliar and uncomfortable for them. This qualitative reading is exactly what the Humanities provide: i.e., it forges an essential goal of a well-lived, alert life, one focused on not simply feeling better, but rather actually on getting better. Simply going through the motions of being awake every day and going through life as it happens does not necessarily mean to "live" a

life. Dante knows this well and teaches it to his readers, to include—and perhaps especially—those of the twenty-first century.

The second key point jumps out from a careful reading of the first tercet: Dante underscores the importance of "our" (I, 1). In other words, each reader is invited to consider that this spiritual journey can be one taken by everyone, not just by Dante, or, in the words of Sam Keen, capturing a Cartesian echo, "we are, therefore I am" (Keen, *Bound* 200). At this juncture, Dante attempts to climb a hill on his own while at the same time catching a hopeful glimpse of the early morning sun (I, 37–42). Failing at his bid to make a successful solitary ascent, Dante descends into a state of despondency. Dante's use of synesthesia encourages the reader to reflect on the condition of a fellow human being who has reached such a dark place where actually the healing light has gone mute (I, 60). Has the reader ever experienced this level of profound theological or spiritual distress, and what specifically was it like? Did the reader's experience intersect with Dante's experience? What are the implications for a crestfallen human being who has reached such a bleak place in life? For students, questions like these can stimulate writing opportunities where "Dante can read *them*." Fortunately, help arrives in the shade of famed Roman poet Publius Vergilius Maro, i.e. Virgil (*Inferno* I, 61–63, 79). The reader gets it: We cannot become whole alone; we all need help. As readers, our assistance partly comes by simply acknowledging the very fact that we are present at this moment thanks to the support we have already received. What immediately comes to mind is Gregory Bateson's wisdom, "It takes *two* to know one" (quoted in Nachmanovitch 113). Dante's story is huge and loaded with ideas. The first-time reader is encouraged not to get lost in the narrative but rather should focus conscientiously on the nuanced, multi-faceted aspects of this dynamic relationship between Dante and Virgil, so as to experience a full and richly gratifying alliance, a bond where the entire "palate" of human emotions (Keen, *Beginnings* 7) would be explored and, ideally, applied to creating a healthy, more authentic self.

Virgil is "mission focused" from the moment he appears in the narrative. Once Dante realizes that his favorite writer has come to rescue him, he immediately enters into a kind of "gush-mode," adopting the classical *captatio benevolentiae* rhetoric, an erudite, slick language filled with enthusiastic flattery (I, 82–87). Barbara Reynolds describes this kind of discourse as the "prostitution of language" (108). Virgil will have none of this fawning and exhibits an impressive ability to radiate firm yet graceful parent-like pressure by telling Dante that he must take "another path" (I, 91). In addition, Virgil offers to guide Dante only to the extent that his limited abilities will allow (I, 112–26). Dante's surprised reaction to Virgil's invitation to alter his route in order to be freed from his predicament reveals the Pilgrim's lack of inner maturity, although he is already a thirty-five-year-old man. Unfortunately, Dante's premature enthusiasm causes him to confuse his options, thus inverting the sequence as just explained by Virgil (I, 130–34). This rearrangement of factual sequencing is a classical literary device known as *hysteron-proteron*. It is an effective strategy, for it captures the reader's attention, thereby slowing down the reading of a text because the reader becomes aware that something is not quite right in the progression as it is being promoted in the story. Dante uses *hysteron-proteron* occasionally in the *Divine Comedy* and always at key, strategically significant points where he wants a careful reading, the rhetorical device forcing more attention to the words**.** This shift in progression certainly takes some of the pressure off of Dante's mind because he can almost leap-frog over the hard work needed to descend through Hell and make it to Peter's gate relatively unscathed (*Inferno* I, 130–35). The problem is that Dante allows his enthusiasm to obstruct his vision in such a way as to impede his appreciation for the true gravity located at the heart of this spiritual pilgrimage. During a class discussion of

Inferno I, a student correctly noticed that Dante was disrespecting the process of life's spiritual journeying, trying to find short cuts when in fact there are none. Dante and his readers must take seriously the *bona fide* hard work that stands before us, for only gritty and honest introspection will lead to worthwhile experiences.

Given Dante's magical-thinking attitude grounded in lack of true readiness, it comes as no surprise that almost immediately he fumbles the ball and gets cold feet. He declares that he is "not Aeneas . . . not Paul" (*Inferno* II, 32) and lacks the necessary background and credentials needed to deserve such a grand opportunity. Virgil, being the superb surrogate parent and astute coach that he is, sees right through Dante's effort at making excuses. He points out that Dante is "assailed by cowardice" and that Dante is among those who have had a similar experience (II, 43–48). As a defining characteristic of Virgil's genuine love for Dante, he does not call the Pilgrim a coward, but rather acknowledges that he is suffering because of his acting in a cowardly manner. This distinction cuts to the core of the poem. Dante is being called back to his true self. The fact that he is neither a famous epic hero nor an apostle really is beside the point. He is himself, and he is close to being fatally lost. Most importantly, at the center of the universe, there is a Love that is so strong it cries out for Dante to come home, symbolized by the chain of three loving women who are pulling for Dante to find his way out of the dark and move towards and into enlightenment (II, 64–72, 94–105). Why should Dante warm up his feet again and say "yes" to Virgil's plan? A "court of Heaven" has endorsed him, and Virgil, his literary hero, promises "so great a good" as the journey's outcome (II, 121–26). Those two reasons are motivation enough for Dante who finally makes an authentic commitment rooted in his will, a will grounded in the light of reality and not a decision simply based on myopic emotionality (II, 127–40). Therefore, Virgil, along with his now clear-thinking student, can move forward "on the steep and savage path" (II, 140–42). Often, it is at this point that first-time Dante students can see clearly how they, too, need to grow up and start walking.

The key woman in Dante's love chain is Beatrice, whom he saw in Florence when he was nine years old and she was eight. It was she who originally awakened in him a sense of aspiring to wholeness, and the entire *Divine Comedy* can, perhaps, be seen as a chronicle describing Dante's return to this love with a truer appreciation (*Vita Nova* III). Once the more correctly focused Dante begins his real journey towards Love (and Love here needs to be understood as an overarching sense of goodness), the reader is immediately struck by an egregious injustice. Virgil, who willingly has taken on this role as Dante's guide from the dark forest to the top of Mount Purgatory, will be compelled to return to Limbo, his eternal region, where righteous, ethical and morally right-minded people reside, and whose only "sin" was to be born before Christ (*Inferno* IV, 31–42). Selflessly and sincerely, just as a baptized Christian would, knowing that there is no actual reward other than his heart feeling gratified at accomplishing an important mission, Virgil accepts this duty from which he can reap no personal salvific benefits. It is a really interesting and, frankly, frustrating theological conundrum that Virgil is not allowed into the redemption of Paradise, yet he does lead Dante to the very top of Mount Purgatory where he is then replaced by Beatrice. Where is the justice in such a scheme?

It is, however, precisely being in this situation that constitutes Virgil's embodying a quintessential example of "grace under pressure." He is on an *agape* mission, symbolically sacrificing his life for his friend (John 15:13). This rich dynamic between Dante and Virgil calls to mind a potent question by Sam Keen, one that aims its sights towards the heart of why human

beings choose to do anything: "If you were mortal / what would you do today?" (Keen, *Beginnings* 129). When students (and myself) are confronted with this question, often the response is, "I did not notice because I have been going through my life not really seeing much of what is floating around me." Dante's story challenges readers of all languages and generations to genuinely wake up and not merely to get up. *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens points clearly to this idea when Ebenezer Scrooge, upon rising on Christmas morning, realizes that "the Time before him was his own, to make amends in" (63). To connect Scrooge's awakening with Dante's, a stimulating paper assignment connected with the *Divine Comedy* is to segment the word *amends* into as many existing words as possible. And if that type of semantic "terminology surgery" is performed successfully, lots of options emerge: *mend*, *men*, *amen* and *end*. The short word *amends* is packed with meaning and substantial depth. It is worth seriously considering how the words within *amends* capture an aspect of Dante's inner struggles. He takes this journey to see the nature of sin and how it has affected his life, and his Mount Purgatory climb will afford him the chance to *mend* his ways, thus, finding a path towards a loving *end* (*τέλος* in Greek) to his life.

Dante's Hell is divided into upper hell and lower hell. It consists of nine concentric circles, in descending order. Upper hell is reserved for those who were prone to weakness and lower hell contains the souls whose lives were defined by malice (Singleton 44). These respective areas are subdivided into further specific unethical levels. This moral structure of sin is rooted mostly in the thinking of Aristotle (Pequigney 509). Perhaps the most well-known episode in the entire *Divine Comedy* is found in *Inferno* V, where Dante meets, and speaks with, Francesca da Rimini (V, 116) who suffers eternal damnation in the circle of lust (V, 37–39). This scene shows the reader an especially helpful example of Dante's concept of how the "punishment fits the crime" in *Inferno*. He uses the term *contrapasso* (*Inferno* XXVIII, 142) which indicates that the damned are punished *by* the nature of their sins—as opposed to *for* their misdeeds. The damned receive exactly what they chose without the sin's seductive trappings (Sayers, "Meaning" 101–02). Thus, here, for instance, the *contrapasso* shows the lustful being blown around by an unceasing, powerful wind, just as the storm of their earthly, corporeal passions had thrown them any which way during illegitimate sexual encounters (V, 31–33, 43–45). Dante is profoundly insightful regarding how well he "gets" people that some passages can forge a deep echo within the reader who abruptly realizes: "No, I am not just reading this; I am truly taking this journey through Hell together with Dante. This *is* real!"

In Dante's poem, God does not send anyone to Hell; people are in Hell because they were free to choose their fates. Blasphemer Capaneus can speak for all the damned here: "That which I was in life, I am in death" (*Inferno* XIV, 51). Dante experiences intense encounters with the damned souls whom he meets. Often mesmerized and confused, Dante is "locked-in" to these conversations, mostly because, in order to learn, he needs to be aware that the damned always reveal their "damned-ability" in the telling of their own stories. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* appears a line that can help the reader appreciate Hell's relevance to the present moment: "Hell is empty, / and all the devils are here" (1.2.214–15). Dante's reader, like Shakespeare's, is forced to assess the implications of hell and the individual responsibility necessary to head along "another path" (I, 91). Dante's narrative takes place in the afterlife of Hell, Mount Purgatory and Paradise, but it actually occurs right here, right now.

In our modern Western world, we punish by inconvenience; at school for instance, when a student does not wear a tie, he receives a detention and sits in a room for twenty minutes. There is

no direct relationship between that student's lack of decorum and sitting in a room for a short period of time. It is certainly a functional system, yielding positive results most of the time, but it does not necessarily teach anything, per se. The people in Hell are not learning anything while suffering either, for they are they are continuously living out symbolically the sin that defined them. As introduced above, the lustful are being blown around in a near hurricane that never stops. Dante creates these punishments as expressions of life choices in creative ways. Even Satan, for example, suffers an intriguing, yet also appropriate *contrapasso*. He is pinned up to his chest in ice due to his being the ultimate betrayer (*Inferno* XXXIV, 28–36). It is often a very fruitful discussion when students ponder the provocative connections between ice and treachery. Actually, much to the surprise of first-time readers, there is very little hell-fire in Dante. It becomes colder as the funnel narrows and the distance from God's Love increases.

A particularly intense scene in *Inferno* X consistently has led to stimulating discussions due to its relevance to students who are first-semester seniors in high school. The reader is now navigating circle six where the heretics are punished. Christian tradition has aggressively identified and fought heresy throughout the centuries. Dante does not interact with anyone guilty of indulging in a Christological heresy. Instead, Dante meets a famous Florentine general named Farinata, guilty of being an Epicurean, i.e., one who believes that the soul dies with the body (X, 13–15, 31–33). Coincidentally and significantly, his son Guido was Dante's "closest friend" ("quelle cui io chiamo primo de li miei amici," *Vita Nuova* III) and, consequently, there are many nuances of a personal nature at work here (Singleton 150–52).

Farinata's *contrapasso* punishment is that he resides, with over a thousand others, in an open, burning tomb (IX, 112–23). This tomb, like all the others, will be sealed at the end of time (X, 10–12). Essentially, Farinata's *contrapasso* experience resembles a false resurrection (Cassell, *Fearful* 23) since he is only visible, "all of him from the waist up" (X, 31–33). Farinata looks like he is rising from the dead, yet the spiritual uplifting is in appearance only. In this encounter, Farinata has all of the power stemming from what shows itself to be resurrection, yet, ultimately, he has none of the authority established by Jesus' true resurrection. The Epicureans, not believing in eternal life, are now doomed to endure an existence that looks like it is filled with fresh starts but does not really contain them. Jesus' tomb was empty because he was "risen indeed" (Luke 24: 33–34), while the Epicureans suffer inside open tombs that will never allow them actual rebirth. They exhibit what Sayers refers to as "the fall into illusion" ("Meaning" 62). For Dante, this encounter has a unique level of gravity shown by Virgil physically shoving Dante towards Farinata (X, 37–39), anticipating the seriousness of future meetings in lower Hell. Imagine being in Hell and having your guide thrust you right at one of the damned! Healthy pedagogy? For Dante: Yes! It is Dante's Florentine accent that tips off Farinata as to where this strange visitor to Hell is from (X, 25–27), and his first question for Dante: "Who were your ancestors" (X, 42)? There is no "How are you?" Nothing. And Dante is intimidated by Farinata's very presence, to such a degree that he spills the beans and tells him everything about who he is and what he is about (X, 43–45). The reader learns here that the damned certainly lack basic civility, but, most importantly, they are fundamentally self-absorbed.

In response, Farinata raises his "brows a bit" (X, 45). This kind of "facial slur" appears only twice in *Inferno*: with Farinata, and Satan, who "raised his brows / against his Maker" (XXXIV, 34–36), a gesture suggesting a kind of fatal arrogance. Instantly, Farinata becomes combative, bragging about how his family successfully crushed and expelled Dante's own from

Florence—twice even (X, 46–48). Since Dante, too, suffers from the contagion prevalent in Hell, he becomes verbally contentious, responding that *his* family "still returned, both times, from every quarter; / but yours were never quick to learn that art" (X, 49–51).

To illustrate the dynamic between Dante and Farinata in a contemporary and personal setting, I tell the students the following, near perfect "anecdote as antidote": Between 1972–76, I was lucky enough to have played college basketball at St. Ambrose College (now University) located in Davenport, Iowa. I sat the bench mostly, but it was still an honor to be on the team. My best friend and teammate Mike Kiss has three sons, who, in 1994, as they were growing older, wanted a chance to see their dad in action, playing basketball in college. So, I offered to find a film from 1976 against a big rival, where both Mike and I played together in the same game. I knew it was going to be tough to locate such a video, but I wanted to take a crack at this near-impossible search. My first thought was to call the best player on the opposing team who had played a very good game that day. My thinking was that, for sentimental reasons, perhaps his coach had given him the tape after the season since he, too, had been a senior, just like me and Mike and myself. Obviously, this was going to be a huge shot in the dark. I was operating on numerous assumptions and hopes: Did he still live in the same town? Did he own the film? Would he be willing to share the film? Would he even talk with me? I should add that I had never once spoken to this man in my life! When I called "Information" (back when people did that kind of thing—both my late grandmother and mother had been telephone operators), I discovered, much to my pleasant surprise, that he still did live in the same town, with a listed number. I was especially fired up: this was truly going to work! After a few rings, a man answered. A conversation began. I told him my name and that I had played at Saint Ambrose. He immediately interrupted and blurted out through gritted teeth, "Whenever we played in your gym, the refs cheated us every single time!" Literally, those were his very first words. So, I, clearly being the only real adult in this conversation, responded, "Oh, yeah? Well, when we came to your gym it was just as bad, maybe worse!" As I spoke with him, it donned on me, "Oh, my goodness. I am in the midst of a Farinata moment!" Hell is not always in the afterlife; I found myself, right at that moment, in the very middle of Dante's *Inferno* X. Fortunately, unlike in this Dante scene, we quickly put on our "big-boy pants" and worked it all out. Amazingly, he did have the video tape of that very game and I was able to show it to Mike's family. Happy ending! My point here being that what happens with the students, thanks to this particular intense "damned encounter," is that they are challenged to interrogate the mythology of competition which often percolates at the very core of personal self-definition in American culture today.

Dante's episodes challenge his readers to consider the ideas we hold most staunchly, and—not surprisingly—those are the ones most in need of interrogation, so as to genuinely progress by committing to our own strong values and by strengthening our intellectual and spiritual fitness. The reality of competition is certainly one of those that has almost reached near golden-calf status (Exod. 32:2–4). In addition, another play *with* words might help readers at this critical juncture in understanding how Dante's Hell works. It goes like this: "The *proposition* is that the *preposition* makes all the difference." The spirits of the damned are grounded in one key preposition with devastating spiritual implications: *against*. If students of *Inferno* can learn to read, with *against* sitting on their shoulder, they will have an especially beneficial lens to examine Dante's encounters with such damned souls as Francesca (V), Farinata (IX–X), Pier delle Vigne (XIII), Brunetto Latini (XV), Ulysses (XXVI), Bertran de Born (XXVIII), Count Ugolino (XXXII) and even Satan himself (XXXIV), all defined, destroyed and damned by *against*.

Incidentally, students engage in a "thought experiment" after they have earned their readership passage to Mount Purgatory. Eventually in Paradise they create new prepositions for the purpose of shaping their growing inner lives, ones that force them to move away from *against*—fresh, neological combinations, such as *towith* or *aboveon* or even *towithoverforunder*. Clearly, the current repository of prepositions simply falls short of what is required. Most importantly, what is needed are novel prepositions that can bridge the gap between *I* and *we*. Such a connective neologism could take us to a better place: one maintaining the integrity of the singular person, while still honoring collaborative relationships. Love might serve as both the center and the circumference of this newly created, vital space (*Vita Nuova* XII; *Paradiso* XXX, 10–12). Carefully navigating prepositional guideposts can provide first-time readers with the tools necessary to grasp a crucial fundamental at work in Dante's *Inferno*. The reason that this particular meeting with Farinata hits home with the students is that they are currently in the very throes of two particular struggles. First, instead of finding meaning from feeding their spirits within by being *present* to the present, my students enter class enmeshed in the college application process, often anxious about their future to such a degree that they become emotionally and spiritually paralyzed, buried symbolically in coffins where they are only half present (*Inferno* X, 31–33). Part of Farinata's hell resonates well with the seniors because as they write and stress over their college applications, they become so focused on a yet uncertain future, that they risk losing their sense of a tangible and meaningful present. Similarly to the damned in canto X who are blind to the present, college seniors might suffer from lack of perspective. They feel that the future is *against* them as a result. The destiny of Farinata's *contrapasso* is to serve eternity in an open tomb. Thus, Farinata has a false sense of openness to the future because he only sees the future but not the present. At the end of time, all that will be available will be the present. Thus, he is losing more and more sight and will ultimately know nothing at the end. He tells Dante that seeing things down the road is all that "the Highest Lord allots" (X, 100–02), but this actually adds to his torment since all he has is the future, and it has not happened yet, so he is living in Hell *against* himself. Fortunately, our students encounter Dante while at the same time meeting with terrific college counselors, who are constantly waving red (*read*!) flags warning the students about the pitfalls of defining themselves only by what is to come. Second, this hellish quandary festers also for the students often in the way they talk about sports. They often believe that they need to "play angry" *against* the opponent versus playing the game *with* the other team. For high school teacher/coaches, it is heartbreaking to observe really good kids being crippled by the negative energy expelled from the core of one *damned preposition*. Once again, "All the devils are here," and they are *against* us all.

Finally, at the very bottom of Hell, the students meet Satan, the "damned worm who pierces through the world" (*Inferno* XXXIV, 106–08). Satan is forever frozen, fixed up to his chest in ice with his three mouths chewing on the three worst betrayers in history: Judas, Brutus, and Cassius (XXXIV, 28–67). Amidst all this infernal and eternal grinding, Dante does not say one word in the presence of Satan. It is particularly fascinating to ponder why he remains silent here, given that he has spoken to numerous souls as he has made his descent. Dante is silent, perhaps, because by now he realizes that Satan does not deserve words, since he lives forever with the loss of the light.

Dante's exit route out of Hell can be challenging to imagine, but he manages to describe it masterfully. Responding to Virgil's offer, Dante holds onto his guide, and, using Satan's leg hairs as a kind of ladder, penetrates the center of the earth, pirouetting 180° into the southern hemisphere. It is here that the visual turns especially challenging, yet understanding the symbolism is doable and makes it worth the imaginative effort. Their timing must be just right as well. To that

end, Virgil and Dante wait until the perfect moment when Satan's wings finally create a hole (analogous to when the clown's nose and the windmill align in miniature golf). Since the earth is a sphere, a critical rotation is needed, and, subsequently, the pair begin to climb up. The pilgrim, and likely the reader as well, are a bit geographically discombobulated, but Virgil explains the issue in a way that helps Dante understand. The place he finds himself is "no palace hall" (XXXIV, 70–117, esp. 98). The turn, thanks to Virgil's assistance, nicely points to the role he has played so far for the pilgrim, guiding Dante down so that he can make a turn towards the light. Without the need for an ostentatious display of triumph, the pilgrim must simply "begin again" (Keen, *Beginnings* vii). Fortunately, though, he is not starting from scratch. Students, teachers and readers would do well to remind themselves that as one wakes up each morning, everyone can start over.

Suddenly, Dante and Virgil find themselves in a brand new place, having traveled through this tube-like channel, steered by the hopeful sound of running water still beyond the reach of their sight. Thus, *Inferno* ends with the two travelers aiming for the light, and "emerg[ing], to see—once more—the stars" (XXXIV, 127–39). The cleansing climb up Mount Purgatory is to follow.

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