ARTICLE

Dante's *Paradiso*: The Vitality of Healing Love

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SUMMARY

To set the tone for reading *Paradiso*, this article begins with an "anecdote as antidote" about the first homecoming of high school Dante teacher Milton Burke's daughter and how music can jumpstart a blessed, meaningful life. Such blessedness is experienced by Dante as "wholeness." Key scenes from *Paradiso* (II–III, IX, XV–XVIII, XIX–XX and XXX–XXXIII) are addressed to show how the essence of a blessed life is still possible today. Moments of "celestial cross-pollination" with references to modern literature also are highlighted. The article concludes with a detailed description of our Dante class' final exam, an opportunity that challenges students to think about Dante's whole journey with the help of folk music.

KEYWORDS: Beatrice, Cacciaguida, Pam Cardullo, Harry Chapin, Tom Chapin, Cunizza, Dante, John Denver, Eagle, Freedom, Anne Hills, Justice, Love, Moonspots, Robert Ortiz, Piccarda, Sam Rizzetta, Virgil, David Wilcox

The story of the *Divine Comedy* culminates in *Paradiso*. Therefore, it makes sense to begin with a heavenly "anecdote as antidote" in order to set the table for the Dante meal to come, one with a richly assorted menu. Once again, every good experience should begin and end with music. Thus, hanging tough with *Paradiso* means, at its core, to keep reading with courage, patience and openness so that the wholeness within the music of the spheres that Dante experienced can be shared. The heavenly gratification will be worth the effort.

Milton Burke, a former high school teacher from Fayetteville, Arkansas, and author of *Words Unbound: Teaching Dante's* Inferno *in the High School Classroom*, taught Dante in translation for many years. We have been friends since 1990 when we studied the *Divine Comedy* as part of a NEH Seminar for School Teachers, chaired by William Stephany. Over the years we have "talked Dante" often and also collaborated with our classes for a number of semesters by interviewing Dante scholars from around the world on the telephone. One afternoon, Milton and I were talking about children. In his rich, genuine Louisiana accent, Milton told me that when his daughter was born, he did none of the expected new-father things. What he did do, though, was to lie on the floor, resting his child on his chest and hit "play" on the stereo to share a *Brandenburg Concerto* with his daughter. I asked Milton why he did such a simple, yet surprising thing. He answered: "I wanted our daughter to know from the first moment in her home that there is order to the universe." Dante honors that order in *Paradiso*.

Paradiso, the third and final canticle of the *Divine Comedy*, which Dante finished just before he died in 1321, is the section that is the most challenging to study. It makes sense then to

wonder whether we prefer "known hells to strange heavens" (Keen, *Beginnings* 11), yet, nevertheless, reading *Paradiso* will be a rewarding, nurturing experience that will affirm the vital value of "costly grace" (Bonhoeffer 47). In her introduction to Dorothy Sayers's translation of *Paradise*, Barbara Reynolds, Sayers's friend and colleague, reconfigured a quotation from C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*: "The joys of heaven in our present condition are an acquired taste and Dante's *Paradiso* is about the acquisition of that taste" (13). Thus, reading *Paradiso* cultivates a kind of theological appetite. After readers hang in there for the first couple of challenging cantos, the rewards of learning to sample these foods of theology, grace, intelligence and Love that Dante puts on the table for his readers are more than worth the intellectual work. Giving up on reading *Paradiso* would simply rob the reader of the opportunity to share, with Dante, a glimpse of the God's whole light (*Paradiso* XXX, 38–42; XXXIII, 140–45).

At the very beginning of *Paradiso*, Dante still finds himself at the top of Mount Purgatory (*Paradiso* I, 43–48). This topographical positioning serves as a nice segue as he moves forward into Paradise since the climb up Mount Purgatory prepared Dante well to see Love clearly: Paradise is grounded in that Love. His story teaches the reader that those who enter Heaven have earned their healthy spiritual condition thanks to the successful ascent of the Mountain (*Purgatorio* I, 1–9). Because the chance to visit Paradise is such a rare and marvelous opportunity, Dante regrets being able to offer only segments of memory gleaned from his experience, and his recall is going to be incomplete at best (*Paradiso* I, 7–12). The power of music will hold this new experience together as he will sing about what he can recollect, just as he has been doing all along (*Paradiso* I, 10–12). Steadfast and courageous readers discover, right from the beginning, how they will be confronting moments of truth that are going to be elusive. Thus, in order to capture just the right tone for our Dante class, I rely on Robert Hollander who writes about two graduate seminars offered at Princeton, and as our class progresses on an alert and attentive reading of *Paradiso*, we, too, want to become a single, collaborative unit of fellow pilgrims slugging our way, together, into God's light (xvi). Actually, a productive way to view Dante at the start of *Paradiso* is to think of him as having the heart of an adult but still the mind of a child. Zen Buddhism can be helpful to appreciate Dante in this moment, as an adult with a "beginner's mind" (Suzuki xviii).

As Dante's new intellectual and spiritual guide/coach, Beatrice helps him to think deeply and to see accurately. With his untrained mind, Dante must now "begin again" (Keen, *Beginnings* vii) although he has already experienced symbolic purging while climbing Mount Purgatory. There is no room for intellectual cockiness when reading *Paradiso*, for readers must remain open to the simple fact that, when it comes to the big issues, they start as vessels needing to be filled (2 Tim. 2:21; *Purgatorio* I, 1–9). Beatrice's teaching strategy will be grounded in truth rather than merely in sentimentality. No gold stars will work here; Dante's life is on the line, and he needs to get it right (*Paradiso* I, 100–05). Dante's multifaceted befuddlement at the start of *Paradiso* reveals his confusion about where he is actually heading: he is flying home to his natural end (I, 109–11, 127–41) to meet the source of his *subsisto* (*Paradiso* XXIX, 13–15). Rather than downstream, the symbolic boat of Dante's spirit is now flowing *up*stream; the newness leaves him confused, yet eager (I, 136–38).

For the sake of clarity, in class we refer to *subsisto* (the conjugated form of a Latin verb *subsistĕre*) as the noun *wholeness*. This ready-made concept provides high school students with a clear lens through which to consider Dante's experience of blessedness and its subtleties. Along with Dante, in *Paradiso* II readers experience an initial, honest-to-goodness taste of how Heaven

works. First, Dante describes a mystery: how fast he moved into the “godly realm” (II, 20)—similar to an arrow hurrying towards its target, yet Dante remarkably depicts his inaugural move in Paradise as flying backwards from target to bow (II, 22–30). In this scene, the reader detects at work the literary device of *hysteron proteron*. Students often benefit from considering the use of this literary tool at this point in Dante’s journey. Perhaps Dante is affirming a metaphysical fundamental, one stressing the idea that motion is essential to the vitality of all relationships, even divine ones (*Inferno* I, 37–40) and this calls to mind Aristotle’s first mover (280). Sayers expresses this well when she chooses to present Heaven *before* Hell so as to honor the integrity of “God in Heaven,” as the only “unconditioned reality” (47). If readers view Dante’s *Paradiso* as a heavenly curriculum, with Dante enrolled in the Honors-level course, then it is evident from his first day in class that the bar has been raised, and he is expected to view himself and all of reality with a larger lens. “Professor Beatrice” is now working with a thirty-five-year-old man trying to negotiate a tough mid-life crisis and who is, however, spiritually still at near-infant status (I, 100–02). One thing is for sure, Beatrice demonstrates at the outset that she is committed to “early childhood education.” Truly, the “first years [do] last forever” (“First Years” 184). Her devotion becomes abundantly clear later in the sphere of the moon when she schools Dante on moonspots and their paramount value.

Dante writes about Heaven within the Ptolemaic cosmology where the earth is located at the center of everything, surrounded by ten spheres (technically nine, with the tenth being “a placeless place,” cf. Hollander xviii), the abode of God and those saved souls whose *subsistos* (XXIX, 15) are wholly one with God. While the medieval scientific model has been eclipsed by current research, this discarded image (Lewis, *Discarded* 12–14, 19) of the universe continues to benefit today’s readers because it serves as a model for the interconnectedness which is at the core of Love itself. Tangentially, but not less significantly, the former structure of the universe provides another opportunity for students enrolled in the Dante class to learn about folk singer/ humanitarian, Harry Chapin, since the Chapin family’s flagship song “Circle” affirms the soulful value and deep meaning of circles (Track 7). It is about time that Dante and Harry be connected. Thus, the story of Dante’s Paradise reveals a structure already in place, one that enables readers to see (*οραω*, in Greek) well Dante’s return to wholeness and Love. Indeed, the allegorical structure of the Ptolemaic universe is conducive to growth, as our hearts and spirits long for its comprehensibility. Most importantly, Dante learns from a scintillatingly enthusiastic Beatrice what C. S. Lewis asserts in *A Grief Observed* that “a shattering and disarming simplicity is the real answer” (71), that simple lesson being one that will sustain Dante throughout Heaven: aim your grateful eyes towards wholeness (*Paradiso* II, 22–30).

Dante’s interaction in the moon sets the stage for future heavenly encounters. His arrival is qualitatively different from the hopes of a NASA moonshot mission because the principle of displacement is not operative in Paradise. While there is no lunar splash, he actually penetrates the body of the moon. Alive and well in Heaven, however, is a principle of robust intimacy at work, and Charles Williams expresses it perfectly: “co-inherence” (92). The “first star,” as the sphere of the Moon is referred to in this canto, accepts Dante smoothly with both bodies’ substances maintaining simultaneously their own human and lunar individual integrity and wholeness (II, 30–36). Contemporary pop culture might declare that Dante and the Moon are very much “into each other.” This initial moment in Paradise acquires even more value for its synchronicity, while shedding some insight into the mystery of the Incarnation, i.e. hypostatic union (II, 37–42). From the outset, the main point of Heaven is to teach the reader that Love, at its best, ratifies the power

of "we" while, at the very same time and in the very same place, it likewise fortifies the integrity of "I." For high school seniors, who are grappling with important concerns, this definition of Love comes at an ideal time and feeds them well. As though it were not daunting enough to grapple with how God and Christ are considered one, and not two, a second mystery of Paradise seizes Dante's attention. On the surface, it appears to be a small and almost innocent issue, but not surprisingly, it cuts to the very core of *Paradiso*'s structure. In class, we call book segments that reveal something big like this "pulse moments." Our fundamental premise in class is that "book[s] [are] alive" (*Stone Reader*, Scene 12). So, just like when a caregiver takes a pulse to see if the patient is alive, readers can identify small scenes in a piece of literature that provide "pulse moments." Dante's query about why there are spots on the moon serves as a classic example of one of these minute, yet vibrating, scenes; thus, within the little is the big.

"Professor Beatrice" and Dante actually talk it through, resulting in Dante's deeper understanding of the big picture. This is a rich and familiar school scene for students, for this Heavenly discussion might resemble the spirit of any classroom when an educational sense of urgency prevails. Beatrice employs a stern, yet somewhat playful, approach with her "student." Similar to Socrates, she initially asks him for his thoughts. This teasing technique positions Dante where his intellectual error can most easily be exposed to himself just as the Buddhist maxim goes: "Don't believe everything you think" (Kida 12). When asked about the nature of the moonspots, Dante responds that their cause is "matter dense and rare" (*Paradiso* II, 58–60). He believes that the Moon's dappled appearance is determined by a possible varied quantity of moon material. Dante had already made that assertion in an earlier piece, the *Convivio* (Singleton 46). Without hesitation, Beatrice proclaims that Dante is wrong (II, 61–63). Her subsequent explanation, however, focuses more on quality than on quantity. The spots on the moon signify God's pervasive yet disparate distribution of light (II, 61–148). In fact, readers had learned this truth from the very first tercet (I, 1–3), yet its reinforcement while inside the "prima stella*"* (II, 30) challenges readers to consider the implications of this light-sharing process as revealing different dynamics within relationships on earth. For example, parents who love their children do not always love them identically. In school, a similar dynamic is at work; being fair does not always mean treating every student the same. These theological reflections enrich the active inner life of teenagers embarking on new, more adult challenges, yet such meditations can be complicated and challenging. The Humanities prepare budding readers to face tough hurdles by forging their inner lives with substance. Teachers serve their students best by not sugar coating the process of enlightenment; rather teachers and students alike strive to push each other to think it all through, with the hope of finding healthy nuggets of intellectual food, a bite from the "bread of angels" (II, 10–12). Beatrice's second, now fervent, response to Dante, whom she had just scrubbed clean with her teacher's brush, now fills him with living light (II, 109–11). Students feel liberated by this moment in the narrative and, therefore, often open up during class discussions. Finally, the most potent example of what Bill Stephany constructs as an image of "celestial cross-pollination" related to this distinction between "quality *vs*. quantity" and the life of the spirit in Dante comes from an unlikely source: a bumper sticker! While the connection is not a perfect fit, it nourishes well and evokes a smile: "If God is not a Tar Heel, then why is the sky Carolina blue?" *Paradiso* I–II offer clarity because the topics presented in those cantos summon readers to look up, pay attention and consider that the divine presence might be in our very midst, if only we learn how to look. Pouring down from the Empyrean is a kind of flowing river of energy cascading from sphere to sphere showing the vitality at the center of the universe working its way through all things. (II, 112–48).

Indeed, the Carolina decal supports Dante's readers as they digest the imperative to cultivate a strong sense of wonder, *maraviglia* (*Paradiso* I, 139).

The way God's radiance is shared in the Moon also presents an interesting paradox. Readers are provided the opportunity to make peace with this contradiction when Piccarda Donati arrives (III, 49). Dante states that every person in Paradise is filled with God's light, but the fullness experienced is not equal, calling to mind the moonspots. Piccarda's visit into the Moon functions as a tangible illustration of this apparent incongruity. This episode exemplifies that, even in Heaven, the examined life is always, at its core, about persons and not abstractions. Piccarda, the sister of Dante's close friend Forese Donati, had been violently kidnapped from her convent, and then physically assaulted during an arranged marriage (III, 103–08; Lansing 697–99). Yet, in Dante's narrative, she is seen as responsible for breaking the "relative" part of her vows while alive (IV, 109–14). In Paradise she is, nevertheless, filled with God's light according to her capacity. Perhaps our best conversations in class are generated by Dante's encounter with Piccarda. She clearly has arrived at a blessed state, yet, now, as Sam Keen reminds his readers in a different context, "[This] is when love gets interesting" (*Your Mythic Journey* 1:14). The following two points of discussion arise: First, Piccarda and her fellow shades smile at Dante's question about whether, now that they are whole, they want to move to a higher place, so as to be nearer to God (III, 64–69). The soul's near-grinning response to Dante's concern is akin to C. S. Lewis wondering about the final validity of all theological questions, "Peace, child, you don't understand" (*Grief* 69). Teenage readers love to ask, "How can a person be whole and *not* be ambitious? Is it not in our human nature to want to reach for more?" And, secondly, Piccarda utters perhaps the most often quoted line in *Paradiso*, "And in His will there is our peace" (III, 85–87). Students express intense curiosity about what the word *freedom* means within the spirit of a person who is whole, yet seems comfortable with being submissive (*Purgatorio* XVI, 80). They are frequently *worried* for Piccarda and for her other heavenly emissaries. Might it be more beneficial, students wonder, if the blessed were to participate in an exit-counseling process like that undergone by people choosing to leave abusive personal relationships? Clearly, studying the Humanities in general, and Dante specifically, generates the desire to strengthen students' "empathy muscles," as well as to foster hunger for some larger human questions.

Following his encounter with Piccarda, readers notice something unexpected. While the great deal of discussions about levels of blessedness and gradations of light may lead to the belief that Heaven is segmented into blocks, this is not the case. The souls whom Dante meets in the various spheres of the planets make their eternal home, not in any one planet, but rather in the one true Heaven, the "Empyrean" (*Paradiso* IV, 34–39). To meet and to educate Dante, these shades have descended into each star showing the pilgrim how grace's differentiating principle operates in Heaven (*Paradiso* IV, 34–42). Therefore Heaven, indeed, is not composed of several parts. However, it is Dante, as a human being with limited intellect, who needs to process the reality in pieces so as to digest the big picture. For first-time students of the *Divine Comedy*, seeing that an attentive universe rallies behind Dante can be undoubtedly a source of hope. Given the multitude of texts to which Dante refers within the *Comedy* as complements to his journey, students can consider the next time they spend time in a library that they, too, are being quietly swarmed by humanity's cheering section!

At a critical moment within the journey through the planet Venus, understood by Dante's cosmic layout as occupying the last sphere inside the conical shadow of the earth (IX, 118–20), he

meets Cunizza (IX, 32). That she appears to him within Venus is appropriate for, while alive on earth, she had been "conquered" by this "planet's radiance" (IX, 32–33). The presence of *contrapasso* (*Inferno* XXVIII, 142) is apparent even in *Paradiso* because she was heavily tied to worldly matters. Dante narrates how Cunizza experienced a rich, amorous history (Jewiss 241), yet a single tercet about her blessed life now constitutes a quintessential "pulse moment" and perhaps epitomizes the main message of the whole *Divine Comedy*. There is no whining on Cunizza's part: forthrightly, she acknowledges her mistakes to Dante in a tone that is not confessional, rather merely factual.

She is most spiritually whole, though, when she states, "But in myself I pardon happily / the reason for my fate; I do not grieve— / and vulgar minds may find this hard to see" (IX, 34–36). Cunizza's personal affirmation is the essence of the blessed life, and that loving mindset can be applied to all human beings. In canto IX, *Paradiso* readers are still trying to figure out its mysteries, can rest assured that Dante wants them to know that at the heart of reality is a liberating Love, one that guarantees that people need not suffer forever. High school students, in particular, crave for such an epiphany. Such freedom from the paralysis of guilt is one of the unexpected beneficial fruits waiting for successful readers of the *Divine Comedy*.

Dante recognizes that people should not be identified solely by their lowest moments. Among high-school-aged Dante readers, Cunizza's self-awareness fuels a fruitful discussion stemming from her almost off-handed observation that "vulgar minds may find this [radiant self-forgiveness] hard to see" (IX, 36). She expects that some people will struggle with her wholeness, perhaps thinking that she is being morally complacent, letting herself off the hook. Cynics might not trust enough in hope; they might even, out of a curious sense of bitterness, resent Cunizza and her blessed sense of self. Typically, however, adolescents deeply "get" Cunizza, for they know what it is like to have made poor choices and then have classmates or family members almost hold them hostage for a long time. Worse yet, often we ourselves will relentlessly dangle past errors over our own heads and, thus, hinder the aim of our sights towards wholeness. We must remember that human beings can and do make serious mistakes, for it is part of the human-nature packaging. Within varied shades of gray, no one is immune to mistakes; nevertheless, Dante's story instills hope that we can eventually arrive at a wholesome place within.

Cunizza's decision to forgive herself gladly (*Paradiso* IX, 34) is much more than simply excusing herself. She has already completed the climb up Mount Purgatory and, therefore, has paid her heavenly dues. In *Paradiso* IX, both Dante's literary and theological points are that Cunizza now and forever is allowed to be defined by the fullness of herself, by the best of who she is, rather than by her past poor behaviors. If all goes well in our reading journeys, perhaps someday we can all forgive ourselves for past forms of careless living and reading and commit to becoming better human beings. Theologically, a phrase that elucidates even further Cunizza's condition is "realized eschatology," and it challenges readers to ponder that the kingdom is already here (Luke 17:20–21). Paradoxically, while wholeness exists in seed-like form at this very moment, it is "complete but undeveloped" (*Your Mythic Journey* 8:15). Thus, one just needs to tend to that garden with care. Our lives are ultimately shaped by the very choices we make right now, and a modification of René Descartes' famous *cogito* can be useful to readers: "I *choose*, therefore, I am" (Part IV). High-school-aged students of Dante and of the Humanities need not wait until they grow older to wake up. The process can start immediately with students answering the call of books, as well as

by responding thoughtfully to the lure of other art forms. Cunizza is living proof of what is possible for all of us.

The "*kingdom* quality" (Duncan, *Brothers* 84) of this discussion about Cunizza can also be "cross-pollinated" thoughtfully with David James Duncan's *The Brothers K*, recalling the title of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. One section of Duncan's book acknowledges the energy within the Kingdom of Heaven mirroring the vitality of the saved souls in *Paradiso* (80–85). The episode in *Brothers K* is both playful and powerful at the same time. Also, a second novel by Duncan connects with Dante in meaningful ways. In the *The River Why*, the author considers several spiritual connections simmering within the sport of fly-fishing showing "his flies [being] constructed with a scrupulousness rivaling the Creator's" (5). This moment is reminiscent of the first sentence from the successful novel *A River Runs through It* by Norman Maclean, in which the narrator asserts with a flair of theological authority that "in our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing" (3). Although not canonical in any religious formal sense, all three sources by Duncan and Maclean are loaded with energetic and provocative moments, echoing scriptural scenes from varied sacred traditions. The image on the cover of *The River Why* shows a barbed hook, positioned in such a way so as to depict a question mark, calling to mind Sam Keen's playful fresh spelling of "quest-I'm-on" (*Hymns* 15). Such a visual representation invites every fellow-pilgrim reader to get "hooked" on the power of stories, especially the *Divine Comedy*.

In canto X, Dante first enters the sun. Typically, each tenth canto in the *Divine Comedy* forms a key moment of transition and *Paradiso* is no exception. Finding himself beyond the Sun's shadow, Dante penetrates the largest-encountered light during his journey so far. The intensity and sight of the light represents God: true, wholesome radiance itself (*Paradiso* X, 52–54). By noticing the manner in which the blessed appear, as Beatrice suggests, readers immediately realize that they have transitioned in a significant way. In fact, the souls whom Dante met within the first three spheres did not assume unique shapes. Instead, they revealed themselves simply as potent pieces of light (III, 109–11; V, 106–08; VIII, 46–48). Within the Sun, Dante, along with Beatrice, is crowned by two different circles of light, each populated by the souls of twelve intellectual luminaries stemming from throughout Western history (X, 64–69; XII, 19–21). The geometrical patterns of light formed by the blessed underscore the depth of Dante's journey towards wholeness. High-school-aged readers benefit from such visual patterns which serve to clarify for Dante the heavenly configurations' magnitude, for the blessed shapes can connect with the half-time extravaganza performed at a football game by, say, the Ohio State Buckeyes marching band. This sports example assists students visualizing Dante's creation of harmony and celebration, for Paradise honors this kind of fellowship and festivity. At this juncture, the two circles of light crowning Dante and Beatrice emphasize to readers that the two are being installed as visiting intellectual VIPs. What better place to affirm the Pilgrim's efforts at becoming himself, a stronger, brighter student of resurrection than within the sun?

"Thomas of Aquino" (X, 99), St. Thomas of Aquinas, is the first soul with whom Dante speaks inside the sun. To this day, St. Thomas remains a theological heavyweight, especially in Roman Catholic circles, one of those powerful people recognized by first-name only, like golfer *Tiger* (Woods) or basketball player, *Michael* (Jordan). However, the manner of introduction used by St. Thomas sets the heavenly tone for this particular encounter with Dante. Instead of initially introducing himself by name, St. Thomas first identifies his teacher, Albert of Cologne, by his

standing as brother, *frate* (X, 98). Perhaps high school readers, in particular, appreciate how St. Thomas exhibits humility at its best, by upholding the long-standing adage: "All of us can see only because we have stood on the shoulders of giants." At the heart of blessedness, coming even from a great one, lives, once again, the power of solidarity, "nostra vita" (*Inferno* I, 1). Once the encounters within the sun draw to a close, Beatrice and Dante move into a new planet. Dante's recognition of Beatrice's increasing radiance signals that he is making meaningful progress (XIV, 79–87).

Following the Ptolemaic progression, Beatrice and Dante reach Mars where martyrs are celebrated. Here the two stand at the foot of an intricate Greek cross comprised of lustrous blessed shades (XIV, 97–117). Cacciaguida, Dante's great-great-grandfather and his only relative mentioned in the entire *Divine Comedy*, approaches like a shooting star to meet and talk with his descendent, starting from his home base at the far point of the right beam and landing at the cross' base (XV, 13–24, 135). This encounter proves to be filled with urgency and meaning, conveyed by a novel example of the geometry of humility at work in Paradise. Setting the stage for this heavenly modesty, the reader learns that the longing for connection with family does not supersede the desire to remain connected, first and foremost, to the blessed fellowship that is grounded in God's Love. Thus, the route traveled by Dante's ancestor is not the direct one which would have meant leaving the cross and journeying down an easily available diagonal path, but rather he commutes along its the beams, staying linked with his fellow blessed lights, heading into the center and then descending to his anxiously waiting relative (XV, 19–24). Cacciaguida avoids succumbing to the temptation of taking a "Ulyssean shortcut" to his heart's desire (*Inferno* XXVI). By staying joined to his *frati*, traversing through the cross' center, Cacciaguida shows that, as a whole and blessed soul, he keeps the priorities of his loves in order. Avoiding the short cut, although probably more cumbersome, Dante's forefather role models for his descendant what it means to keep his focus. A song by John Denver, "Looking for Space," comes immediately to mind: "Then I look in the center, suddenly everything's clear" (Track 4). Dante reminds his readers they should travel the long way not because it is lengthy, but rather because it is often the route aiming towards wholeness. Finally, on an interesting structural level, Cacciaguida's scene in cantos XIV–XVIII is stationed near the very center of *Paradiso*. To depict, near the midpoint of the canticle, the seminal concerns of Dante's life as revealed by a passionate soul revering the center of the cross, reveals Dante's mastery at showing how form and content can work together in a meaningful way.

Once Dante and Cacciaguida become familiar with each other, the encounter moves onto serious ground, and it is Dante's hope that his "dear root" (XVII, 13) clarify for him questions raised on his journey, specifically about what life holds for him in the future (XVII, 19–24). A clear response is offered coupled with a reassuring smile (XVII, 34–36): Dante can expect to be exiled from his home in Florence (XVII, 55–60). Next, he will be doomed to wander with untrustworthy and ignorant companions until he finds safe refuge (XVII, 61–69, 70–94). Most notably, Dante is commissioned by Cacciaguida, his ancestor speaking with parental authority, to write about his experience in full, leaving nothing out (XVII, 127–29); being a "timid friend of truth" (XVII, 118) will be too costly. Thus, Dante should not worry about whether his story upsets people. While there might be a source of discord early on, over time, if digested well, Dante's account will be transformed into "living nourishment" (XVII, 130–32). Like the widow seeking justice for her killed son, Dante, too, must heed the call to "tell truth to power" (*Purgatorio* X, 73–93). Clearly, if we read to be fortified by the vital food served on a meaningful scale by the study

of the Humanities, the robust result will be a source of intellectual and spiritual growth. Most importantly, at the end of the day, healing stories will bring comfort to the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Having left Cacciaguida, Dante's next heavenly destination is the planet Jupiter. Not surprisingly (Zeus was the Greek god of Olympus and supreme king of gods), the issue of divine justice is finally confronted, a topic which Dante had not explicitly tackled since exiting Limbo (*Inferno* IV). The shades of past just rulers come forth in an especially ornate way: Dante sees a kind of helpful skywriting, "Love justice [...] / you who judge the earth" (Mandelbaum, *Paradiso* 369). It conveys a heavenly message more uplifting than the dreadful "Surrender Dorothy" declaration written in the Oz sky (*Wizard*). As Beatrice and Dante are watching the heavenly script, the *m*, the final letter of the word *terram*, morphs into the guise of an eagle (XVIII, 73–93, 97–108).

Virgil's eternal situation in Limbo is likely driving Dante's "hungering" for a thoughtful reply at this critical moment (*Paradiso* XIX, 31–33). It will be remembered that Virgil, the role model and hero and "the gentlest father" (*Purgatorio* XXX, 49–51) has been denied Heaven due to "bad timing" (*Inferno* IV, 31–42) for he died nineteen years BCE (Mandelbaum, *Inferno* 336), thus did not have a chance at Christian baptism. Responding eagerly (*Paradiso* XIX, 34–36), the Eagle seeks to offer Dante satisfaction. First, "that ensign" (*Paradiso* XIX, 37–39) takes a similar intellectual path as the Lord does "out of the whirlwind" (Job 38:1), pointing out that human beings have limits when it comes to understanding the divine plan (Job 38–42; *Paradiso* XIX, 40–69). At its core, the eagle asserts that human beings are never going to fully understand this issue, for its meaning is deeper than the sea (*Paradiso* XIX, 52–63). At this point, my high school students often express intense frustration with what they perceive as the Eagle's evasive explanation. It is clear to students that they have a gift encouraging them to think deeply, yet when they do so, they are told that the plan is beyond them. They ask, "Why invite us to ponder and then slap us down for pondering?" or "Is God behaving like a 'spiritual poacher'?" Adolescents are, by definition, appalled by mixed messages, with those coming from God's messengers being the worst! It is at this time that I remind them how important it is to "live the questions" (Rilke 27). Nevertheless, they are not amused! Teachers can reassure students at moments like these and teach them what Reverend Christopher Leighton taught me back in the mid 1980s: "True maturity is learning to make peace with ambiguity." Paradoxically, becoming comfortable with this kind of intellectual discomfort will serve students well for the long haul.

Eventually, the Eagle does address the topic of divine justice, but still skirts the issue of Virgil residing in Limbo. In lieu of a direct comment about the virtuous pagans (*Paradiso* XIX, 70–78), Dante is presented with a hypothetical scenario that focuses on geography rather than chronology, with a man being born on the Indus River rather than in Mantua. The traditional theological concerns about the afterlife of souls who never knew Christ are put forth, yet what is bypassed is a thorough response to the recurring question about justice and Limbo. Highlighted by the Eagle, though, are the spiritually fatal, final consequences for those claiming an intimate relationship with Christ but who failed to consistently and genuinely put their lives where their mouths were (XIX, 76–117). It is clear, given the Eagle's pedagogical strategy, that easy answers to complex questions are not part of the divine recipe. In fact, consistently, the *Divine Comedy* insists on readers avoiding intellectual and spiritual complacency, and the encounter within Jupiter strongly supports that principle. High school readers are drawn to Dante precisely because a close

reading of the *Divine Comedy* presses them to care for their own lives with a solid sense of purpose. To affirm such a mindful challenge, and before the Eagle introduces the "Final Six" comprising the its eye and eyebrow, Dante renders the voice of the Eagle as sounding like a "murmur of a torrent / that, limpid, falls from rock to rock, whose flow / shows the abundance of its mountain source" (XX, 19–21). To jumpstart thoughtful class conversations about this auditory image of justice, I have played a selection of Sam Rizzetta's hammered dulcimer music mixed with the sounds of flowing waters from mountain streams in West Virginia (Track 1). In class the post-music writing prompt is: "What features are heard in the recording that call to mind some aspects of divine justice according to Dante?" Key words like "consistency," "strength" and "surprise" usually emerge from student writing.

The *Comedy* stage is now set for meeting the "Final Six" blessed lights comprising the Eagle's pupil and eyebrow (XX, 37, 43). Imperative to note is that the eye of the Eagle dominates the reader's focus at this moment because medieval convention acknowledges sharp vision as a strong feature of eagles (*Beastiary*). Thus, if clarity about the nature of justice is to be found in Heaven, Dante (and the reader) are in just the right place to tussle with this topic. Dante's story wants readers to be wary of smugness regarding the big things; it is no surprise that the Eagle's eye is populated by the unexpected. Sam Keen asserts that we "remain free as long as [we] can be surprised" (*Beginnings* 67), and Dante's presentation at this crucial moment frees readers to grapple with how divine justice might work. Only two of the six blessed lights making up the eye (Constantine and William the Good) are traditional baptized Christians. Two of the other souls are Jewish Kings of note (David and Hezekiah). The presence of the final two (Trajan and Ripheus), who form a kind of light-parenthesis for the brow, is a bombshell revelation and leaves Dante stunned, for these two are pagans who made it into Paradise. His shock compels him to ask, "Can such things be?" (XX, 79–84). This pair of souls, Emperor Trajan and Trojan Ripheus (XX, 43–45, 67–69), received the gift of salvation for reasons that, for the reader, are difficult to reconcile intellectually and, frankly, emotionally. According to tradition, Trajan was called back to life by Pope Gregory and given a second chance to convert, and he accepted this opportunity (Singleton 334), while Ripheus, a Trojan mentioned in the *Aeneid*, simply has a reputation for being just (Virgil, II, 426–27). Moreover, Ripheus also "is the only one of them not to have been a king or an emperor" (Hollander 496). Most readers, nevertheless, are dismayed and heartbroken not to find Virgil in Paradise. Here, Dante leaves his readers hanging regarding absolute knowledge about divine justice. Not even the blessed already in Heaven know the last tally as to who will make the final cut (XX, 133–35). After listening closely to the Eagle the whole time, Trajan and Ripheus find a way to celebrate, in a lighthearted way, their presence on the eyebrow specifically, and within Paradise generally, by offering to Dante an authoritative and grateful wink in his direction (XX, 145–48). What should hungry readers and fellow pilgrims do now with such a quandary? This is exactly where pursuing the content of the Humanities is productive. Students learn healthy "aesthetic reception" (West 146) and it is within Humanistic Studies that students can steadily honor Keen's "quest-I'm-on" (*Hymns* 15).

Ultimately, having moved through the planet of Saturn, the spheres of the Fixed Stars and the Primum Mobile, Dante reaches the realm of God's full light, known as the Empyrean, which is beyond space and time (*Paradiso* XXX, 38–42). Dante's challenge at this truly grand moment rests in his struggle with finding just the right words to assist the reader in sharing a taste of his ultimate experience (XXX, 19–33). Beatrice remains his devoted spiritual and theological guide, and she directs him to notice and attend carefully a river of light (XXX, 61). While Dante suffered

as a young man from being denied Beatrice's *salute* (*Vita Nuova* X) nevertheless, he has arrived at the main source of a heavenly *salute* thanks to Beatrice's, stern, yet loving, leadership (XXX, 28–42). Perhaps, when he was young, he lacked the necessary maturity to receive a *saluto* from Beatrice, for, as C. S. Lewis teaches, "After all, you must have a capacity to receive, or even omnipotence can't give" (*Grief* 46). Dante's openness has been earned for sure, but he still has an additional task to perform so as to be truly *read*-y for a deep glimpse into God's brilliant light. Using "book talk" language to aid Dante, Beatrice teaches him that the river and the "living sparks" (XXX, 61, 64–69) are merely "shadowy prefaces of their truth" (XXX, 76–81), and in order to actually see ultimate reality as it is "for [his] betterment," he needs to bathe his eyes in the river of light (XXX, 82–90). Much like a hungry infant, he urgently thrusts his face into this river in order to cleanse his eyes (XXX, 82–84); thus, Dante undergoes a kind of spiritual laser surgery. Whenever readers bring eager, keen eyes towards and into books**,** the result is enlightenment, for the eyes and the intellect are being bathed. Thus, Dante's *Paradiso* supports readers as a background scaffolding for every subsequent book experience.

Dante's childlike enthusiasm at the river reveals his need to still develop a process of serious maturation. Mirroring the eagle's ritual of sight healing and purification by looking directly into the sun (*Bestiary*), Dante also bathes his eyes into the river of light. In the moment of spiritual knowledge following, Dante realizes that the river of light is indeed shaped like a perfect circle, and a gigantic one at that (XXX, 103–05). Similarly to how, even as adults, we can still enjoy children's music because it taps into that ever-young sensitive and receptive part of us, angels joyously "plunge" into the river after becoming "intoxicated with the odors" emanating from the flowers on the banks of flowing light (XXX, 67–69). Dante portrays the form of the blesseds' final home as a Heavenly Rose, reminiscent of an amphitheater (XXX, 117, 124).

Nearly twenty-five years ago, Kate Spies (Bryn Mawr, 1994) was enrolled in our *Divine Comedy* course, and a few months after class concluded, I received from her a thoughtful and meaningful gift: a framed photo of a climbing rose that she had grown in her backyard. Still today, it is prominently displayed in my classroom. A close look will reveal that there are multiple small buds in different stages of growth. I had not noticed the other blossoms initially. Her kind gift became all the more cherished—it has come to represent the difficult, but valuable, challenge to grow ("to blossom," that is) into a person who sees more clearly and more broadly. The photo is slightly blurred, as if Kate's aperture were precisely calibrated so as to catch the flowers literally growing! What a perfect Paradise image, one expressing how we are developing into our whole selves! Years ago, Christina Moran (Roland Park, 1997) captured the subtleties of *Paradiso*: she said that Heaven reveals moments of "imperfection made beautiful." Ultimately, Dante receives a wonder-full glimpse of God**,** appearing to him as three interconnected circles of light (XXXIII, 115–17). Because Dante is in the presence of living light at its brightest (*Paradiso* II, 109–11)**,** his vision continues to become sharper and more attentive, and as a result, the image of Christ appears fortuitously within the second circle (XXXIII, 130–32). A powerful key dynamic is at work at the end of *Paradiso* with the seer and the seen being in perfect partnership (XXXIII, 100–17). In a final paradox, though, Dante's freedom to respond meaningfully to the ultimate light is a direct consequence of his being conquered by that very light (XXXIII, 100–05). C. S. Lewis' description of this divine mystery in *Surprised by Joy* aids the reader's understanding of Dante's culminating experience: "His compulsion is our liberation" (229).

Dante's journey concludes, and, like all good experiences, the class discussion should end (*τέλος*, in Greek) in music, with "Terra Nova" (Pam Cardullo and Robert Ortiz) offering a hopeful invitation for the Humanities to provide the much-needed healthy nutrients: "You be on the lookout for someone bearing light and you'll find yourself an angel to walk you through the night" (Track 13, "Angels").

How does a teacher incorporate into the high school curriculum the extraordinary journey that Dante describes in the *Divine Comedy*, the challenging passages (both troublesome and uplifting) which students have navigated for one semester, the candid conversations, the moral and social self-discoveries that have occurred?

The students' final exam consists of a reflective paper about what was learned and discussed during the semester. Their final assignment begins by their listening to three pieces of music: "I Finally Found It, Sandy" by Harry Chapin, "Follow that Road" by Anne Hills and "The Kid" by David Wilcox. While listening, they respond by creating thorough "conversational marginalia" notes about the lyrics and melodies. To be honest, this exercise also provides an opportunity to feed folk music to the young students who do not realize that they are parched for it since it might not be a genre that quenches the musical thirst of today's adolescents. Having met every other day throughout the semester and having had fruitful and stimulating class conversations, they begin this final assignment by choosing their favorite song of the three, and then the students imagine how Dante might relate to that particular powerful piece of folk music. Since the *Divine Comedy* is a retrospective narrative that recounts what Dante describes as an actual journey through the realm of the dead, students understand the power of written thoughts after such a taxing journey. They know that sometimes writing down memories can be an undertaking so strong that it triggers experiences almost as intense as though they were actually reoccurring, a kind of recall that can be either euphoric or traumatic. Often the focus required by writing can be a source of appropriate healing, if needed.

Asked to imagine Dante in 1321 Ravenna, sitting in his easy chair, putting on his headphones, listening to the selected song, the students' final Dante activity consists of a sixty-minute writing exercise focused on the following prompt: "How would this particular piece of music help Dante to finally exhale and say, without equivocation, that his "journey [was] worthwhile" (Chapin, "There Only," Track 14)? The students then bring their marginal notes plus their hour-long piece of reflective writing to my home for a discussion after a dinner of Indian food. Often the discussions are thoughtful, provocative and honest, for the *Divine Comedy* is an open poem, with many rooms, many mansions, subdivisions and countries. Mostly, the experience gives the students a chance to exhale, just like Dante probably did at the end of his long journey of self-discovery. We have been together, fully with him, for the entire story. Such a gathering of fellow Dante pilgrims (my students and me) is simply fitting. We end our journey, together, with Dante "alive in [us]" (*Stone Reader*, Scene 12). "Nostra vita" (*Inferno* I, 1) has been celebrated, folk music has been reclaimed, and chicken masala has finally taken its place among "the bread of angels" (*Paradiso* II, 10–12). Read Dante.

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