

# Introduction: Teaching Dante

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**Abstract:** This introduction to the Special Issue “Teaching Dante” summarizes the volume’s essays and discusses the conference at which they were initially presented.

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In October 2014, Samford University hosted its inaugural biennial conference on “Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition.” Drawing more than fifty scholars from thirty-plus universities, and supported by a generous grant from the Lilly Fellows Program in the Humanities and the Arts, “Augustine Across the Curriculum” was designed to help non-specialists teach the writings of Augustine more effectively in undergraduate core and general education classes. Anchored by plenary addresses from Peter Iver Kaufman and Kristen Deede Johnson, a selection of conference papers was published in a special issue of *Religions* in spring 2015, helping to disseminate the interdisciplinary insights of “Augustine Across the Curriculum” to a wider international audience. Building upon the energy and partnerships established at this conference, Samford developed a companion initiative: a biennial “Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition Summer Institute.” Led by faculty from Samford’s University Fellows Program, this week-long residential seminar met in June 2015 and focused on “Teaching Dante’s *Commedia*,” with more than a dozen faculty from the fields of history, classics, English, philosophy, and theology engaged in a close reading of Dante’s masterpiece. Both biennial initiatives—the conference and the summer institute—flow from a common conviction that Samford shares with many universities and colleges across the country: in this era of intense competition for resources, when the liberal arts are increasingly valued (or devalued) in terms of the “skills” and “measurable outcomes” they produce, it is more important than ever to support institutions and faculty committed to teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition, and teaching it well.

The essays gathered in this special issue represent selected papers from the third biennial “Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition” (TCIT) conference, this one focused on “Teaching Dante.” Building on the success of the second TCIT conference (2016’s “Teaching the Reformations”), as well as a second TCIT summer institute (2017’s “Virgil and the Modern Christian Imagination”), “Teaching Dante” attracted another large gathering of scholars from across the disciplines. In his opening plenary address, which also serves as the opening essay of this collection, Albert Russell Ascoli, President of the Dante Society of America, raised questions and issues that resonated throughout the three-day conference. The same is true for how that address shapes this current collection. Exploring a “guiding thread in [his] own research on and teaching of Dante’s great poem,” Ascoli skillfully connects three key moments from the *Divine Comedy*: Dante’s encounter with the five classical poets in *Inferno* Canto 4; the encounter Dante and Virgil have with another classical poet, Statius, in Cantos 20–22 of *Purgatorio*; and a “remarkable six-canto suite” in *Paradiso* where pilgrim-Dante undergoes a series of doctrinal tests on the theological virtues, quizzed by the likes of Peter, James, and John. Among the many rich conclusions one can draw from these three encounters, Ascoli illuminates how these scenes address a “perennial pedagogical problem” faced by all teachers of Dante—that is, “how to account for the extraordinary spectacle of a first-person epic that at once expresses deep piety with profound ‘charitas’

(spiritual love) and appears as the absolute height of a self-aggrandizement seemingly inconsistent with Christian humility." In addition to addressing this tension between Dante-the-poet's secular ambitions (primarily, the "pattern of self-authorization" that runs throughout the work) and the "narrative of spiritual evolution" that Dante-the-poet crafts for Dante-the-pilgrim, these three key scenes also answer another challenge faced by all teachers of the *Divine Comedy*: "the problem of connecting the experiences of the three different realms in a way that brings out both the immense scope and incredible specificity of Dante's poem." For Ascoli, Dante's quick acceptance as the sixth poet of the "bella scola" in *Inferno* 4 temporarily suggests "both humility and self-affirmation," but the fact that pilgrim-Dante quickly moves on to the next circle of Hell accompanied only by Virgil ("the company of six is reduced to two" / "sesta compagnia in due si scema" [*Inf.* 4.148]) also suggests that "Dante, as poet, has already moved beyond the spiritual limitations that constrain the other five . . . to Limbo." This movement of simultaneous humility and self-affirmation continues in the extended encounter with Statius in *Purgatorio*. While these cantos do draw an "immediate identification" between the pilgrim and Statius (for instance, Statius and Dante are the only purging sinners in the *Purgatorio* who pass between the boundaries that separate levels), they focus "primarily on the interactions between Statius and Virgil" and, with their "explicit and repeated echoing of the 'bella scola'," they reproduce and revise *Inferno* 4. Because these cantos "systematically intertwine questions concerning the special role of 'poet' and those concerning Christian faith or lack thereof," this extended encounter makes us think more deeply about poetry and conversion. However, "[w]hat is left unspoken, though it is structurally obvious already in the episode . . . is that, of the three, Dante alone is both a Christian and the author of a Christian poem." Thus, echoing *Inferno* 4, Dante "[o]nce again . . . becomes part of a community of writers, clearly cast as the last and least in dramatic terms; although, once again, it is implicitly obvious that the last will be first." This drama of humility and assertion culminates in *Paradiso* with Cantos 22–27. Here, Dante-pilgrim once again joins a company of writers, but instead of poets he meets "sainted souls who were apostles on earth, the three favored apostles of Jesus . . . who, among other things, participated in the Transfiguration." In addition, Peter, James, and John are authors of New Testament Epistles (as well as one Gospel and the Book of Revelation), and "although in the narrative order of the canticle Dante does leave them behind him, at least temporarily, there is certainly no question of his 'superseding' them as he does with the pagan poets and Statius." The same holds true for Dante's relationship with Paul, who is "alluded to but never met in person," but with whom "Dante invited comparison from the very outset." In these cantos, Dante "undergoes a formal, tripartite examination that, as he says, is analogous to the scholastic ritual of the 'bachelor' being tested to determine his worthiness to be granted the title of 'magister' or 'maestro.'" Successfully passing this theological "examination," Dante assumes "the role of Christian poet par excellence distantly anticipated in *Inferno* 4, and that Dante implicitly occupied in *Purgatorio* 21 and 22, and then more explicitly assumed on his entrance into the Earthly Paradise." *Paradiso* 25 opens with Dante calling his work a "'poema sacro,' a holy poem, to which both Heaven and Earth have put their hands," thereby highlighting how, via his journey from Hell to Paradise, he has "achieved the capacity to write this 'consecrated poem,' in which, as we have seen, he will assume the starring role."

Complementing Ascoli's plenary addresses, this special issue also contains eleven additional essays. They are grouped loosely from works dealing with comprehensive approaches to the *Divine Comedy* (essays on such topics as how to train students to read Dante's epic and which themes may resonate most with students) to essays which focus on a single canticle (specifically, two essays on *Inferno* and two on *Purgatorio*). In the first of these eleven essays, John Edelman acknowledges how the time constraints of an undergraduate syllabus often limit faculty to teaching solely from the *Inferno*, but he then provides a way for teachers to assign selections from all three canticles. He does this by highlighting cantos that develop "the notion that student-readers of the *Divine Comedy* are called upon by the poem to be not mere observers of the experiences of the poet-pilgrim but to become themselves 'pilgrim-readers.'" Central to Edelman's reading is the poem's treatment of "divine justice," in particular how both Dante and his "pilgrim readers" grapple with the confusion presented by

the “harsh justice” of the *Inferno* contrasted with the “exceedingly lenient” justice of the *Purgatorio*, a confusion students miss if they remain only in the first canticle. This confusion is then complemented by “the fundamental emotional contrast between the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*—between humble repentance and the peace that surpasses all understanding—one of the reasons for taking students beyond the *Inferno* through to the *Purgatorio* and on to the *Paradiso*.” Thus, it is only when Dante and his pilgrim readers allow themselves to be bewildered that they experience the fullness of God’s mysterious grace and justice. Attentiveness to this mystery, which can only be achieved by reading from all three canticles, teaches students that we are all pilgrim readers when it comes to life’s difficult challenges, where “doubts, perplexities, and questions are not to be dodged—any more than their complete resolution is to be expected.”

For Matthew Rothaus Moser, Dante’s poem also has a transformative effect on its readers. In “Understanding Dante’s Comedy as Virtuous Friendship,” Moser notes that Dante, in his epistle to Can Grande, proclaimed his intent to move his readers from “a state of misery to a state of happiness.” That movement rests, in large part, on a moral and religious transformation that cultivates the virtue of hope and culminates in the beatific vision of God, and Moser reads this journey, undertaken by both Dante and his readers, as establishing “a kind of virtuous friendship” between poet and audience. Through a close reading of *Inferno* 3, *Purgatorio* 5, and *Paradiso* 20, and complemented by specific pedagogical strategies and assignments, Moser encourages his students to “think with the *Comedy* as a project of self-knowledge and intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth and formation.” From the outset, this requires shifting student expectations, for as Moser notes, “my students expect to meet Dante as someone who wants only to give them answers rather than one who is committed to asking questions of them.” The poem’s “reformatory character,” operating through “surprise, shock, [and] misdirection,” takes many forms, among them the poet’s repeated celebration of divine mystery,” which students must understand “not [as] an epistemological dodge, but [as] a rhetorical strategy to open up a space for the virtuous action of understanding, of knowing what to do or say next: to hope, to love, and to pray.” Just as Dante’s journey opens him up to this virtuous action, so too is the reader asked to “share the pilgrim’s surrender in faith and active performance of hope and love in prayer.” According to Moser, students can “perform” the *Comedy* in this way “only after personally wrestling with the cold logic of Hell, after feeling the ground shifting under their feet as mount purgatory shakes from the earthquake of mercy, after confronting their own ignorance of the mysterious depths of the divine will.” By sharing this “beautiful grace of holy ignorance” with his readers, Dante is himself being a “virtuous friend,” and that friendship is most explicit in the poem’s final silence, where that silence not only “speaks the truth of God to us” but also leaves us “at a point of desire,” refusing to do “our work for us.” This silence is Dante’s “most profound act of virtuous friendship precisely because it refuses to give to the reader answers to questions they have not yet *personally* investigated.” The poem, then, encourages us to set out “on our own pilgrimage toward becoming a person of perfect virtue, which is to say, to be grounded by faith, to be animated by hope, and to be moved by Love in compassionate prayer.”

In his contribution, Sean Gordon Lewis sees a different kind of challenge for teachers of the *Divine Comedy*. Whereas Moser’s approach is cast for students taking an upper-level theology class on the “Christian Imagination,” Lewis seeks “to answer the question of how one can effectively teach the Christian vision in Dante’s *Commedia* to undergraduates who have little or no religious formation.” Noting that his methods for teaching the poem differ in a freshman humanities course than in an upper-level literature elective on the Epic, Lewis offers several different strategies that “are useful in presenting Dante’s work to non-religious students without sacrificing the epic’s specifically Christian content.” Central to these strategies is the *Purgatorio*, where Dante not only “begins to complicate the rules of the afterlife” that students find so troubling in the *Inferno*, but also provides “a Christian vision [that] is actually more nuanced than [students] might have thought, and more relevant to their own lives.” This also holds true for the *Paradiso*, which non-religious students at first resist, but can be made to appreciate more fully through “contemporary poems about mathematics and science,”

which provide “apt analogies to begin, at least, to carve out a place for metaphysical poetics in their understanding of literature.” In both cases, Lewis turns to “Humanist Theology” as a way to “meet [students] where they are” and to encourage them to meditate on “mysteries that are evident simply to reason and lived human experience, apart from revelation.” Such an approach opens up discussions of “mercy,” “free will and love,” and “the inexpressible,” all of which will interest humanists as well as Christians. The larger goal, of course, is to “leave students, regardless of their faith, with some taste of the complexity of Christian thought, and hopefully an appreciation of its positivity and nuance,” even if that positivity and nuance is “seen strictly through a humanist lens.” Although acknowledging the limitations of attempting “to bring Dante’s essentially theological poetics into a solidly human realm, in order to reach students of any faith (or no faith),” Lewis does not see such limits as a violation “of Dante’s own epic, since what do we see in the Second Person of the Trinity?—‘la nostra effigie’: ‘our [human] figure.’”

The next three essays in the collection situate Dante in different contexts, the first in a course on the history of Christian theology, the next two in courses in literary studies. For Bryan J. Whitfield, the challenge is how to bring Dante into the curriculum outside of core classes and Great Books programs, the only place outside of literature courses where students are likely to read and discuss the *Divine Comedy*. One solution is to read Dante as a theologian as well as a poet, which Whitfield does in his “History of Christian Theology” course. Because the course is designed to explore “the ways theology and Western culture interact,” Dante can play a significant role, particularly for teaching the medieval period. Noting that “[a]ny effective study of [this] period requires students to integrate insights from several disciplines,” Whitfield argues that Dante’s epic “provides the paradigmatic example of the interaction of theology and culture in the West.” Reserving five weeks on his syllabus for a guided reading of the *Paradiso*, and treating Dante as a representative medieval theologian, Whitfield carefully outlines his approach, concluding that Dante’s “sacred poem” can provide students with three ways to understand the interaction of theology and Western culture: first, that theology “is not a discipline removed from other spheres of life but integral to them”; second, that “the Christian tradition shapes the West and is at the same time shaped by the culture, as [Dante] both receives and transforms the theological tradition he inherits”; and, finally, that great theologians have a strong “afterlife” because, like Dante, they continue to influence Western culture in variety of fields, such as poetry, music, and the visual arts. In their essays, both Christopher A. Hill and Sarah Faggioli are interested in afterlives as well. For Hill, one of Dante’s most interesting contributions to literary history—one of his afterlives—is how well his poem helps readers to meet the interpretive challenges posed by “dense and lengthy poems,” a.k.a. the “big books” of Hill’s title. Noting that most undergraduates are taught to read for “information-retrieval,” Hill urges faculty to teach “longer, more allegorical and symbolic poems” such as the *Divine Comedy*, Spenser’s *Fairie Queen*, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, all of which cultivate in the attentive reader a better experience of literature, one premised on “understanding” more than mere information, and one that pushes students beyond sense and speculation. In fact, each of these epic poems is interested in remaking “not only its narrative characters but also its readers” (a theme that is common to many essays in this collection). By teaching poems that offer a “challenging, even daunting [reading] experience,” we give our students the opportunity to undertake their own challenging and daunting quests, an experience that cannot be easily replicated in other forms of reading. As Hill so forcefully articulates toward the conclusion of his essay, “However dark the wood or steep the path, whatever the burden, the understanding reader will embrace it all as a totality, gaining in the experience forms of knowledge and skill that are much greater than the sum of their parts. These skills and knowledge, once gained, are never static or simple, but can inform every intellectual phase of a student’s career. Thus, do epic poems manifest the greatest kind of reading possible, and the greatest teaching of that art they so dramatically require.” For Sarah Faggioli, Dante’s epic provides a form of knowledge that also has an afterlife across time. In particular, Faggioli explores how the *Divine Comedy* can serve as a “frame” for discussing love in literature from the medieval period to the present, and she traces this discussion as it occurs in her two-semester undergraduate seminar. First semester

readings such as the Gospel of Mark, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Dante's epic raise questions about lust, romantic love, and *caritas* that remain unanswered by semester's end, and will be raised again in the following term in works by Francis of Assisi, Vittoria Colonna, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Flannery O'Connor, and Gabriel García Márquez. Of the authors in the fall semester, Dante has the greatest afterlife on questions of love as students in the spring semester see again and again how his insights have either directly influenced other authors or can provide ways to understand what these authors have to say about love. For Faggioli, Dante's journey, which begins in "the farthest place from God and His love" and ends "with a vision of God and of the entire universe as moved by His love," can help students to grasp more deeply their own journey in search of "the very human experience of love," especially in "this lonely, individualistic, modern-day world."

Julie Ooms's "Three Things My Students Have Taught Me about Reading Dante" is a fitting way to round out the first part of this collection. As with the many of the previous essays, this work is attuned to the transformative power of the *Divine Comedy*, only Ooms is here more concerned with the poem's power to transform faculty, and not simply students. Noting that many of us who teach the poem, especially in general education courses, see Dante's work as "an opportunity to teach [our] students to humble themselves before texts older and greater than students' own personal views and experiences," Ooms warns us that this approach can "blind professors to the important lessons their students have to teach them about Dante, about pedagogical techniques, and about the professors themselves and their own biases." In particular, Ooms shares a series of stories that highlight moments when, "through their questions and in their applications of the text," her students taught her about humility, and about reading Dante. First, after framing Dante's first meeting with Virgil as the meeting of one man and his "hero," Ooms was surprised when a student-athlete pushed back on this metaphor, seeing Virgil as more of a "mentor" than hero, as someone Dante saw as a "personal teacher and friend rather than someone he admired only from afar." This new metaphor allowed Ooms to take her discussion that semester in a different direction, particularly in a class full of student-athletes, and to raise issues related to skill development and career preparation. Next, Ooms relates how student responses to *Inferno* 13—The Wood of the Suicides—have reshaped the way she teaches this troubling canto. Originally, she prefaced her discussions by "declaring from the outset . . . that I did not agree with Dante's definition of suicide as mortal sin." She did so, she believed, because she "was trying to be sensitive," but she soon came to realize that she was "inadvertently and implicitly telling my students that their anger—at friends, at family members, at their own moments of crippling self-doubt—had no place in the discussion." Now, instead, she tries to provide ways for students to express their anger and grief in class, and although she is still not satisfied she has fully done so, she promises to "keep working on more ways to encourage that empathy and to provide a place for my students to respond to their own experiences of suicide." Finally, Ooms tells of "the most significant lesson" her students have taught her as they "walked through Dante together." After she reminded her students one day that the lowest circle of Dante's Hell is reserved for those who have committed various types of fraud—who have willfully and maliciously misused "the good of the intellect"—one of her students asked, "So, does that mean the smartest people usually end up in the bottom of Hell?" Admitting that "[on] the face of it, his point isn't even technically correct," Ooms "went with it" and spent a good deal of the period "talking about the idea that intellectual power could potentially lead people to worse sins." Eventually, this discussion led Ooms to examine more closely her "own default positions and prejudices": "I, like many other academics do, rely on intellectual prowess to justify myself and to construct my identity, and I am often—no, always—tempted to equate intellect with genuine thoughtfulness and, especially, with wisdom. But it is neither of these. And the misuse of intellect can easily draw us, myself included, into the deepest of sins." In the end, Ooms understands that her students have taught her that teaching the *Divine Comedy* is about teaching her students, and herself, to love more deeply, for, as Dante says in *Purgatorio* 17, "love alone/is the true seed of every merit in you, / and of all acts for which you must atone."

The final four essays in the collection each address a specific canticle. David Chapman and Dennis Sansom focus on the *Inferno*, with Chapman emphasizing the canticle's engagement with classical mythology and Sansom placing Dante in dialogue with contemporary philosophy. For Chapman, one of the challenges of teaching Dante is how often students find "themselves lost in a strange wood of symbols and allegories that are remote from their education backgrounds." Specifically, students seem baffled by the strange "intermingling of actual historical characters and mythological figures" because, in their academic experience, "there is a rather strict division of history and literature, fact and fiction. We don't expect a story about the Vietnam War to include references to Apollo and Zeus." In fact, "the whole idea of mythological characters seems somewhat suspect [to them]. Shouldn't we be more concerned with real people and real events than fictional ones?" Of course, this estrangement opens up opportunities for teaching students about "mythology as a means of expressing human value," in particular how myth is a "fluid and malleable" way for writers to engage the past and revise it for their own purposes. Nowhere is this more evident than in Dante's retelling of the myth of Odysseus, a story that had been circulating for more than 2000 years before Dante revised it in *Inferno* 26. By comparing Dante's revision with Book 12 of the *Odyssey*, students can see how Dante takes the original story away from "the familial values of Homer" and reconceives it as a tale about our "proper relationship to God," with Odysseus not dying "a hero's death . . . in the company of his family and devoted nation," but instead suffering eternal damnation for lying to others and sacrificing them to "his own maniacal pursuit of adventure and glory." "By examining Dante's re-envisioning of Homer's heroic warrior," Chapman writes, "we can begin to focus [class] discussion not on the apparent contradictions between the two stories, but on the work that myth performs in helping us explore our own cultural values. How we tell Odysseus' story—and by extension how we tell any myth—is based in large degree on what we want the story to tell about us." For Sansom, the illuminating connection in the *Inferno* is not back to Homer but forward to Richard Rorty. According to Sansom, the *Inferno* has much to teach us about "the relationship among human nature, moral order, and the vices," and this relationship is best understood by contrasting Dante's vision with Rorty's thoughts on "the contingency of language, selfhood, and community." For Rorty, the "truly modern person" is the "liberal ironist" who "continually remakes her or himself by adopting new metaphors for living." For Dante, this is non-sensical and, as Sansom argues, one of the reasons this is so is because Rorty's vision represents a failure of "the moral imagination," providing "no way to prevent or correct the 'reasonably vicious' person." Against Rorty's "liberal ironist," Dante offers "the pilgrim," a metaphor which better elucidates "the inherent necessities of moral action" and helps "students to understand more deeply how the moral imagination shapes and directs their lives." In the end, Dante exposes the shortcomings of Rorty's vision, which "does not help us to understand why some people can be informed, deliberate, and rationalizing of their behavior but be also committed to cruelty and harm of themselves and others." Because Rorty offers us "contingency without telos," he "has no way to use his ideas to prevent the reasonably vicious from happening; he gives no basis for a prophetic ethic that would warn us of the 'inferno' that awaits all who aim for the wrong aims, even if they are sincere and rational in doing so."

In the two concluding essays, Jane Kelley Rodeheffer and Paul Camacho help us through the difficult terrain of the *Purgatorio*. As Rodeheffer notes, students find this section challenging "on a number of levels"; however, those challenges can be addressed by a close reading of Cantos 29–33, where "Dante the poet provides a window through which the reader can interpret the pilgrim's journey in the third and final part of the *cantica*." In these cantos, Dante makes several references to the Emmaus story in the *Luke* 24, and reading that story alongside of Cantos 29–33 can help students to unpack Dante's experience in the *Purgatorio*. To build her case, Rodeheffer relies on Eric Aurebach's explication of Dante's "figural system," whereby the poet, in Aurebach's words, "combines two events, causally and chronologically remote from each other, by attributing to them a meaning common to both." For instance, the appearance of Jesus in *Luke* 24 and Beatrice in the *Purgatorio* "are attended by a series of images that serve to map one story onto the other," marking Beatrice as a clear *Figura*

*Christi*. Additionally, “the most striking aspect of the two texts is the veiling of the Christ figure.” Just as Jesus draws near to the two disciples but remains a stranger to them (“their eyes were prevented from recognizing him” [Lk 24:16]), Beatrice is often veiled from Dante, who describes her as appearing within a “cloud of blossoms,” adorned in “a veil of white,” a figure he “could not see . . . with [his] eyes” (XXX 25–37). As with Cleopas and his companion in *Luke 24*, Dante is prevented from seeing clearly “until [he has been] properly chided by the veiled Christ,” revealing a slowness of heart common to “all Christian pilgrims, who fail to understand that the recognition of their true good is an affair of the heart.” Of course, Dante’s figural system does more than simply point out connections between his poem and the Emmaus story, between Jesus and Beatrice; it also points to “something beyond.” That “further horizon” becomes clear when students note that, in “gazing at the nature of God incarnate, Dante is both satiated and left yearning for more (“While my soul, filled with wonder and with joy / Tasted the food that, satisfying in itself, / Yet for itself creates a greater craving” [XXXI 127–29]). This craving “suggests that even the revelation of Christ in Beatrice is a provisional event, namely a figura of the eternal reality that, while always already fulfilled perfectly in God, is a matter of hope and anticipation for us.” Moreover, it is important for students to see that “Dante’s recognition of Christ in Beatrice takes place within a procession of the Church Triumphant,” because “[w]hile the ideal of the Church Triumphant has already been fulfilled in God through God’s providence, it exists beyond time and as an historical event, it is veiled and obscure and will remain so until we see Christ face to face.” In the end, highlighting Dante’s use of *Luke 24* as part of a larger “figural system” not only helps students to appreciate the poet’s vision “of an essential passage in Christian life,” but it also “brings them into the Medieval European world of interpretation.” Doing so allows students to partake in a “dance of figuring and prefiguring that gives meaning to the text of *Purgatorio* while simultaneously preserving that mystery of slowness of heart giving way to conversion, repentance and forgiveness, which forms the soul of the entire poem.” So attuned, “students of the *Purgatorio* may just be encouraged to ask what Dante’s narrative process—layered as it may be—could mean for their own recognition of Christ.”

Paul Camacho’s essay on Cantos 17 and 18 of the *Purgatorio* rounds out this volume. According to Camacho, Virgil’s discourse on love in these cantos—which lie at the very center of the *Commedia*—invites us to employ love as a hermeneutic key to the full poem. Placing his approach to Dante’s epic within a larger philosophical tradition, Camacho argues that the poet, like Plato and Augustine, understood “true education” as “metánoia,” that is, “the radical conversion of mind and life that each of us must achieve in a personal and decisive way.” Reflecting on “what it would mean to teach Dante’s *Commedia* for the sake of conversion or metanoia,” Camacho turns to the *Purgatorio* as a means of exploring “how we conceive of the end or goal of our teaching, and . . . how we might imagine anew the practice of our teaching in light of Dante’s own intrinsic pedagogical methods and practice.” The *Purgatorio* is a better resource than either the *Inferno* or the *Paradiso* for exploring these issues because, unlike these other canticles, the *Purgatorio* is dedicated to transformation. In fact, it is the only canticle in which Dante’s characters and Dante’s readers exist in time, because “only here is there the possibility of change and growth. If we read the *Commedia* to learn how to love better here and now, in this world, it is the *Purgatorio* that will provide the blueprint.” Dante’s poem, then, “presents a pedagogy of love, in which the reader participates in the very experience of desire and delight enacted in the text,” and Virgil’s discourse on love is an essential part of “educating” that desire and delight. First, that discourse “gives us the central animating idea of the entire *Commedia*: “Neither Creator nor His creature . . . / was ever without love, whether natural / or of the mind.” Following Vittorio Montemaggi, Camacho sees these lines as embodying “the drama of divine love . . . [that] unfolds in the *Commedia*”; that is, “the drama of the human community itself which chooses to reject, strives to understand, and finally accomplishes participation in the love that made it.” Virgil’s discourse also helps students to understand that love “is the seed of every virtue and of every deed that merits punishment,” and in turn requires faculty to ask “what difference does such an anthropology of desire make for the way we teach our students, especially if we consider our vocation to be the same as Virgil’s, i.e., if our aim is not only to impart information, but also to accompany our students on their

difficult journey of intellectual and moral conversion?” Here, then, is the heart of Dante’s poem and Camacho’s reading of it. The move that Dante’s pilgrim takes from ignorance through awareness to intellectual contemplation “function[s] to effect in the student a love for ultimate things,” and our teaching of the poem must assist in that transformation. Taking up Augustine on “the weight of love” and the freedom that comes with loving “absolute” beauty, Camacho insists that our teaching of Dante must direct students to this kind of experience: “The human being, like the sun and all the other stars, is moved by love. When that love lessens, when the heart loses some of its restlessness, then it is beauty and beauty alone that will rekindle the flame of desire.” Ultimately, “as Virgil teaches in his Discourse, as Dante dramatizes throughout his entire poem, and as Augustine developed in his philosophical reflection on freedom, conversion comes not from the screwing up of will but from the honing of loving-attention in festive celebration and ‘entirely active mindfulness,’ a consent and celebration of the good of being.” Thus, the “more we can help our students give themselves over to that ‘consent and celebration,’ to the ‘essentially joyful vigilance’ that is ‘celebrating mindfulness of the ultimate powers,’ the stronger their voices will become. Radical conversion will be the response of a soul shaken awake.”

Souls shaken awake: all of us who teach the *Divine Comedy* know that the poem possesses this soul-shaking power. Of course, not all souls are the same, nor are they shaken by similar things or in similar ways. However, all souls seek awakening, and no poem in the Christian Intellectual Tradition better expresses this shared longing, this common desire to see better than we now see, to know better than we now know, to be better than we now are. It is my hope that readers of this collection find insight and inspiration as they teach the *Divine Comedy* to a new generation of readers, introducing our students to the power of Dante’s vision so that they may awaken something powerful in themselves.

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