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Teaching Dante's Inferno: One Hell of an Assignment

PAMELA D. JOHNSTON

O honor and light of all other poets,
I value the long study and deep love
Which inspired me to search your great poem.

(*Inferno* 1.82-84, Simone translation)

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri carries off an amazing feat: the creation of a detailed geography of Hell (in the *Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*), and Heaven (*Paradiso*). No less remarkable is his decision to cast himself as the hero of his supernatural epic. Composed in the Tuscan dialect of the Italian vernacular (not the Latin of “serious” literature), and set in a new verse form called *terza rima*, his poem remains one of the most influential and groundbreaking works of world literature. At Fresno Pacific University, students read Dante’s *Inferno* as part of the introductory core text-based civilization series that forms the foundation of our general education program, “Stories of Peoples and Cultures.” The problem for the instructor has always been first, how to make this work intelligible and accessible to modern students, and second, how to convey to them the bold (one might even say “shockingly audacious”) innovation behind Dante’s poem.

The first difficulty has been to a great degree ameliorated by the publication of Tom Simone’s translation of the *Inferno* (Focus Press, 2007). This edition effectively aids “the daunting task of a first acquaintance with the *Comedy*” (Simone, vii) with copious notes, clearly written introductions to each Canto, helpful diagrams, a glossary, and above all, a lucid and deceptively simple translation that makes sense: as this brief example from the beginning of the poem illustrates:

In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood
where the straight path was lost.

Oh, it is a hard thing to tell what it was,
that wood was so savage and harsh and strong
that my fear renews even at the thought of it!

Finding a solution to the second difficulty, that of bringing home to students just how remarkably original was Dante's *tour de force*, is the focus of this paper. One could, of course, assign an expository essay exploring the geography, or the progression of sin, or the work's relevance to today; all perfectly sound ideas, but frankly not all that exciting to the average undergraduate—and the proliferation of Internet essay paper mills such as (for example) "www.danteessays.com" offer temptations that are best avoided if possible. (I pass over in silence the obvious irony of handing in a purchased paper dealing with the punishments inflicted on sinners guilty of fraud and deceit!) No, I have discovered that the best way for students to understand the originality of Dante's work is for them actually to duplicate it. It's hard to imagine how shocking it is for someone to create a Hell populated by (among others) his contemporaries, until you try to recreate what he has done. It gives students a first-hand idea of what is so breathtakingly original about what Dante is doing.

I got the essential idea of using the Inferno as the setting for a creative-writing essay from a colleague, Dr. Nathan Orgill (now at Georgia Gwinnett College), who devised an assignment several years back in which students filled a plane doomed to crash with ten historical characters. I took his core idea and modified and expanded it for my Medieval/Early Modern civilization class in the spring of 2007. Since then, I have used this same basic assignment every semester I have taught the course (adding refinements along the way), with outstanding success.

For those who would like to adapt this assignment for use in their own classes, I'll be happy to send you a more detailed description; for the purpose of this paper I will briefly describe the process: first, students need to set an overarching theme for their essay; in other words, where does their Inferno take place? I stress that students should use a theme that they know and are interested in; many use their favorite television show such as *The Office*, *House* or *The Simpsons*. Some of the more ambitious papers use serious works of fiction: I have read marvelous papers set in the world of Dostoevsky, Austen, and Wharton. Likewise, film series such

as *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Twilight* are also popular. Many choose to use historical figures such as American presidents, African politicians, sports figures, or popular musicians.

Once the theme is set, this determines a number of attendant factors: who is their Dante figure? Who guides him on his journey (the Virgil figure)? “Dante” must be facing a serious crisis that precipitates the journey (for Dante, his mid-life crisis is precipitated by his exile from his beloved Florence). Then the figure that guides him must have some relevance to the Dante figure’s life (that Dante chooses the greatest Roman poet, Virgil, as his guide says volumes about his own ambition and allows for creative interplay between the two along the way). These are the only two characters that can actually be created by the student for the purpose of the essay. Many students choose to cast themselves in the role of Dante, with a beloved family member or role model in the Virgil role. From there, the task is straightforward: translate, as completely as possible, the landscape and events of Dante’s stories into the new setting. Who will be the three Blessed Ladies? The three beasts that prevent Dante from climbing the hill? How will Dante and Virgil get from level to level? The process takes some imagination; for example, the particular circle to which each unrepentant sinner is assigned is indicated by the number of times that the judge of the dead, Minos, wraps his tail around his body. This method may translate in the new story as a sorting hat, or an elevator that takes the sinner to his appropriate level, and so on. Whatever the method, it must fit the particular world that the student has chosen. Then the student must choose a given number of appropriate characters to populate each level of the journey: Ante-Inferno, Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, and so on. These characters must be historical or fictional figures whose suitability is clearly seen or is explained by the author.

The greatest virtue of the Dante paper is that it elicits powerful reactions from my students. The week or so before the assignment is due, the campus is abuzz with discussions about who to put in the Sixth Circle (heretics), and Facebook abounds with comments such as, “I’ve reached Circle Seven, where are you?” The school newspaper even did an article on the pros and cons of the assignment, concluding that while it may take many out of their comfort zone, it is nonetheless the role of professors in particular, and the university in general, to challenge students

to think in new ways. Certainly for the great percentage of them it was the longest paper they ever wrote—I only require a minimum of 3,500 words (around 12-14 pages) but most students write much more. Currently, the record for the longest Dante paper submitted stands at 47 pages. Many tell me that writing this paper was one of the most thought-provoking experiences of their college life and some consider it their finest work.

In sum, this assignment not only helps the student grasp the enormity of Dante's achievement, but also emphasizes the idea of sin, punishment, and salvation that was such a large part of life during the Middle Ages. The more we think about the nature of sin, the more aware we are of it in our own lives. I find that every semester when I read these papers I am so impressed by the sheer creativity and talent displayed by my students. Would they get the same result from a dry prompt such as “What is Dante’s conception of sin as displayed in the Inferno”? I don’t think so.