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Lust, Literature, and Damnation: Reading Dante's *Divine Comedy*

> *My weight is my love;*
> *wherever I am carried,*
> *it is my love that carries me there.*
> Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII. viii

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Abstract: Reading great works of literature is often a daunting task and this is especially the case with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a vast encyclopedia of medieval culture. There are, as Kenelm Foster once noted, two Dantes: the poet who is the author of the text and Dante the pilgrim, whose journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise constitutes the overarching theme of the poem. Readers of the poem are confronted from the very beginning with claims about the reality of what the poem describes. Charles Singleton, the great American Dante specialist, observed: "the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction." There are dangers in failing to take seriously what Dante describes, to read the poem with a "willing suspension of disbelief." In Canto 5 of the *Inferno* Dante encounters Francesca and Paolo in the circle of the lustful and he listens to the story Francesca tells about her and Paolo's getting lost in their own reading of the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. Dante the pilgrim, as described by the poet, is so beguiled by the story Francesca tells that he swoons in pity. The poet tells us the story of this encounter as part of the larger story of the poem as a whole. In way Canto 5 offers a commentary on the dangers of losing oneself in beautiful stories.

Keywords: Augustine – Aeneas – Dante – Francesca – Paolo – Virgil

Lujuria, literatura y condenación: lectura de la Divina Comedia de Dante

Resumen: Leer grandes obras literarias es a menudo una tarea abrumadora y este es especialmente el caso de la Divina Comedia de Dante, una vasta enciclopedia de la cultura medieval. Como señaló una vez Kenelm Foster, hay dos Dantes: el poeta, autor del texto, y Dante el peregrino, cuyo viaje por el infierno, el purgatorio y el paraíso constituye el tema principal del poema. Los lectores del poema se enfrentan desde el principio con afirmaciones sobre la realidad de lo que describe. Charles Singleton, el gran especialista estadounidense en Dante, observó: "la ficción de la Divina Comedia es que no es ficción". Hay peligros en no tomar en serio lo que describe Dante, en leer el poema con una "voluntaria suspensión de la incredulidad". En el Canto 5 del Infierno, Dante se encuentra con Francesca y Paolo en el círculo de los lujuriosos, y escucha la historia que Francesca cuenta sobre ella y Paolo perdidos en su propia lectura de la historia de Lancelot y Ginebra. Dante el peregrino, como lo describe el poeta, está tan cautivado por la historia que cuenta Francesca, que se desmaya de piedad. El poeta nos narra la historia de este encuentro como parte de un relato más amplio en el poema en su conjunto. De esta manera, el Canto 5 ofrece un comentario sobre los peligros de perderse en hermosas historias.

Palabras clave: Agustín – Eneas – Dante – Francesca – Paolo – Virgilio

Dante and Virgil encounter Aristotle in Hell! What a seemingly pleasant ring it has to the modern ear: Aristotle in Hell. Dante, however, identifies the great philosopher as "the master of those who know," (*il maestro di color che sanno*) [*Inferno* IV, 131]. In these remarks I want to celebrate another maestro, Dante, who rightly deserves the title, "*il maestro di color che poetanno,*" the master of those who make poetry. Although my principal teaching and research is in the history of science and the relationship among science, philosophy, and theology, in the United States I taught a course every other year just on Dante's epic poem. One of the characteristics of my teaching, especially courses in intellectual history, is the reading of some of the great texts of Western civilization: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton. It is a good feature of education in the United States that university students in diverse disciplines, from mathematics and the natural sciences, to sociology and psychology, are able to join with students in the humanities to read and discuss epic works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Not all students, of course, read Dante or any of the great epic poets, but those who do, enrich their education by encountering some of the best that has been written about nature, human nature, and God. Poets like Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton challenge us to think deeply about ourselves and the world we inhabit, and I think that an encounter with their works ought to be an essential part of education, especially of any education that seeks to inform human beings about what it means to be human. In fact, I think that poetry, including the great works of tragedy by authors such as Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Shakespeare, offers the best way *initially* to encounter profound philosophical and theological questions. Poetry excites both the imagination and the intellect in a way in which abstract treatises in philosophy and theology do not.

I invite you to explore, however tentatively, some questions about what it means to read Dante's great poem. As many of you know, the *Divine Comedy*, written in the early years of the Fourteenth Century, is a story about an other-worldly journey of Dante Alighieri: to Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. The 100 cantos are divided into three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. In each of the three parts, Dante meets famous and not so famous individuals from ancient history as well as people who had died in Dante's own lifetime. There are kings and emperors, philosophers and poets, bishops and popes, merchants, lawyers, and politicians. The *Divine Comedy* is a vast encyclopedia of medieval culture; it brings together themes from Greece and Rome, including mythological figures from the ancient world, with themes from both the Old and New Testaments. In many ways, the poem is an elaborate commentary on the relationship between classical antiquity and Christianity: between reason and faith. Dante, the poet, tells the story of his own journey. Throughout, Dante has many guides who assist him. His first guide is the Roman poet Virgil, whose own epic poem, the *Aeneid*, is an important inspiration for Dante. I am not going to give a summary of the *Divine Comedy*; in fact, I am going to assume some familiarity about the general structure of the poem.[1] For those who might know little of this great poem, I hope that my remarks might encourage a desire to learn more.

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[1] The best English translation of the *Divine Comedy* (with Italian on the facing

As Dante the pilgrim leaves Limbo and enters the second circle of Hell, the circle in which the lustful are punished, he and Virgil encounter Minos, the legendary King of Crete and judge of the dead in the underworld in Virgil's *Aeneid*. In Dante's *Inferno*, Minos examines the offenses of each condemned sinner and then dispatches him or her to the appropriate circle in Hell. Interrupting his task, Minos addresses Dante: "'O you who come to the abode of pain ... beware how you enter and in whom you trust; let not the breadth of the entrance deceive you!'" [*Inferno* V, 16-20] The warning is addressed not only to the pilgrim, but to us the readers as well, for we too enter this "abode of pain" (*doloroso ospizio*). Dante is both poet and pilgrim. Dante, the poet, invites us -- indeed, in a sense, compels us -- to join the journey with the pilgrim Dante, that is, the Dante who is the central character in the poem. The poet invites us to enter the pilgrim's entourage as he journeys through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

Dante has been made, so he tells us in the *Paradiso*, the poet of a great theme [*Paradiso* X, 22ff.], and he prays that his memory will not fail as he writes of what he saw and heard. How are we to view the insistence of the poet on the reality of his vision and the prophetic nature of his writing? Are such claims but the deliberate artifice Dante uses in order to produce a better poem, and thus, is the poem,

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page), with commentary, is by Charles Singleton. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross have edited a canto-by-canto commentary of the entire poem, *Lectura Dantis*, in three volumes, one for each cantica: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso (Berkeley, California, 1998). During the 700th anniversary of Dante's death (2021) many new books and articles are appearing. Perhaps the most notable so far is *Per Questa Selva Oscura: La teologia poetica di Dante* by Giulio d'Onofrio (Roma, 2020). Two excellent on-line resources are the Dante projects at Dartmouth and Princeton, respectively.

in the proper sense, fiction?[2] Or must we see his claims in other terms?

Charles Singleton, the great American Dante specialist observed: "the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction."[3] But I think we should reject the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction in approaching the poem. The poem is a prophetic text, in a medieval literary tradition of visionary writings: texts that do not appropriately fall into our categories of fiction and non-fiction. Modern readers may indeed have difficulty in regarding the *Divine Comedy* as anything other than fiction. This, no doubt, tells us more about modern readers than it does about the poem itself. When we reject out-of-hand a consideration of the realist claims Dante makes, such a rejection, I think, indicates our own narrow sense of the real. The realism that modernity embraces, especially a realism that rejects as un-real the prophetic and the spiritual, or even the metaphysical and the theological, or relegates them only to the realm of the imagination, is a kind of banal realism unable to comprehend the more profound dimensions of the real.

In 1335 at a chapter meeting of the Dominican community in Florence, members in that community were formally prohibited from reading both Dante's *De monarchia* and his *Divine Comedy*.[4] One might understand the reaction to *De monarchia*, since in this treatise

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[2] The great Italian scholar of Dante, Bruno Nardi, lists and discusses all the principal passages in which Dante insists upon the truthfulness of his claims to have gone on the journey, in "Dante profeta" in *Dante e la cultura medieval* (Barii, 1949), pp. 336-416.

[3] Charles Singleton, "The Irreducible Dove", *Comparative Literature* 9 (1957): 129-35, at 129. See also, Robert Hollander, "Allegory in Dante", *Princeton Dante Project* (https://dante.princeton.edu/pdp/allegory.html), as well as Dante's Letter to *Cangrande della Scala* (text in the Dartmouth Dante Project).

[4] Gianfranco Folena, "La tradizione delle opere di Dante Alighieri", *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi Danteschi* (20-27 aprile, 1965) (Florence, 1965), 4.

Dante supports the claims of those who argue for the autonomy of the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor against the claims of the papacy to be the supreme power in Christendom. But what was the danger in the *Divine Comedy*?

Five years before the chapter meeting, a Dominican theologian, Guido Vernani of Rimini, wrote to the bishop of Bologna, chancellor of the university, calling attention to what Vernani thought was Dante's claim to have written a fifth gospel. Not only did Dante claim to know the ultimate disposition of the damned and the saved, but he claimed, so it seemed to Vernani, to have written a realistic account of a divinely sanctioned journey.

Dante's earliest commentators, beginning with his son Pietro Alighieri, went to great lengths to deny charges of heresy leveled against the poet. They argued that Dante's poem was simply an elaborate allegory, the work of a great imaginative writer.[5] Thus, as one commentator, Jacopo della Lana, observed, when Dante "puts" a soul in one of the three realms the only claim that is really being made concerns the vice or virtue attributed to the soul. By the end of the 14th century this commentary tradition was well-established, and Boccaccio would write that Dante "brings forth strange and unheard-of creations of the mind… and thus [the *Commedia*] veils the truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction." [*De genealogia deorum* 14.7][6] For almost six centuries this tradition reigned supreme: namely, the view that the truth of the *Commedia* is allegorical, set forth by Dante in "a fair and fitting garment of fiction." This tradition is evident, even today, in those commentators who tell us, for example, that Virgil stands for Reason, with a capital R, and that Beatrice represents grace.

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[5] Pietro Alighieri writes: "Some things cannot be understood literally, for, taken literally, such things would induce not instruction but error… For what person of sound mind would believe that Dante descended in this way, and saw such things, except for allowing for my distinctions among modes of speaking figuratively?" [*Commentarium*, p. 8; cited in Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (1986, n. 8, p. 126)]. This note in Dronke contains an excellent discussion of various debates concerning figurative and realist readings of the poem.

[6] For these commentaries on Dante, see the on-line Dartmouth Dante Project.

I do not think that the poem is intelligible if we treat the characters as such abstractions. If we trust in Virgil because we think that he somehow represents Reason, we will not understand the punishment of the sinners in Hell, nor the structure of Hell or Purgatory. Despite Dante's enormous respect for Virgil, Virgil's vision is not a substitute for the vision of the poet or the pilgrim, nor is Virgil really a personification of reason.

Is the *Divine Comedy* a *bella menzogna*, a beautiful lie? How are we to read the poem? What kind of work is it?

In search of an answer, let us return to Hell - or at least to the text of Dante's Hell. In response to Minos' warning, Virgil, the pilgrim's guide, informs Minos that Dante's voyage is a "fated going" (*fatale andare*) [*Inferno*V, 22]: it is willed from on high, where power and will are one. Since Virgil is his guide, we are often reminded of the comparison between Dante's journey and that of Aeneas. The story of Aeneas, celebrated in the great Roman epic written by Virgil in the first century B.C., is the journey of a prince of Troy who flees from the flames of his city conquered by the Greeks. Aeneas, "fate's fugitive" (*fato profugus*) as Virgil calls him [*Aeneid* I, 2], is led by the gods to found a new city in the West, a city to which the god Jove promises empire without end (*imperium sine fine*) [*Aeneid* I, 279]. That city, Rome, through Virgil's epic, traces its origins to ancient Troy and discovers its hero-founder, Aeneas, to have been destined by the gods to lay the foundations of a cosmo-polis: a city that truly is a world-city.

The comparison between Dante and Aeneas is explicit in the *Divine Comedy*. Prior to the encounter with Minos, when Virgil announces to Dante the other-worldly journey that he must undertake, Dante protests: "But why should I go there? Who allows it? I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul…" [*Inferno* II, 31-32] After all, Aeneas's mission to found Rome, a mission that included a visit to the world of the dead, was divinely sanctioned, and St. Paul's rapture into heaven, an experience he describes in his epistle to the Corinthians [2 Cor. XII. 4], is the result of God's special grace. Although there are dozens of medieval visions of heaven and hell set down in literary form, no other author makes the claims Dante makes. "No medieval author before Dante had measured himself against Aeneas and St. Paul, as one impelled by divine grace to undertake another-worldly journey for the sake of mankind, in order to right the world's injustices at a crucial moment of its history."[7]

As the *Divine Comedy* unfolds, we see Dante becoming a new Aeneas and a new Paul. The heritage of Greece and Rome, especially as mediated through Virgil and the *Aeneid*, comes together with the traditions of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to form the matrix of Dante's poem. Thus, in an important sense, the *Divine Comedy* is the quintessential poem of Western Civilization. But as we come to the text we must, as Minos told Dante, "beware how" we "enter and in whom we trust, let not the breadth of the entrance deceive" us [*Inferno* V, 19-20]. The dangers are real, and no more real than in the Inferno, that "abode of pain." We must learn how to navigate through the text so that we can safely reach the end of the journey.

Throughout the *Divine Comedy* the poet speaks, from time to time, directly to his audience, calling our attention to a particularly significant event, or inviting us to a deeper vision. In the second canto of the *Paradiso* there is an especially disconcerting warning. Dante addresses one group of his readers: "O ye who in a little bark, eager to listen, have followed behind my ship that singing makes her way, turn back to see your shores again; do not put forth on the deep, for, perhaps, losing me, you would be left bewildered [*rimarreste smarriti*]. The waters I take were never sailed before." [*Paradiso* II, 1-6] How do we avoid the perils to which the poet alludes? How do we avoid becoming lost and bewildered?[8] Indeed, ought we to turn back, as Dante counsels? Is there a danger that our voyage through the text may be like the "mad flight" (*folle volo*) of Ulysses, that Dante so eloquently describes in Canto xxvi of the *Inferno*? In a medieval variation of the story made famous by Homer in the *Odyssey*, Dante's Ulysses recounts how he sacrifices his duty to return to wife and family in Greece and seduces his crew to sail to unknown lands beyond the Mediterranean world.[9] Ulysses' voyage, however, ends in shipwreck and damnation. Our voyage through the text has similar dangers.

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[7] Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (1986), p. 2.

At last, we are, I think, prepared to join with Dante in his encounter with the lustful in the second circle of Hell. The canto is important, I should like to contend, not so much for understanding the punishment of lust, but rather for what the canto reveals about the dangers of literature, and correspondingly the dangers to be avoided as we, the readers, encounter the *Divine Comedy* itself. We might, in fact, discover a connection among lust, literature, and damnation.

As we turn to the fifth canto,[10] with Virgil and Dante we hear those "doleful notes" of wailing, that tempest (*bufera*) of whirling winds, those shrieks and moans and lamentations of the sinful spirits: spirits driven by an infernal wind "hither, thither, upward, downward." [*Inferno* V, 23 ff.] The meteorology of Hell mirrors the restless passion that dominated the lives of the sinners punished here. We are in the circle of the lustful. These sinners, "as doves called by desire" leave "the troop where Dido is," and, coming through "the malignant air" [*Inferno* V, 82-5], approach the pilgrim, Dante. Francesca, daughter of Guido da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna, married Gianciotto Malatesta, Lord of Rimini. Unfortunately, she and her brother-in-law, Paolo, who himself was married, fell in love. Francesca tells the story of how she and Paolo were surprised in their amorous embrace and then killed by her husband. The allure of her speech beguiles Dante, and he asks: "'Francesca, your torments make me weep for grief and pity, but tell me, in the time of the sweet sighs by what and how did Love grant you to know your dubious desires?'" [*Inferno* V, 116-120] In response, Francesca discloses that it was the story of Lancelot and Guinevere which, when she and Paolo read it together, so overpowered them that they gave in to their desire for one another:

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[8] The past participle of the verb *smarrire* is the same one the poet uses at the very beginning of the *Inferno* to describe his condition before the journey begins.

[9] Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno. Text and Commentary* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 456-7, n. 56.

[10] Extensive commentaries on this canto are found throughout literature on the *Divine Comedy*. An especially insightful analysis, especially of the story of Francesca and Paolo, is that of Paolo Valesio, "The Fierce Dove," in *Lectura Dantis. Inferno*, edited by Allen Mandelbaum, et al., (Berkeley, California, 1998), pp. 63-83.

> One day, for pastime, we read of Lancelot, how love constrained him; we were alone, suspecting nothing. Several times that reading urged our eyes to meet and took the color from our faces, but one moment alone it was that overcame us. When we read how the longed-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, this one, who never shall be parted from me, kissed my mouth all trembling. A Gallehault was the book and he who wrote it; that day we read no farther in it. [*Inferno* V, 127-138]

In the Arthurian legend of Lancelot and Guinevere, Sir Gallahad encouraged the relationship between the knight and the queen; hence, Francesca's especially apt identification of the book as a Gallehault.

The canto ends with the description of Dante the pilgrim's reaction to Francesca's story: "While the one spirit said this, the other wept, so that for pity I swooned, as if in death, and fell as a dead body falls." [*Inferno* V, 139-142][11] Whereas Francesca and Paolo had lost their senses out of passion, Dante loses his senses out of compassion.

Earlier in the canto, Virgil lists for Dante other sinners punished in the circle of the lustful: including, among the women, Dido, the

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[11] The cadence of this, the final line of the canto -- *E caddi come corpo morto cade* -- is an excellent example of Dante's poetic genius.

Phoenician exile who was the founder and queen of Carthage; Cleopatra of Egypt; and Helen, whose abduction by Paris was the occasion for the Trojan War. And among the men, Virgil identifies: Achilles, Paris, and Tristan. In fact, Virgil shows Dante "more than a thousand shades, pointing them out and naming them." [*Inferno* V, 67-68] Dante tells us: "When I heard my Teacher name the ladies and knights of old [*le donne antiche e' cavalieri*], pity overcame me and I was as one bewildered." [*Inferno* V, 70-2] Notice how this line, just prior to the encounter with Francesca, anticipates the story she tells, as well as Dante's reaction to it: "pity overcame me and I was as one bewildered."[12] The stories of these ladies and knights of old, central to the courtly love tradition of the Middle Ages, call to mind not only great feats and noble deeds, but sinful passions as well. As we have seen, Francesca reveals her own reading of precisely such a story: "'Several times that reading urged our eyes to meet and took the color from our faces, but one moment alone it was that overcame us (*ma un solo punto fu quel che ci vinse*).'" [*Inferno* V, 131-2] The book they were reading had rhythms of its own that slowly possessed the lovers.

It is, I think, a central theme of this canto "that literature, by preserving and transmitting through the written word the love stories of old, may lead us into sin, as Paolo and Francesca were led by reading their *libro galeotto,* the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere. Literature is full of *falli scritti,* of faults written down, to employ an expression that Dante uses in a passage in the *Paradiso* [XVI. 13-15]"[13] In fact, Francesca's own story is itself a *fallo scritto,* a fault written down.

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[12] The final phrase is *fui quasi smarriito*, once again an echo of the sense of loss and bewilderment introduced at the very beginning of Canto 1 (see note 8, above).

[13] Renato Poggiolo, "Tragedy or Romance? A Reading of the Paolo and Francesca Episode in Dante's *Inferno*," *PMLA*, June, 1957, Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 313-358, especially, 343-4.

Scholars have pointed out a major discrepancy between Francesca's paraphrase of the episode of the kiss in the Lancelot romance and what the medieval romance itself depicted. In the romance, the trembling Lancelot is seized and kissed by Guinevere; in Francesca's version, the roles are reversed: Francesca's trembling mouth is kissed by Paolo. It is instructive that the passage in the romance that Francesca misrepresents mirrors the crucial moment in the story of her and Paolo. Readers familiar with the tradition of medieval courtly love will recognize that Francesca fixes on the important moment in the well-established ritual of any courtly encounter - known in the technical language of courtly love as the *amoris ascensio* (kindling of love). They read, as Francesca says, of Lancelot, "how love constrained him" (*come amor lo strinse*). The curiosity that Francesca and Paolo exhibited about the *amor ascensio* of Lancelot is exactly paralleled by Dante the pilgrim's reciprocal curiosity about their own *ascensio:* "what and how did love grant you to know your dubious desires?"

As he calls attention to this crucial moment, this *solo punto*, Dante the poet expects his readers, I think, to be aware of the particular version of the story of Lancelot and Guinevere popular in the late 13th century.[14] In this version, Lancelot is presented as foolish and bumbling; Guinevere is manipulative and disdainful. Indeed, the Guinevere who kisses Lancelot in this version of the story is not the wife of King Arthur at all; she is an impostor, something of a witch. But because they stop reading at the moment of the kiss, Paolo and Francesca do not learn her identity. Nor do they find out that Lancelot is severely punished for his lustful faithlessness to a holy quest and his role is assumed by Gallahad. Ironically, the particular Lancelot story read by Francesca and Paolo is really a religious attack on chivalric values, showing that adulterous love brings only unhappiness. Paolo and Francesca were reading a text designed expressly to keep potential adulterers out of Hell. That they are in Hell shows that they did not have the ears to hear the guidance they most needed, that they were *truly* lost in the text.

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[14] H.O. Sommer, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 7 vols., (1909-13), vol. 3, especially, 258-263.

Francesca's very last words: "'that day we read no farther in it'" [*quel giorno piu non vi leggemmo avante*] may call to mind another famous autobiographical account of sin, but an account with a far different ending. Augustine, writing 900 years before, in the late fourth century, tells us how, at the time of his conversion to Christianity, he heard a young voice say: take and read, take and read. Augustine writes of his response to the voice, that is, of his reading the famous line condemning the sins of the flesh, found in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Augustine then observes: "No further would I read, nor need I." [*Confessions* VIII.xii]

Augustine's reading of St. Paul reminds us of an earlier scene in the *Confessions*. When Augustine writes of his early education, he refers to his reading of Virgil's *Aeneid*:

> . . . I was obliged to memorize the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas, while in the meantime I failed to remember my own erratic ways. I learned to lament the death of Dido, who killed herself for love, while all the time, in the midst of these things, I was dying, separated from you, my God and my Life, and I shed no tears for my own plight. What can be more pitiful than an unhappy wretch unaware of his own sorry state, bewailing the fate of Dido, who died for love of Aeneas, yet shedding no tears for himself as he dies for want of loving you?... For to love this world is to break troth with you [God], yet men applaud and are ashamed to be otherwise. I did not weep over this, but instead I wept for Dido, who surrendered her life to the sword, while I forsook you and surrendered myself to the lowest of your created things. *Confessions* I. xiii

It is interesting that the special role played by Virgil and the *Aeneid* in the *Divine Comedy* is a reversal of their function in Augustine's experience of conversion. In the *Confessions*, Augustine dramatizes his spiritual itinerary *from* the *Aeneid*, through complex intellectual and sensual temptations, to God's book. The final sections of the *Confessions* contain Augustine's systematic reading of God's book, the Bible. In many ways, Dante rescues the great Roman epic and its author from too harsh an Augustinian condemnation.[15] In fact, Dante places the *Aeneid* within the context of salvation history, looking upon both the Trojans and the Jews as God's Chosen People. The Trojan Aeneas is the founder of Rome; he represents the distant origins of the civilization that prepares the world for the coming of Christ.

We ought not to find Dante's fascination with the *Aeneid* unusual, since the *Divine Comedy* incorporates significant elements of the pagan classical past, including that of epic poetry.[16] Dante displays his familiarity with the traditions of Greek and Roman poetry, history, philosophy, and mythology. The heritage of the ancient world is a vital part of Dante's vision of the Christian cosmos. But Dante's vision is not a random collection of classical and Christian insights, rather he offers a single comprehensive view in which we can discern classical elements. The *Divine Comedy* contains the heritage of the classical world, a heritage that we can distinguish analytically, but a heritage that is an integral part of his Christian poem.[17] Dante does not appropriate pagan themes, including poetic conventions, and dress them in Christian garb. Rather, to use an expression from Thomas Aquinas, he transforms the water of classical antiquity into the wine of Christian poetry: a poetry that itself seeks to lead poet and reader to salvation.

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[15] For this discussion of Virgil and Augustine, as it relates to understanding the fifth canto of the *Inferno* (and beyond), I am indebted to the work of Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert* (1979), especially, pp. 147-191, as it informs much of my analysis in this section.

[16] On the importance of the story of Dido and Aeneas for Dante, see: Tristan Kay, "Dido, Aeneas, and the Evolution of Dante's Poetics," *Dante Studies*, CXXIX (2011), pp. 135-160. One might also consult Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"*(1984). and Winthrop Wetherbee, *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets* (2008).

[17] In an insightful passage, Winthrop Wetherbee observes: "Dante's poem incorporates the worldview of ancient epic more completely than any previous vernacular poem, and it is from the directness and honesty with which he both assimilates and challenges the tragic vision of the Roman poets that the *Commedia* and the transcendent experience it reports derive much of their extraordinary power. Throughout the poem Dante's engagements with these poets define a process of self-discovery that is in effect an existential counterpart to the spiritual journey which is his primary theme. Coming to terms with the poets of Roman epic is repeatedly shown to be the necessary precondition for the Pilgrim's attainment

Canto five of the *Inferno* is rich in allusions to Virgil's *Aeneid*, and especially to Virgil's story of the encounter between Dido and Aeneas. Dido is mentioned twice in the canto: first in the general catalogue of the heroines of love that crowd this area of sin: ""The next is she who slew herself for love and broke faith to the ashes of Sichaeus..." [*Inferno* V, 61-2] The second time she is named directly in the description of the movement of Paolo and Francesca toward the two poets: "so did these issue from the troop where Dido is, coming to us through the malignant air; such force had my compassionate cry." [*Inferno* V, 85-7]

The story of Dido and Aeneas is one of the more famous episodes in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas and his crew have just left Sicily, where his father Anchises had died. A terrible storm, the result of the goddess Juno's continuing attempt to thwart the destiny of Aeneas, engulfs their ships. Aeneas and his crew find themselves ship-wrecked on the coast of North Africa, near a new city rising under the guidance of Dido, herself like Aeneas a fugitive from the eastern Mediterranean.

The story Virgil tells of the encounter between the Queen of Carthage and the hero from Troy -- the story that so fascinated the young Augustine -- contains within it yet another famous story. Dido, already inflamed by her own desire for Aeneas and stung as

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of genuine understanding, and the lessons they teach must be continually relearned. Even in the *Paradiso* their wisdom maintains a pervasive and often disturbing relevance to Dante's spiritual education, and to the very end reminders of their vision of history, the many paths that lead forward from the voyage of the Argo to the last days of Ulysses, remain essential to Dante's articulation of his experience of heaven." Winthrop Wetherbee, *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets* (2008), p. 4.

well by Cupid's dart, calls upon her Trojan guest to tell the story of the fall of Troy. Aeneas begins his story with the words:

> Majesty, too terrible for speech is the pain that you ask me to revive, if I am to tell how the Greeks erased the greatness that was Troy and the Trojan Empire ever to be mourned .... Still, if you are truly anxious to learn what befell us and to hear a short account of Troy's last agony, even though I shudder at the memory and can hardly face its bitterness, I shall begin. [*Aeneid* II, 3-13]

The words of Aeneas remind us of Francesca's introductory claim [*Inferno* V, 124-6] that she will tell of that sinful encounter with Paolo, "as one may that weeps in telling."

Aeneas's account of the fall of Troy in the *Aeneid* sets in motion the erotic seduction and ultimate fall of Dido. Dido is enamored with Aeneas, the hero of Troy; his exploits at Troy are sculpted on the walls of the temple she is building in Carthage. But the Aeneas before her, the Aeneas who tells the story, is no longer simply the Trojan prince; he is destined to be the founder of Rome, and as such has already undergone significant changes. The Aeneas whom Dido embraces is the Aeneas in the story she has heard. That embrace is the undoing of both Dido and Carthage. For when Aeneas leaves, as leave he must, Dido kills herself. Dido falls for the same reason - lust - that Carthage herself will fall. And Troy, like Carthage, fell as the result of lust: the lust for Helen. As we have seen, the seductive power of such stories -- the stories of individuals and empires -- was readily apparent to Augustine. We might also remember the other encounter between Dido and Aeneas when Aeneas visits the underworld. "Weeping with tender affection," he addresses the ghost [shade] of Dido. [*Aeneid* VI, 455] So Dante, in his visit to the underworld, is filled with pity, when he speaks to the ghost [shade] of Francesca.

Augustine reminds us in the *Confessions* [XIII. viii]: "My weight is my love [*pondus meum amor meus*]; wherever I am carried, it is my love that carries me there." Francesca has the vain hope of achieving a kind of happiness through the repetition of her story. But her story is itself a seduction, a seduction that threatens Dante, just as Francesca and Paolo were seduced by the story of Lancelot. We see in her story the real dangers "in allowing literary experience to dominate one's thoughts, disguising the raw reality of passion."[18]

Dante the poet tells us a story: a story of his encounter with the damned in the circle of the lustful, a story that is part of the larger story of his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. It is the story of the experiences of Dante the pilgrim that establishes the authority of Dante as the storyteller. The story told in the *Divine Comedy* is, in part, the story of how the story came to be written. The fifth canto of the *Inferno* is a story about stories -- and, in particular, a commentary on the danger of stories, the dangers of literature. Literature is a powerful and seductive force. The story of Lancelot and Guinevere proved to be especially dangerous for Francesca and Paolo. Francesca's own story resulted in confusion and bewilderment for Dante the pilgrim, just as Aeneas's story in the *Aeneid* proved to be Dido's undoing.

When one reads literature, especially beautifully written stories, one must beware. It is all too easy willingly to suspend one's disbelief[19] and enter imaginatively into the world constructed by the author. We do need imagination in order to read literature. But there is danger in such willing suspension of disbelief. In granting automatically the premises of the text, in particular, the moral or ethical principles, as distinct from believing in the specific characters and scene set by the author, we might forget that the truth or falsity of these very premises depends upon a higher source. The danger is, in part, to treat a work of literature as a completely autonomous entity, independent of any order of truth and goodness outside of itself. The work of literature, thus, would become its own little cosmos, into which the reader enters, willingly abandoning any connection with a higher order of truth and goodness: the order which comes from God.

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[18] Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante's 'Inferno': Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (Cambridge, UK, 1987), p. 94.

[19] The now oft-used expression, "willing suspension of disbelief," was introduced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *Biographia literaria or biographical sketches of my literary life and opinions* (1817).

Like the other sinners Dante and Virgil meet in the journey through Hell, Francesca reveals her sin. She remains dominated by her lustful passion for Paolo. As she says: "'Love, which absolves no loved one from loving, seized me so strongly with delight in him, that, as you see, it does not leave me even now.'" [*Inferno* V, 103-5] Francesca claims a kind of amorous determinism in which free will plays no role. Furthermore, she can imagine only one way of loving, which she perpetuates in reverie throughout eternity. Even in death, even without her earthly body, her concern remains carnal. She seems to identify the core of her being with her sense appetites, and it is precisely such appetites that human beings share with other animals. Francesca loves herself and her body as absolutes, and she loves herself through Paolo's eyes: a small, self-subsistent cosmos in which there is no law which transcends its own system of values.[20] Such lust is truly damnable. Her love of self mimics God's mode of existence, which is pure self-love. As Augustine observed: "All who desert you [O God] and set themselves up against you copy you in a perverse way; but by this very act of imitation they only show that you are Creator of all nature and, consequently there is no place whatever where man may hide from you." [*Confessions* II. vi]

A Christian finds in Francesca's actions an example of the sin of pride. Satan is the preeminent example of this sin, and, as Dante tells us elsewhere in his poem, Satan fell "unripe" [*Paradiso* XIX, 48]. He was unwilling to let God's grace mature and ripen him for the fullness of the beatific vision. Satan sought to be autonomous, dependent on no one, not even God. As Augustine notes in *The City of God* [XIV.13]:

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[20] "The [fifth] canto is the esthetic-ethical reevaluation of a story of love as an *exemplum* of the intersection of the autonomy of passion with the heteronomy of sin." Paolo Valesio, p. 80.

> And what is pride except a longing for a perverse kind of exaltation? For it is a perverse kind of exaltation to abandon the basis on which the mind should be firmly fixed, and to become, as it were, based on oneself and so remain. . . . Now it is good to 'lift up your heart,' and to exalt your thoughts, yet not in the self-worship of pride, but in the worship of God… This then is the original evil: man regards himself as his own light, and turns away from that light which would make himself a light if he would set his heart on it.

It may seem strange, in our age, to warn against an unwarranted celebration of literature, since the greater danger appears to be the unwillingness to become intensely involved with anything of value. The antidote to such cynicism, however, ought not to be an uncritical infatuation that results in the divorce of beauty from truth. Thus, a danger that modern readers may experience in reading the *Divine Comedy* is, in some sense, the opposite of that to which Francesca and Paolo, and the young Augustine, succumbed. When we willingly suspend our disbelief in our reading of the *Divine Comedy*, we tend to insulate ourselves from the unsettling claims of the poem: the claims about the reality of Hell and Heaven, of damnation and salvation. Francesca and Paolo took the story of Lancelot and Guinevere too seriously, we tend not to take seriously enough the story Dante tells. But there is, I think, an underlying similarity: and that is the consideration of works of literature as *autonomous* realms of meaning: either to be appropriated uncritically or, in our case, to be conveniently ignored.

Dante alerts us to the dangers of literature, including his own. Beware of how you enter and in whom you trust. Beware of that willing suspension of disbelief that may result in confusion, bewilderment, and loss. As I suggested, a danger in reading the *Divine Comedy* is to treat the work only as a closed universe of its own, a universe into which we can enter imaginatively, but a universe seen only as fiction, whose claims we can easily ignore. On the contrary, the *Divine Comedy* is a series of windows through which the poet invites us to gaze at a higher order. Beautiful as the poem is, we ought not to become lost in it.