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***Paradiso* as a Guide to Social Distancing**

As if to give his readers a test before embarking on one final journey, Dante begins the *Paradiso* with a seemingly contradictory idea: “The glory of Him who moves all things / penetrates the universe, and its splendor / reflects more in one part and in another less” (*Par.* I.1-3). Decontextualized, this tercet challenges the notion that all of the souls in heaven are equally blessed and living out eternity in perfect harmony. In fact, in order for Dante to make sense of his journey, he needs to ascend stepwise up a hierarchically structured set of heavens. This insight can be read as an inversion of our present situation with regards to the COVID-19 crisis.

There is a potentially harmful narrative that has been circulating since the beginning of the outbreak which describes the coronavirus as some great equalizer. It contends that no matter who we are or where we may be, the virus and the sort of demands it places on people will be the same. We all have to stay at home, we are all in this together, we are all at risk of the virus. The trouble with these grand, totalizing statements about the virus and our situation is that they are simply not true. Not only from a biological standpoint, the virus will bring and has brought disproportional harm to people of groups at higher risk. It will reflect itself in some communities more and others less. Older people and those with pre-existing health conditions are at more of a biological disadvantage while the poor and working classes face much more quarantine-related challenges than do wealthier individuals. One of the fundamental lessons of this course has been to balance sameness with difference, an insight originating in ancient Greece and emanating through to the Middle Ages. Now more than ever, we must take up this balancing act to show

compassion and solidarity to those who might be at a greater risk of the crisis we all face together.

The major assignment of this course has come to us at perhaps the most challenging time, but I believe it is for that very reason this assignment will yield such fruitful and creative responses. The Heaven of Mars, though figured around one individual, Cacciaguida, is also about community and an individual's responsibility to it. Reflecting on the transition from in-person to remote learning, I recalled a day in class when we read canto XVI aloud, during which we stumbled over Florentine family names collectively as a class. It was a bit humorous then, but it is interesting to me now that the Campi, Certaldo, and Figline, along with the Galluzzo and Trespiano, and Luni, Urbisaglia, Chiusi, and Senigallia actually reflect people Dante knew closely in the time of the *Commedia*. In much the same way that we spent cultivating community only to be exiled from our space of communion, so too did Dante know intimately the community which wound up turning him away. I am not faulting our institutions, they actually responded quite well, in my opinion. I am trying, rather, to emphasize the hard work that is needed in fostering a sense of community, as I am trying to point out the sense of loss we must have all felt when our communities were suspended. Thus, Dante reminisces: "With these families, and with others no less, / I saw Florence enjoy such tranquility" (*Par.* XVI.148-149). I, too, miss the days of closer proximity and connection, but Dante and, to use Dr. Herzman's words, "the good will of this class" have carried me through.

If we are to reconcile the tension I mentioned above between sameness and difference, it might be best to start at the end. In the penultimate canto, XXXII, Dante asks readers to "behold the depth of Divine Providence, / for both of the ways of manifesting faith / will fill this garden in equal measure" (*Par.* XXXII.37-39). Though I am skeptical, and have been skeptical for some

time, about the role of free will and providence in our lives and actions, there is a sort of balance achieved when we consider both our experiences learning in person and remotely. It is devastatingly ironic that the text we were building towards all semester had to be relegated to remote learning, but it is also quite fitting. We have spoken consistently about Dante as an exile and, though we do not face quite the same situation, the distances we find ourselves at from each other are better grasped by having read *Paradiso*. Furthermore, if we only look up to the stars at night as suggested by Plato and the Pythagoreans, we will be reunited in a sense through the gaze that also urged Dante higher and higher into the heavens.

Reaching back a bit further, *Paradiso* and its synthesis of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* might well serve as a handbook for life in the time of coronavirus. Though we face isolation like both the poet and the philosopher, we have these texts of great wisdom to reassure us when often all we hear on the news is, to use a Boethian phrase, "sweet tongued rhetoric," but if we "want the doctor's help, [we] must reveal the wound" (*Consolation* I.iv ; II.i). If we want to make sense of the current situation we must listen to Boethius when he explains the wheel of fortune just as we must mimic Dante and admire his great patience as he awaits the fulfillment of his desire in the final heaven.

In moving away from the physical classroom, I have learned just how much of learning is informed by physical context, something I dealt with more analytically in my paper on the Heaven of Mars. However, I am so profoundly grateful and in awe of my classmates and professors who have made this semester still work because they found, like Dante, meaning in the distance between themselves and their community, between sameness and difference.

Works Cited

Watts, V.E., translator. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. By Boethius, Penguin Books, 1999.

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Lombardo, Stanley, translator. *Paradiso*. By Dante Alighieri, edited by Alison Cornish, Hackett Publishing Company, 2017.