

Carly Rizzuto
Bryn Mawr School, Baltimore, MD
Dante Senior Elective at Gilman School

REAL-EYES-ing What Matters Thanks to Dante

Reading Dante has caused me to realize many things about myself. Consequently, over the past two months I have been pondering my findings. So far, I have decided on one uncomfortable conclusion. I am scared. To be completely honest, I am utterly terrified. I am terrified because I understand now that, as a person, I get to choose so much of what my life is. Within the Ante-Inferno, Dante “saw a banner that, as it wheeled about, raced on-so quick that any respite seemed unsuited for it” (Mandelbaum 3:12). These shades, who chase the banner, are in the Inferno because they were not decisive. While alive, they were unable to take risks and find a cause to stand behind. In the Inferno, they are eternally forced to do exactly what their neutral souls could never do; they follow something. I know that I do not want to be among these people, not because they reside in the Inferno, but because I want to live a life of choice. I want to take advantage of my ability to choose.

This power to choose, but moreover, the decision to begin choosing, is what scares me. I do not want to do it wrong. Here I am, this seventeen year old girl, whose whole life has been structured and designed, being told to begin. I have always wanted to choose the course of my life; I just never knew I could. And now, I am not really sure where to start.

In September, Mr. Christian gave me a mysterious poem. I say mysterious because after multiple internet Google searches, in hopes of finding the full poem and its author, I have found no luck. It seems to be a phantom poem, only showing itself once or twice to those who need it.

Anyways, there are two lines in the poem that have stuck with me from the very first time I read them.

“Once I decided to go all the way
the road turned downhill toward home.”

I think that my journey “toward home,” like any journey, begins with me deciding to go, and that is where I will start. First, I need to find the courage in myself to begin choosing and leading my journey. Although, I am willing to say that I cannot do this on my own. People need other people. I like to think of the courage I need to begin as the activation energy an enzyme protein needs to jumpstart its reaction. This energy can slowly come from the enzyme itself, however, it is often supplemented by an outside source, helping it along. Beginning is hard, and it is ok to need other people. Relying on others, others that you trust and love, makes life not only more understandable, but also more full. Even the great poet, Dante Alighieri, needed Virgil. In Harry Chapin’s “A Better Place to Be,” the waitress says, “And I wish that you’d come with me, when I leave for home. For we both know all about emptiness, and livin’ all alone,” to a customer at the bar (Chapin, Harry). Her risky decision to receive comfort from a stranger proves the inherent necessity humans feel for one another. I believe that reaching out is our nature. She needs another person, even for a night, in order to briefly try to make sense of her life and the world around her.

The fear that I have realized is inside of me, is like the hesitancy Dante felt looking up at the inscriptions on Hell’s gate. He tells Virgil that, “their meaning is difficult for me” (Mandelbaum 3:52,53,54). In this moment Dante embodies the fear that me and all people inundate with when about to begin something new. We are unsure, and look desperately around us for guidance. However, in this moment, with the help of Virgil telling Dante to “...leave

behind all hesitation,” I like to think that Dante is learning to choose, and so growing into his name, Dawn-te, by deciding to begin his journey and see the first glimpses of light (Mandelbaum 3:14). Therefore, I believe that Dante, the writer, is asking us to abandon hesitation. He wants us to begin. He wants me to begin.

Through reading Dante and writing this reflection, I am beginning to see that the ability to choose, while scary, is one of the most precious gifts that humans have. That is why I have decided to begin. To say it simply, I am choosing to choose. Even though this is just the beginning step, I think that it may be the hardest part. Therefore, I have also decided to open myself up more to the people around me, and thus welcoming any Virgils or other influences into my life. I am excited to live a life with more intent and choice. I think that it will allow me to see things that I have not been able to before.

Works Cited:

Alighieri, Dante, and Allen Mandelbaum. “Canto 3, Line 12.” *The Divine Comedy of Dante*

Alighieri, Inferno. New York, NY: Bantam, 2004. N. pag. Print.

Alighieri, Dante, and Allen Mandelbaum. “Canto 3, Lines 52,53,54.” *The Divine Comedy of*

Dante Alighieri, Inferno. New York, NY: Bantam, 2004. N. pag. Print.

Alighieri, Dante, and Allen Mandelbaum. “Canto 3, Lines 14.” *The Divine Comedy of Dante*

Alighieri, Inferno. New York, NY: Bantam, 2004. N. pag. Print.

Chapin, Harry. *A Better Place to Be*. 1972. Web.