

The First Ascent

Dante constructed a universe out of paradoxes, with allusions and links permeating each *bolgia*, terrace, and celestial sphere (respectively). I awakened in the middle of the journey of our high school career only to find that my notions of logic, sympathy, and bravado were best discarded at the door of room 202. Rather than being terrified by three beasts, I was fortunate to accompany four other beings embarking on this descent. One was familiar with the route through hell, one didn't make it all the way up, one was desperate to remain on track, one often dissipated into bits of laughter about bits of potatoes, and one corrected every "was/were" found in the text.

I don't want to name names.

As the door to room 202 accumulated carefully curated quotes and images, as well as a lovely gothic arch, the raspy sounds of "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate" echoed into the hall.

Through me into the life of the mind, through me into eternal contemplation, through me
the way among the lost wit.

Intellect moved my higher maker; standard wood made me, six desks, and scratching
pencils.

Before me were no things questioned except the mundane ones, and I endure all
philosophizing. Abandon all preconceived notions, ye who enter.

Inferno

Here, my empathy was contorted beyond all proportions. My logic grew warped and deformed. These lost souls are the ones I can recall the strongest images of, this realm of darkness brought me the most light.

I was terrified of a woman named Barbara Rosenblit. I yearned for her approval—I was anxious she would view me as an imbecile, that I would bumble over the text of *The Commedia*, that I was not intelligent enough to sit in the six sacred desks forming a baptismal font in the center of the room. *Inferno* proved to be an equalizing factor rather than one that promotes some intellect and abandons others. I have never read a text so dense, so linguistically beautiful, and with characters I grew attached to as quickly as I did Dante and Virgil. Nine levels to disfigure the soul instead dismantled my fear of inadequacy, as shades gurgled blood and bathed in their own feces, I found a nervous confidence in myself that was internal rather than an outward projection. From this hopeless place, I took many souvenirs, but nine are prominent in my memory.

1. Contrapasso

Counter-suffering, the pain of being satisfied, a twist of words. Contrapasso are ingrained into every canto and all three canticles, and they captivate me. I am trying to think of a way to describe the impact these turns of fate have had on me, but there is only a sort of silence. This is a cruelty that escapes me, but they are eloquent in their own way. The melding of one meaning into another, desires and depravity are so closely linked that the contrapasso never seem to be a stretch, only an unintended result of subjugating reason to desire. It took me months to train myself to stop sympathizing with Francesca. After all, she got exactly what she wanted.

2. *Subjecting Reason to Desire*

I view this as the hinge upon which the entire *Commedia* hangs: this is the death sentence for every inmate of hell, and it is an implicit part of my daily existence. My overwhelming anxiety is a form of subjugating reason to desire: I know better, but I still drive myself mental over trivialities and hypotheticals. Seeing the melancholy drowning in a river of bile and muck was a horrifying reality check: there are many realms in which Minos could find a fitting space for me.

3. *Dante is a Coward*

This is harsh, but after dozens of fainting spells and pages upon pages of confusion, the protagonist left me criticizing his every move. He is weak, he spooks easily, and he seems incapable of existing without the guidance of Virgil. Only three canticles later have I learned to accept the fool that is Dante Pilgrim: he is every reader, every spirit, an amalgamation of the human condition: he is filled to the brim with pride, but when faced with horrors, he quickly shrinks into himself, unable to maintain his persona.

4. *Virgil*

I see Virgil in every intellectual mentor I have, and I imagine they sometimes roll their eyes at my ideas in the same manner that Virgil sees Dante as an ignorant, yet well-intended neanderthal. Regardless of this intellectual gap, perhaps stemming from one's prior experience in hell and the other's lack thereof, Virgil cares for Dante. Virgil cares for him, nourishing both his mind and his soul, the only shade burdened by a body

throughout this journey. Dante and Virgil become inseparable, and when Virgil leaves it feels as if two worlds have been torn apart. I am terrified of leaving my teachers behind, even if I know I will embark on new relationships when I attend college. I am scared, and I felt childish about it until I thought of the connection between the guide and the guided—I'm only hoping that in my reality my intellectual journey is a mutual pursuit.

5. *Sensory Deprivation*

While Dante feels his way to the bottom of hell, he is completely separated from his own world. His only way to impart understanding on the darkness around him is by the unknown decision to center this journey around the pilgrim: everything is reminiscent of Florence, the city he has left and loved. While reading *Inferno*, I began to see everything in shades of Alighieri. Characters in novels were thrown into whirlwind of lust, waiting for college decisions became an agonizing stretch of limbo, funnels became much more than cooking utensils.

6. *Members*

This class was cultivated out of the scraps of the student body not incarcerated by AP classes or schedule constraints. Adele, Sammy, Rosa, Isaac, Sydney, Barbara. Names chosen with intention, even if one left before the end and two irked the police by riding on top of a car. Human connection can be nice, but more often than not it feels fraudulent (the pits are filling up). However, being able to look across an English class and catch Adele's eye when someone asks what "cred' io ch'ei credette ch'io credesse" means is not superfluous but gorgeously endearing. To toss jokes over a lunch table about making

trumpets out of one's ass is a potent antidote to the quotidian struggle. To find Purgation around every corner and Dante in the crevices of *New Yorker* Articles and Camus' novels is an act of enlightenment: it eases the burden of perpetual perception when the details provide a pull or an insight to the words of Dante Poet.

7. *Artfully Yours*

I am not an artist, nor an art enthusiast, but I always marvel at the ability to pull meaning out of hundred-year old brush strokes. The first few class periods when six people stared at a single painting, extracting allegories, syncretism, and stigmata, was one of the first times I have appreciated painting, art, marble. Art used to be a lost language, but I have picked up the fundamentals of translation.

8. *Medievalist*

One evening I was talking to my mother, whom I adore, but who knows very little about classic literature, or history that is not incorporated in a South African education. She went to medical school, and if I ever need to know about the intricacies of internal organs, I know to ask Carol. When I speak to her about the books I read in school, especially Dante, she doesn't seem to understand why I enjoy these antiquated writings. On the evening in question, I began talking about Dante and the possibility of studying the Medieval/Renaissance eras and becoming a professor in the subject, and she asked why I would ever want to do that. I began talking and couldn't stop myself: I told her I found the origins of life and modernity in words older than the United States itself, that human nature hasn't changed even if communications have degenerated from canticles to

text messages. I found nuances of the soul, the human condition, in the words of an exiled politician. This journey has not been muddled with time: it is painfully relevant, rich with meaning, and every line could yield an encyclopedia explaining its implications and allusions. She hasn't questioned my intent to become a medievalist since (even if student loans are a form of subjecting reason to desire).

9. Teaching

The first lesson I prepared for Dante I carefully crafted in tandem with Isaac, and I was afraid my insights would fall flat once dissected upon the font in room 202. Instead, I found synapses firing until I was experiencing a deluge of thoughts rather than an absence of mind. The days when I have forged my thoughts to a triad of cantos have been some of the highlights of my life (though I'm only seventeen years in). I loved presenting my ideas with authority, collaborating with the thinkers sitting across from me, and the beauty of watching my classmates write my ideas into the margins of their text, as I frantically jot down their thoughts next to my own.

Purgatorio

7 C's have been added, rather than removed from, my forehead as I ventured up, on the back of Virgil/Ms. Rosenblit, carried by my classmates, propelled by my own will:

1. Comprehension

Wading through text that has the consistency of a spider web is exhausting; final understanding is rewarding. Discussions around a hexagon fostered comprehension that

would have been nonexistent had I been relying on the noteless version of *Inferno* I purchased nearly a year prior, in a deranged attempt to teach myself *The Commedia* through a book-club format.

2. Context

The intricacies of a work as a whole are lost without the context in which it was constructed. The works of Dante are elevated when the reader is able to imagine what he had to endure, to understand the parallel journeys of exile to exodus. Dante's Florence is as essential to *The Divine Comedy* as Virgil, Beatrice, or the pilgrim himself—none of this would have existed without a misunderstanding between a group of long-forgotten Guelphs and Ghibellines.

3. Comradery

As Purgatory teaches, one cannot ascend in isolation. With my heavenly, or I suppose, hellish brothers and sisters, with my guide and with the many voices debating the text in my mind, I found that I was able to rise upwards alongside Dante. Saying that I was capable of seeing the stars is a fallacy—“I” quickly morphed into “We.”

4. Contradiction

Dante's system of logic, placement, and geographic design is an esoteric one that does not work in the normal realm of rational thinking. Rather, as an attempt at imposing the divine on the human mind, it is a hodgepodge of suicidal pagans trudging upwards to Paradise, and selfless guides being submerged into an endless limbo.

5. *Contemplation*

This is self explanatory. You shouldn't even have to think about it.

6. *Confusion*

An idiosyncratic system of logic, confrontations of the New Testament and the Old, Christian theology swirling above my head, and a cast of characters from a Florentine society that has eroded over the course of nearly 800 years: *The Commedia* is not something that can be memorized or regurgitated. Confusion is part of the upward trend/trek. Reading Dante without undergoing confusion is just as impossible as getting through a canticle without Dante losing consciousness.

7. *Coalescence*

One idea re-emerges in the same section of a different canticle, characters are shadowed by parallel figures, allusions suffuse every metaphor and conversation: *The Commedia* is the pinnacle of a syncretic work, and it this is the value of the text that leaves me breathless each time I consider it. Dante created the modern conception of the afterlife, weaved universes into cantos, and pulled the heavens down into 140 line cantos. The mental faculties of this man, of his mind, are inconceivable. I have never encountered brilliance on this scale, a scale that stretches from the icy pits of hell to the celestial spheres that house Beatrice.

Paradiso

I made the ascent, only to be pulled back down to the entrance to *Inferno*. This reverse progress is one of the powers of *The Divine Comedy*— I will be able to

experience this journey aboard thousands of different trains of thought, looking at different characters and ideologies with each mission upward. This journey is a self-sustaining cycle: what goes up must come down. I could not ascend or descend without the three pillars that propelled me upwards for this first experimental journey with the poet and the pilgrim.

Hope

From the beginning I hoped I would get *something* out of this course—the vagueness of something explains how ill-prepared I was for this journey to override the trajectory of my life. I was hopeful that I would accomplish something as meaningful as completing *The Commedia*, but that ended up being the least important lesson from this journey. Now, I am hoping that future reads will lead to more late nights with Dante and Virgil, more revelations that leave me on the edge of my seat, eyes wide, hands trembling with the ideas that are pounding through my bloodstream.

Faith

There were times when it seemed as if we were lost in the margins of *The Divine Comedy*, when I felt as though I were trapped within a canto that did not inspire revelations, when I was exhausted at the end of a long day and the meaning of the text wasn't resonating as I expected it to. Faith in Dante, in Ms. Rosenblit, in my classmates, and in myself was an impetus to continue the upward battle. This is not a journey for those weak of heart or with weak minds.

Love

Passing through the door that warns all ye who enter to abandon hope engenders a force: this is often the point where my day turns around, where I am delighted and excited to be a school after endless hours bound to my chair: I love this course. I have never maintained an interest in the miniscule details of anything for such a prolonged period of time. I have never struggled so much to find the right words to express my adoration of the five people to dissect Dante together every other day. I love this text, I have loved every minute delving into the curiosities of the human identity through the words of Dante Poet and the actions of Dante Pilgrim.

This course has been more than an intellectual adoration, but it has turned into an experience that I will preserve for the rest of my life. It is difficult to create meaning out of a universe void of all order, but this class has provided enlightenment and sanity in moments I felt as though my world were caving in. It seems extremely trivial, but being deferred from Haverford was agonizing. I felt inferior, disappointed, and disgusted by my own efforts and abilities. I am still devastated over this, a loss I am aware will be irrelevant in a few weeks or months. However inconsequential it may be in the scheme of my life, this yielded one of the most self-critical periods I have ever undergone.

In Dante, whether in the words or in class discussions, I felt drained self worth streaming back into my thoughts. I felt as though my mind were enough, that my thoughts were as incisive as I hoped: I felt a deep attachment to the five people who helped me remain buoyant in a deluge of self doubt. The text loses so much value without these experiences tethered to it. I feel heartbroken at the thought of leaving Weber at the end of this year. This class, these people, these ideas, are the things I will yearn for the

most as I settle into a new environment and try to find shades as brilliant as those surrounding me during fourth block, every A day, in the unlikely epicenter of paradise.