

Article

Educating Desire: Conversion and Ascent in Dante's *Purgatorio*

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Abstract: In Cantos 17 and 18 of the *Purgatorio*, Dante's Virgil lays out a theory of sin, freedom, and moral motivation based on a philosophical anthropology of loving-desire. As the commentary tradition has long recognized, because Dante placed Virgil's discourse on love at the heart of the *Commedia*, the poet invites his readers to use love as a hermeneutic key to the text as a whole. When we contextualize Virgil's discourse within the broader intention of the poem—to move its readers from disordered love to an ordered love of ultimate things—then we find in these central cantos not just a key to the structure and movement of the poem, but also a key to understanding Dante's pedagogical aim. With his *Commedia*, Dante invites us to perform the interior transformation which the poem dramatizes in verse and symbol. He does so by awakening in his readers not only a desire for the beauty of his poetic creation, but also a desire for the beauty of the love described therein. In this way, the poem presents a pedagogy of love, in which the reader participates in the very experience of desire and delight enacted in the text. In this article, I offer an analysis of Virgil's discourse on love in the *Purgatorio*, arguing for an explicit and necessary connection between loving-desire and true education. I demonstrate that what informs Dante's pedagogy of love is the notion of love as ascent, a notion we find articulated especially in the Christian Platonism of Augustine. Finally, I conclude by offering a number of figures, passages, and themes from across the *Commedia* that provide fruitful material for teachers engaged in the task of educating desire.

Keywords: Dante; *Purgatorio*; love; education; Virgil; Augustine; *Confessions*

1. Introduction: Love and Learning

I wish to offer some reflections on the theme of “educating desire,” and I should begin by noting the double meaning that I intend in that phrase. We might characterize a truly liberal education as one that aims at two goods: it helps us discover anew the perennial questions about human existence, guiding us as we struggle to answer these questions for ourselves; and it helps us become critical and independent thinkers, enabling us to distinguish truth from appearance. A liberal education, then, is liberal (from the Latin *liber*, “free”) because it *frees*: it provides us with a new way of looking at and understanding the world; it shakes up the routine abstractions of common sense and re-awakens astonishment before the profound and perplexing givenness of things. But a liberal education is also an education that *is freed*: it is not for anything else, it has no utility, it is not useful. That is to say, it is useless for anything else, but it is not useless in itself. It has value precisely in and for itself, and not for the sake of some further end.

In this way, a liberal education is like love. For love is *freeing*: love, especially love as *attention* (an idea to which I will return), is an openness to the world as it is and not as we would like to pretend it is. And love is also *freed*: it makes no sense to treat love as a means to something else; as every true lover knows, to instrumentalize love is to kill it. Philosophy is the love of wisdom; and one does not love wisdom for the sake of some further end, but in and for itself.

In saying all this, I am merely stating my agreement with the longer philosophical tradition—especially as it has been articulated by Plato, Augustine, and, as I hope to show, by Dante—that the measure of a true education is *metánoia*, i.e., the radical conversion of mind and life that each of us must achieve in a personal and decisive way. If this is so, then the primary task for the teacher is not so much to impart information as it is to awaken desire for the good in her students, providing thereby the conditions for the possibility of individual transformation. Of course, such a wedding of *love to learning*, of *desire to education*, can take many forms; in my own teaching, for instance, I have labored to present the “great books” as beautiful in their own right, as beckoning engagement through their own intrinsic worth. In this way, I think I share a deep conviction with Plato, Augustine, and Dante (among others in the tradition) that rhetorical finesse is needed to arouse desire for what is true, good, and beautiful in my students. And it is in this spirit that I look to these authors, and to Dante in particular, to teach me how to better occasion conversion to the higher things through love.

Plato’s *Symposium*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dante’s *Commedia*: taken together, these texts form a sort of masterclass on how we can educate our desires, and also (and perhaps more crucially) how desire can educate us. In the following essay, I would like to consider what it would mean to teach Dante’s *Commedia* for the sake of conversion or *metánoia*. In doing so, it will become clear that I read Dante as an inheritor of the Platonic-Augustinian tradition of educating in and through love (although I will focus almost exclusively on what Dante’s text has to offer on its own terms).¹ And my primary concern will be to examine what is at stake when we teach the second canticle of Dante’s poem, the *Purgatorio*, both for how we conceive of the end or goal of our teaching, and for how we might imagine anew the practice of our teaching in light of Dante’s own intrinsic pedagogical methods and practice.

Why the *Purgatorio*? As first-time readers discover with surprise in the closing cantos of Dante’s *Inferno*, Hell is defined primarily by stasis. Where there is motion in Hell, it is only the tormented self-circling of a will that cannot love anything beyond itself. Hell is the place that Dante scholar Peter Hawkins has memorably described as “repetition-compulsion, an endless replay of the sinner’s ‘song of myself.’”² It is certainly true, as Dante saw, that conversion *requires* an underworld itinerary: we cannot overcome the drive to get what we mistakenly think will bring us happiness through intellectual understanding or sheer will-power alone. But to journey through Hell as Dante would have us do, one must experience one’s sin and failure without getting trapped in it; and this means one must face all the darkness in oneself without becoming entombed by fear, despair, or gawking fascination. This is a heavy task for anyone, let alone for the average undergraduate.

By contrast, Purgatory is, in Hawkins’ words, “dynamic, dedicated to change and transformation. It concerns the rebirth of a self free at last to be interested in other souls and other things.”³ It is fruitful to dwell in *Purgatorio* with students because it is in Purgatory that we now reside. I mean this: in Hell there is no time, there is only infinite stasis; in Paradise there is no time, but rather the dynamic over-abundance of eternity; only in Purgatory is there time, because only here is there the possibility of

¹ For a recent manuscript-length study of the Augustine’s “constant presence” in Dante’s thought, see (Marchesi 2011). On the notion of love and the respective role it plays in the thought of Augustine and of Dante, see Phillip Cary, “The Weight of Love: Augustinian Metaphors of Movement in Dante’s Souls” in (Cary 2006). In a similar vein, but with a more critical interpretation, Martha Nussbaum writes of the transformation of Platonic metaphors of ascent in “Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love” in (Nussbaum 1999). I will have occasion to return to Nussbaum below. The presence of Augustine’s thought in Dante’s poem is a complex one, and I can hardly do justice to it in the present essay. Nor am I advancing the claim that Dante is *only* structuring his poem according to a Platonic-Augustinian anthropology of desire. Dante’s philosophical inheritance is highly eclectic, and the affirmation of strong Augustinian elements is not intended as a denial of other philosophical influences. We could list, e.g., Aristotle, Cicero, and Boethius, not to mention Dante’s scholastic contemporaries, such as Bonaventure and, especially, Thomas. For a recent study of the philosophical structure of the *Commedia*, see (Moëvs 2005).

² (Hawkins 2006, p. 51).

³ (Hawkins 2006, p. 51).

change and growth. If we read the *Commedia* to learn how to love better here and now, in this world, it is the *Purgatorio* that will provide the blueprint.⁴

2. Virgil's Discourse on Love

Let us turn to the middle canticle of Dante's great poem. Here is the scene: we find ourselves midway up the slope of Mount Purgatory. "Already," the poet tells us, "the sun's last rays before the night/were slanting so high above us/that stars were showing here and there" (*Purgatorio* 17.70–72).⁵ Caught in that chiaroscuro twilight signaling the descent of darkness and so, according to the spiritual law of this mountain, the halting of upward progress, Dante the pilgrim is surprised to find that his strength wanes more than usual. Summiting the stairs, he stops to puzzle over his lethargy. Virgil, his guide, is ready as ever with an explanation: "A love of good that falls short/of its duty is here restored, here in this place. /Here the slackened oar is pulled with greater force./That you may understand more clearly,/pay close attention. Then you shall pluck/some good fruit from our stay" (*Purgatorio* 17.85–90). Virgil then launches into 103 lines of verse that unfold a theory of moral motivation, will, and defect in a discourse on the nature of love:⁶

Neither Creator nor His creature, my dear son,
was ever without love, whether natural
or of the mind,' he began, 'and this you know.

The natural is always without error,
but the other may err in its chosen goal
or through excessive or deficient vigor.

While it is directed to the primal good,
knowing moderation in its lesser goals,
it cannot be the cause of wrongful pleasure.

But when it bends to evil, or pursues the good
with more or less concern than needed,
then the creature works against his Maker.

From this you surely understand that love
must be the seed in you of every virtue
and of every deed that merits punishment. (*Purgatorio* 17.91–105)

This is how Dante's guide begins his discourse, and it is, we must say, quite a remarkable beginning. In the span of that first, single tercet, Virgil gives us the central animating idea of the entire *Commedia*: "Neither Creator nor His creature . . . /was ever without love, whether natural/or of the mind." As Dante scholar and theologian Vittorio Montemaggi remarks in the opening chapter of his *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology*:

⁴ "Because of the ongoing popularity of the *Inferno* at the expense of the other two canticles, most people identify the poet and his religion with the horrors of Hell. It is as if a vision of damnation were Dante's great contribution to the Christian imagination—as if he were, in fact, Nietzsche's savage caricature of him as a 'hyena who writes poetry in the tombs' [Twilight of the Idols, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," I]. The truth is quite the contrary, if one takes in the whole of the *Commedia*. For what Dante has given the tradition is a notion that joy is at the heart of reality, even at the heart of God" (Hawkins 2006, p. 123).

⁵ (Alighieri 2004, p. 373). All citations of the *Commedia* in the present essay are taken from the Hollander and Hollander translation.

⁶ In his commentary on *Purgatorio* 17.91–139, Hollander calls attention to the importance of this discourse, which is remarkable both for its location ("the poem is now entering its second half and this *cantica* is arriving at its midpoint") and for its unbroken length ("It misses only by a little being the longest speech we have heard spoken in the poem since Ugolino's in *Inferno* XXXIII.4–75"). I shall return to the way in which Dante emphasizes Virgil's discourse by means of its place within the *Commedia* as a whole. See Hollander's notes at (Alighieri 2004, p. 383, n.82–87, n.92–139).

God is love: there can be little doubt that this realization lies at the heart of Dante's *Commedia*. It is from divine love—"l'amor divino"—that creation issues . . . and it is in and as that love that Dante's journey famously ends: [with] "l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele" [the love that moves the sun and other stars] (*Paradiso* 33.143–145).⁷

While the entire poem, as Montemaggi rightly observes, can be read as unfolding the idea that God is love, the drama of that idea lies in the linking of divine and human love, a link that Virgil makes explicit in the opening verse: "Neither Creator nor his creature . . . was ever without love." And Montemaggi knows this, because he goes on to point out that the drama of divine love, as it unfolds in the *Commedia*, is the drama of the human community itself which chooses to reject, strives to understand, and finally accomplishes participation in the love that made it.⁸

In what follows, I want to explore this human side of love. In particular, I want to ask what difference it makes for us if we accept Virgil's claim that human beings are essentially and inescapably lovers. For this is Virgil's startling assertion in these verses: love, he says, is the seed of every virtue and of every deed that merits punishment. What can this mean for how we ought to live our lives? Moreover, if I am necessarily a lover, and it turns out I can only love what is in some measure good, then to what degree am I morally responsible for my actions? Finally, for those of us who dare to step into the role of Virgil, what difference does such an anthropology of desire make for the way we teach our students, especially if we consider our vocation to be the same as Virgil's, i.e., if our aim is not only to impart information, but also to accompany our students on their difficult journey of intellectual and moral conversion?

It will be useful at this point to summarize what I take Virgil to be saying to Dante (and to us) in his discourse on love. The discourse weaves together themes from Greek philosophy (eudaemonism, virtue theory), Late Antique Patristic theology (especially Augustine's theory of an "order of love"), and Scholastic accounts of nature and grace, and I will not be able to do justice to all of these elements.⁹ But here is the basic idea: all spiritual beings, whether human or divine, possess a love of the good by nature; creatures, however, are capable of misusing this love, and this in three ways. We might (1) love truly good things, but love them excessively; or we might (2) love good things, but love them deficiently; or, finally, we might (3) love the harm of another, perversely imagining that the diminishment of my neighbor somehow increases my own good. In every case, our love *intends* something good. But in each case, we err morally and intellectually, directing our desire toward a good that fails to make us happy: often by loving too much; sometimes by loving too little; and, in the more pernicious cases, by loving a counterfeit which is but a twisted image of the good. Virgil urges Dante to allow the beauty of more perfect goods to draw his soul's natural love upward, "as fire, born to rise,/moves upward in its essence" (*Purgatorio* 18.28–29). The penitents on the various terraces of Mount Purgatory purify their love by means of humble acts meant to redirect their desire in just this way. Their goal is the attainment of a perfect form of freedom in which the heart will set itself on that which is truly good and fulfilling. Loving-desire will thereafter serve as an infallible guide for right action.

So that is the big picture. Now, it is noteworthy that Virgil's discourse runs from Canto 17 to Canto 18 of the *Purgatorio*; in other words, it is located precisely at the midpoint of the second canticle, and this means that it is at the very heart of the *Commedia* as a whole. Because Dante calls our attention to

⁷ (Montemaggi 2016, p. 31).

⁸ "And so as we move from the 'cose belle' [lovely things] of *Inferno* 1.40 to union with the love that gives them being in *Paradiso* 33, we are taken through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and invited to reflect on human community as it fails, learns, and succeeds to live in full participation of the love that grounds (its) existence" (Montemaggi 2016, p. 31).

⁹ For a detailed account of the theory behind Virgil's discourse on love, see especially the commentary by Singleton at *Purgatorio* 17.91–139. There, he refers us both to Dante's earlier account of natural love (at *Convivio* III.iii.2–5), as well as to a number of Thomistic texts that provide the form of Virgil's argument here. See (Singleton 1973, pp. 390–409). While the structure of the discourse is clearly Thomistic, the link between desire, sin, and freedom has deeper roots in the thought of Augustine. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the scholastic distinctions presented here—between natural and elective love, for instance, or between excessive and deficient love—result from Thomas' characteristic and daring synthesis of Aristotelian and Platonic-Augustinian concepts.

this discourse by placing it at the heart of his *Commedia*, he invites his readers to use it as a hermeneutic key to the text as a whole.¹⁰

In fact, Dante performs elaborate artistic feats in these central cantos to really drive the point home. For instance: the exact midpoint of the poem is located between verses 118 and 119 of *Purgatorio* 17. Now the previous canto, Canto 16, occupied the Terrace of Wrath, in which penitents suffered the blinding darkness of an acrid cloud of smoke: “Gloom of hell or of a night deprived/of all the stars, beneath a barren sky/which everywhere was overcast with clouds,/had never put so dark a veil across my eyes/or been so harsh and stinging to my sight/as was the smoke that covered us/so that I could not keep my eyelids open” (*Purgatorio* 16.1–8). Through this darkness, a light glimmers as we transition into the middle canto of the *Commedia*, and Dante evokes the way that fog in the mountains begins to burn off as the sun rises: “Remember, reader, if ever in the mountains/you were trapped in fog and could not see/except as moles do, through their eyelids,/how, when the strands of mist, humid and dense,/began dispersing, the sun’s disk/dimly glimmered through.” (*Purgatorio* 17.1–6). Dante then begins to experience visions of the wrathful exemplars, completing what has come to characterize the purgatorial circuit on each terrace (progressing from exemplars of virtue, through an encounter with suffering penitents, and ending with exemplars of sin). Suddenly, a light strikes his face (“a light,/far brighter than the light we know”), breaking up his mental images. The light speaks, “Here is your ascent,” and Dante experiences a profound desire: “It raised in me the overwhelming wish—/a wish that cannot rest short of its goal—/to behold the one who spoke.” And so he turns and moves toward the Angel guarding the passage to the next terrace, a Divine Being Dante encounters as an overpowering beauty: “But as before the sun, which weighs upon our eyes,/veiling its form in an excess of light,/so, before him, my power of sight fell short” (*Purgatorio* 17.44–54). Notice: gloom of hell; fog dispersing on a mountain; excess of divine light enkindling the flame of desire. As if to underline that we have arrived at the center of the poem, and to prepare us for the discourse that follows, Dante gives us a synecdoche of the *Commedia* as a whole: movement from deepest darkness (*Inferno*) into twilight (*Purgatorio*), and then on to unbearable brightness (*Paradiso*).

And there is more. As Dante’s readers learn early on, the geography of the *Commedia* is not insignificant; it is in fact laden with spiritual meaning—so much so that in the world of the *Divine Comedy*, we might say that geography *is* theology. Location is intensely personal and moral. Space is defined according to who is in it, and conversely each person is defined by where she or he is in Dante’s world. Think, for instance, of how gravity functions, and of what this says about the locales in which we find various sinners, penitents, and saints. There is a gravity of sin, a gravity *to* sin: in the *Inferno*, the closer one moves to the center of the earth, and therefore the farther one moves from the heavenly empyrean, the more intense the gravity of sin becomes; and so it is not surprising that the upper and outer-most circles are given over to sins of weakness, while the lower and inner-most circles

¹⁰ Singleton has called our attention to Dante’s deliberate and elaborate numerical structuring of *terzone* around the center of the *Commedia*. He notes in particular that Dante links Virgil’s discourse on love to the crucial Augustinian and Thomistic notion of *libero arbitrio*, “free choice,” by placing this term, in Latin, precisely 25 tercets in either direction from the central tercet of Canto 17. So, at *Purgatorio* 16.70–72, exactly 25 tercets before the central tercet of the poem, we find the following verses spoken by Marco Lombard: “If that were so, free choice [*libero arbitrio*] would be denied you,/and there would be no justice when one feels/joy for doing good or misery for evil.” Again, at *Purgatorio* 18.73–75, 25 tercets after the middle of the poem, we find another reference to *libero arbitrio*, here in a statement by Virgil linking this crucial notion with Beatrice herself: “That noble power is called free will [*libero arbitrio*] by Beatrice,/and so make sure that you remember this/if she should ever speak of it to you.” Singleton finds it significant that the sum of the numerals of these 25 spacing tercets (2 + 5) is 7, a number that seems to hold special significance for Dante. We find 7 again as the sum of the “triform” pattern (3 [pride, envy, wrath] – 1 [sloth] – 3 [avarice, gluttony, lust]) which makes up the division of terraces according to love in Virgil’s discourse. As Singleton writes: “If the poet has so deliberately framed these 7 cantos at the center in this way, we should not fail (this poet being Dante) to inquire if they may not hold in themselves perhaps a ‘center’ of the action and argument of the poem in some sense. . . . [W]hat is thus framed amounts to nothing less than the central pivot of the whole poem in terms of the action, in terms, that is, of what happens to the wayfarer Dante as he ‘passes through the center’ (Singleton 1965, pp. 6–7). For a more recent and extended discussion of these issues, see (Moevs 2017).

are reserved for sins of malice.¹¹ On Mount Purgatory, there is a crucial reversal of Hell's geography: here, sins being purged on the lower terraces are the most grave; as one ascends, the hellish weight of malice grows lighter, giving way terrace by terrace to mere weakness.

But there is another force at work on the mountain. For on this slope, where light is breaking through the fog of sin, there is not only sin pulling penitents downward, but also the "weight" of love, the upward pull of desire, counteracting the gravity of sin.¹² As Dante passes through each threshold and is touched by the guarding angel, he feels himself growing lighter as the relevant sign of the *peccatum* (sin) is cleansed from his forehead. For fallen human beings, no doubt, sliding down into Hell is easy, and climbing back out exhausting; nevertheless, for the repentant sinner, there is the grace of a purifying love, a force stronger than the gravity of sin.¹³

Now as it turns out, Virgil's discourse on love will provide us with a map of the theo-geography of Purgatory. Recall the three ways that love might go astray: to love the good excessively; to love the good deficiently; or to love a perverted form of the good. Take this latter love. Virgil describes the forms that such disordered love might take. First, "There is the one, hoping to excel by bringing down/his neighbor, who, for that cause alone, longs/that from his greatness his neighbor be brought low" (*Purgatorio* 17.115–117). This is Pride, the first terrace. Then "There is the one who fears the loss of power, favor,/honor, fame—should he be bettered by another./This so aggrieves him that he wants to see him fall" (*Purgatorio* 17.118–120). This is Envy, the second terrace. And finally, "there is the one who thinks himself offended/and hungers after vengeance,/and he must then contrive another's harm" (*Purgatorio* 17.121–123). This is Wrath, the third terrace. These three sins—which take the form of loving a mere simulacrum of the good—are lower down, closer to Hell, because they comprise, so to speak, a more twisted and misdirected use of natural desire. Unlike deficient love or excessive love, both of which pursue a real good but in the wrong manner, here, love misses its object almost completely, aiming not at what is good for the self, but at the counterfeit good that takes the form of causing another to suffer.

Compared with these first three lower terraces, Dante's current terrace (Sloth), and those three terraces to follow (Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust, respectively) are motivated by a fundamentally different orientation to the good.¹⁴ The sin of Sloth takes the form of a deficient love, one that knows what is good, but does not pursue it with the striving desire of a lover who longs for his beloved. Above this place of deficient love are the terraces of excessive love, where the good that is loved is a true good, i.e., something rightly ordered for our use and enjoyment (material objects, sustenance, the pleasure and union of sex); here, the problem is that when such a good is loved excessively, it "fails to make

¹¹ Cf. *Inferno* 11, which is given over to a discourse by Virgil explaining the geographical division of Hell according to sins of incontinence, malice, and fraud. That Virgil's discourse there parallels the exposition we find in *Purgatorio* 17, see the note Singleton provides for *Purgatorio* 17.90 (Singleton 1973, p. 390). We should observe, following the near universal consensus of the commentary tradition, that the "theo-geography" of Hell relies upon a distinction made by Aristotle in Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cf. Hollander's commentary at (Alighieri 2000, pp. 214–15, n.77–90). For the contrasting geographical organization of the seven deadly sins on Mount Purgatory, see (Wenzel 1965). It is significant that Dante represents sin and its purgation as structurally located and organized on the mountain according to love. In Hell, the division emphasizes instead weakness of will (incontinence) or hardening of will (malice).

¹² We learn of the countervailing force of love at work on the slope of Mount Purgatory from some elliptical remarks made by Virgil at *Purgatorio* 4.88–96: "This mountain is so fashioned/that the climb is harder at the outset/and, as one ascends, becomes less toilsome./When climbing uphill will seem pleasing—as easy as the passage of a boat/that lets the current float it down the stream—/at that point will this trail be done./There look to rest your weariness./This I know for truth. I say no more."

¹³ Recall the words of warning spoken to Aeneas by the Sibyl just before they venture into Hades: "Easy—the way that leads into Avernus: day/and night the door of darkest Dis is open./But to recall your steps, to rise again/into the upper air: that is the labor;/that is the task" (Virgil 2004, pp. 6.175–6.180). Like Virgil before him, Dante agrees that the gate to Hell is always open and easy to pass through; and like Virgil he agrees that the great labor for the pilgrim is to rise again, ascending into the upper air. For the Christian pilgrim, however, there is a necessary (and freely offered) grace to assist in this difficult task.

¹⁴ Hollander makes the point this way: "Just as the poem is now entering its second half and this *cantica* is arriving at its midpoint, so the experience of repentance of the seven capital vices has come to its central moment with Sloth. . . . [T]here is a gulf separating the vices below, all of which begin in the love of what is wrongful, from the rest, all of which result from insufficient or improper desire to attain the good" (Alighieri 2004, p. 383, n.82–87).

men happy,/for it is not the essence or true source,/the root of happiness or its proper fruit" (*Purgatorio* 17.133–135).

At this point in the Discourse, we, like Dante, might need a word or two of further explanation. When I insist to my students that Dante really does believe that all the sin and evil in the world stems, ultimately, from love, they tend to balk. Objections usually come in two forms. The first (and loudest) objection comes from the romantics, the idealists, and the relativists: "How can I help what I love?" they say. Or (a personal favorite): "If you really love someone or something, how can it be wrong?" The second objection comes from the reasonable, fastidious rule-followers: "I thought being good was about making choices, acting rightly. What does desire have to do with it?" And: "The kind of love Dante is talking about doesn't seem to be very practical, or to have anything to do with being a good person." Virgil seems to anticipate these objections, because at the opening of Canto 18, he broadens his explanation of love into a full-blown theory of moral motivation and action.

The mind, disposed to love at its creation,
is readily moved toward anything that pleases
as soon as by that pleasure it is roused to act.

From real forms your perception draws
an image it unfolds within you
so that the mind considers it,

and if the mind, so turned, inclines to it,
that inclination is a natural love,
which beauty binds in you at once.

Then, as fire, born to rise,
moves upward in its essence,
to where its matter lives the longest,

just so the mind, thus seized, achieves desire,
a movement of the spirit never resting
as long as it enjoys the thing it loves.

Now you see how hidden is the truth
from those who hold that every love
is in itself deserving praise,

perhaps because such love seems always good.
But every seal is not a good one,
even if imprinted in good wax. (*Purgatorio* 18.19–39)

Contained in this exposition is a response to the relativist and the moralist alike. For what Virgil is describing here is the classical ethical system of eudaemonism. When Dante's Virgil speaks of a natural love that desires what is good, we should no doubt have in mind the Aristotelian–Thomistic ethical world, so foreign to our modern sensibilities, which sees the human being as naturally oriented toward happiness. Josef Pieper describes the philosophy that underwrites Virgil's discourse as follows:

The functioning of [love] is exactly of this kind . . . : a desire that cannot be diverted or invalidated and that naturally dominates and permeates all our emotions and all our conscious decisions, above all our loving concern for the world and for other human beings. [As Thomas says]: "Man desires happiness naturally and by necessity." "To desire to be happy is not a matter of free choice." Happiness can virtually be defined as the epitome of all

those things that “the will is incapable of not willing” [*Summa Theologiae* I, 94, 1; I, 19, 10; I, II, 10, 2].¹⁵

As I tell my students, if what it means to be human is to be fundamentally oriented toward happiness, then what we need is to be *more* self-concerned, not less; only we need to be concerned with obtaining for ourselves the right things, i.e., those things that will truly lead to our happiness. To love false goods, to love too little, or to love good but finite things too much: each makes the mistake, both intellectual and volitional, of forfeiting the very thing we want most, namely our true happiness.

Now recall a claim I made above: by placing the discourse on love at the heart of the *Commedia*, Dante invites his readers to use it as a hermeneutic key to the text as a whole. I now want to expand this claim, and in doing so, I will (at last) state my thesis. As teachers, we find in Virgil’s Discourse on Love not just a key to the structure and movement of the poem, but also a key to understanding Dante’s pedagogical aim. Intending to move its readers from disordered love to an ordered love of ultimate things, the *Commedia* invites us to perform the interior transformation the poem dramatizes in verse and symbol.¹⁶ The beauty of poetic image, the gradual conversion of its characters’ affective and volitional faculties, the progress from ignorance (*Inferno*) through awareness (*Purgatorio*) to intellectual contemplation (*Paradiso*)—these dimensions of the *Commedia* function to effect in the student a love for ultimate things. In short, Dante intends to awaken in his readers not only a desire for the beauty of his poetic creation, but also a desire for the beauty of the love described therein. In this way, the poem *seduces* the reader for the sake of an intellectual-ethical-religious conversion regarding the meaning of love—a conversion occasioned by the very experience of love enacted in our encounter with the text.¹⁷

To unpack this connection between loving-desire and transformative conversion, I turn now to a consideration of the philosophical anthropology that lies behind Dante’s pedagogy of love: and this means taking up the notion of love as ascent which we find articulated especially in the thought of St. Augustine. Once I have explored the role of love in the Christian Platonism of Augustine, I will return to the *Commedia*, offering a few examples of figures, passages, and themes that provide fruitful material for the task of educating desire.

3. Augustine on the Weight of Love

Begin by recalling the most celebrated line in Augustine’s corpus: “You rouse us so that we delight in praising you, for you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹⁸ Notice that this invocation of the human heart, moved by self-surpassing desire, finding rest only when it delights in the highest Good, is a fundamental departure from the characteristically modern description of the human person as radically self-determining.¹⁹ The restless heart is not the autonomous will: what the heart wants is not *choices*, but rather unity with the beloved. The “rest”

¹⁵ (Pieper 1997, p. 234).

¹⁶ See (Montemaggi 2016, p. 32): “Dante wrote the *Commedia* to help save us. Whether or not we agree with his particular vision, we cannot read his text accurately . . . if we adopt interpretive practices that do not allow for the questioning open-endedness of Dante’s challenging invitation to his readers to undertake the journey toward divinity of which his poem speaks.”

¹⁷ Montemaggi puts the matter succinctly as follows: “There can be little doubt that the journey on which the *Commedia* takes us is one its author hopes will be transformative for us. Dante would not have seen his poems truthfulness to reside simply in what it speaks of but also, and primarily, in its contribution to the animation of love in us: the conscious realization of divinity within individual human beings and within humanity as a whole” (Montemaggi 2016, p. 33).

¹⁸ *Tu excitas ut laudare te delectet, quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.* Translation my own. For a sense of the rich depth of meaning this sentence contains, compare the variant translations of Henry Chadwick and Maria Boulding: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Augustine 2008, p. 3); “You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and draw us to yourself, and our heart is inquiet until it rests in you” (Augustine 1998, p. 3). *Excitare* has the sense both of setting in motion and of summoning or calling forth. Being made *ad Deum* indicates at once that man has his end or purpose in God (“you have made us for yourself”) and is dynamically in motion toward him (“you draw us to yourself”). In the quotations of the *Confessions* that follow I will rely on the translation provided by Chadwick (Augustine 2008).

¹⁹ On self-determination or autonomy as the supreme modern value, see (Desmond 1998). For more on the historical development of the modern notion of the human person (and Augustine’s ambiguous role in shaping the notion of “self”), see (Taylor 1992, pp. 127–42).

Augustine speaks of is not freedom of choice, but rather an encounter with a good that is radically other, a good that delights just insofar as it lies beyond our anticipation or mastery. So the beginning of the *Confessions* reminds us that we are moved by a power that is “ours,” but that is nevertheless not self-determined: when I love, it is certainly I who wills to love; but when I interrogate my experience of loving-desire, love appears in the first place not as a motion I initiate or control, but rather as something I undergo, even suffer.

In Book 13, the final book of the *Confessions*, Augustine says that by love we are moved toward what delights us, much as the stone is moved by its weight toward its natural place. Augustine goes on to clarify what he means by “weight,” so as to better employ it as a metaphor for human love. The central feature of weight here seems to be its *intentionality*, its purposive movement toward a goal: what it means for a natural body to move “by its weight” is for it to move “towards its proper place.”²⁰ While a stone does indeed move downwards by its weight, we could just as well say, in the view of the ancients, that fire tends to move upwards by its weight. Water poured on oil sinks, even as the oil rises: the movement by which each strives to find its place, indeed the very striving itself, Augustine identifies simply and directly with the term ‘weight.’ Weight in the *Confessions*, therefore, is a master metaphor for the dynamism of a body seeking out balance, order, equilibrium. Weight is what pulls everything toward its proper place. So long as things are still striving toward their respective goals—the stone toward the ground, the flame toward the heavens—they can be said to be restless. But as each thing finds its ordained place, it ceases its striving; in the achievement of its goal, it finds rest: “Things which are not in their intended position are restless. Once they are in their ordered position, they are at rest.”²¹

Now for the Augustine of the *Confessions*, as for Dante’s Virgil, the starting point for understanding the self is to recognize that human beings are essentially *lovers*, moved by the delight that we experience in our encounter with a good. Insofar as we are still striving for our ultimate good, we are restless; but as we ascend in praise, confessing both our iniquity and the goodness of our created contingency, we strive to find our place—our rest—in the transcendent source of our being. The motion of the soul, then, according to Augustine in the *Confessions*, is not simply self-determining will, but *love*; and *love* is *weight*: “My love is my weight,” he writes. “Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me.”²²

To put this in terms of a moral psychology: freedom, taken as self-determination, seems to involve a reduction of all that appears to move me without my consent or control (this is basically a Stoic conception of freedom). Love, by contrast—especially love in its desiring form—is ecstatic, a response to the good that exceeds my own self-determination (this is basically Platonic). But if what love desires is rest in the binding unity of the self with what I love, then—in a certain sense—the more I love, the *less* I am free: if what I mean by freedom is the unrestricted possibility of determining myself. For there is a paradoxical character to loving-desire: it is not simply striving borne out of lack; it is also a responsiveness to the good that exceeds the self. In the language of the *Confessions*, desire grants a new life that is not grasped but is endowed.²³ This is a ratification of a Platonic idea: loving-desire is a lack, but it is an ambiguous lack, not simply acquisitive striving, but rather a seeking that is already intimate communication with the good that it desires, a good that is secretly at work in drawing us to itself.

It is important to note that when Augustine speaks of love, he does not have in mind an affective or emotional quality opposed to a rational or intellectual faculty. In fact, for Augustine, we would do better to think of love as a fully integrated orientation of the entire human person, one which has both affective and noetic dimensions.²⁴ For this reason, I sometimes describe Augustine’s account

²⁰ *conf.*, 13.8.9. See also *civ. Dei*, 11.28.

²¹ *conf.*, 13.10. See (Williams 1994), on the importance of *pondus* for Augustine’s integration of physics into his theology of creation.

²² *Pondus meum amor meus; eo feror, quocumque feror. conf.* 13.9.10.

²³ Cf. *conf.* 9.2.3, and 13.9.10.

²⁴ At *Purgatorio* 24.49–54, Dante recalls a sonnet he composed as a younger man, one that is found in the *Vita Nuova* and that begins with a line addressing “*Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore*” (Ladies that have intelligence of love). He goes on to specify

of the moral life as an effort to overcome disordered love through the cultivation of *love as attention*. The moral life, on this telling, is concerned above all with achieving freedom as liberation from delusion, especially from self-delusion. What Augustine offers us, then, is an account of freedom that we can describe *negatively* as “being freed” from habitual illusion, and *positively* as the freedom of “original participation in the good.”²⁵

For Augustine, love is not only desire, it is also the coupling or binding of the self to the object that is loved. This binding takes the phenomenological form of delight or enjoyment, which is the self’s active appropriation of the determining power of the good. That is to say, the experience of delight is a kind of necessity—Augustine will say that “we necessarily act according to that which most delights us”—but it is a “free necessity” insofar as what we love determines us not through coercion but rather through the intrinsic consent of our will.²⁶ (Recall Dante’s Virgil: “The mind, disposed to love at its creation,/is readily moved toward anything that pleases/as soon as by that pleasure it is roused to act” [*Purgatorio* 18.19–21].) Here, then, is the punch-line: if the will always acts under some representation of the good—and if the good *qua* good necessarily (but not coercively) binds us through delight—then our choice is not between self-determination or extrinsic determination, but rather between whether we bind ourselves to something that enslaves or to something that liberates.²⁷ True freedom, as Augustine says in the *De vera religione*, consists in the power to abide in the good.²⁸

In this way, Augustine develops a line of thinking that Dante will take up in Virgil’s discourse: love is a weaving together of activity and receptivity; it is a response which “lets the good be,” so to speak, while also actively participating in a “yes” to this good. This makes each genuine choice a co-act, where both the will and the object willed are mutual (but asymmetrical) agencies that together bring about a free moral choice. The closest and best analogue we have is that of education, in which both the teacher and the student must co-operate in order to bring about learning.²⁹ And the analogy is apt for our wider discussion, too, since the student’s role in education is that of attentive receptivity, which is decidedly not the same as passivity, but is rather the inward reception and appropriation of what is outwardly given.

Now, if we think through what it means to say that freedom is a co-actual participation in the good by means of loving attention, then we arrive at a somewhat startling implication. In his *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine makes a famous distinction between the goods of use and goods of enjoyment.³⁰ The former are things that are good for the sake of something else; the latter are things that are good

that his poetic creation depends upon the linking of love with intellect, describing himself as one who writes down what it is that love dictates to him internally. As Nussbaum remarks, “It is clearly Dante’s view that all forms of love involve cognitive representation” (Nussbaum 1999, p. 89, n.50). See also (Williams 2005): “It must however be stressed that this image of Beatrice is ‘of so noble a virtue’ that it does not allow Love to triumph without Reason . . . ‘We are come’, says Virgil to Dante at the opening of the *Inferno*, ‘where I told you you should see that unhappy people who have lost the good of intellect’—‘il ben dell’ intelletto.’ And at the close of the *Paradiso* Beatrice says to him: ‘We are come to the heaven which is pure light—intellectual light full of love’—‘luce intellettuale piena d’ amore.’ . . . The greatest Romantic poet, like every other true romantic, insists on the intellect at every step of the Way” (p. 21). I will return to Williams’ reading of Dante, and especially to his articulation of the role that Beatrice plays for the relationship between intellect and love in the *Commedia*.

²⁵ For the notion of freedom as “original participation in the good,” see (Schindler 2002). As it will become clear, I follow Schindler’s reading on the relationship between desire, beauty, and freedom in Augustine’s philosophical anthropology.

²⁶ See (Schindler 2002, p. 634). Cf. Augustine’s comments on John 6:44 (“No one comes to me unless the Father draws him”): “Do not think that you are drawn unwillingly; the mind is drawn also by love. . . ‘How do I believe by will, if I am drawn?’ I say, it is not enough by will, you are also drawn by pleasure. What does it mean to be drawn by pleasure? ‘Take delight in the Lord, and he will grant you your heart’s desire’ (Ps 36:4). There is a certain pleasure of the heart to which that heavenly bread is sweet. Moreover, if it was allowed to the poet to say, ‘Each man is drawn by his own pleasure’—not need but pleasure, not obligation but delight—how much more ought we to say that a man is drawn to Christ who delights in truth, delights in happiness, delights in justice, delights in eternal life (and all this is Christ)? Do bodily senses have their pleasures and the mind does not? . . . Give me one who loves, and he knows what I’m saying. Give me one who desires, one who hungers, one traveling and thirsting in this solitude and sighing for the fountain of an eternal homeland, and he knows what I’m saying. . . He is drawn by loving. . . by a chain of the heart” (*Jo. ev. tr.* 26.4–5).

²⁷ See, again, (Schindler 2002, p. 634).

²⁸ *ver. rel.* 54.113.

²⁹ On teaching as an asymmetrical but genuine “co-act,” see (Schindler 2002, pp. 640–41).

³⁰ *doct. Chr.* 1.3.

in themselves. These latter goods, the goods of enjoyment, are in an important sense “useless” or “gratuitous,” which is to say, they are good not with reference to anything else, but simply because they are. If, as we have said, what it means to love a good is to bind oneself to what one loves, then the degree of freedom one experiences in a choice will correspond proportionately to the “absoluteness” of the object that is loved. If we choose what is merely useful, we bind ourselves, in a certain sense, to that which determines the goodness of the object (that for the sake of which it is). If, instead, we adhere to what is good in itself, then in a real sense, we make the freedom of the object *our own* freedom. When the will participates in the goods of enjoyment, then it becomes more actually good, and thereby becomes an object of enjoyment itself.³¹ For Augustine, it is beauty that is the preeminent good of enjoyment, because beauty is the radiation of a goodness beyond our immediate control, a goodness that resists all instrumental use. It is by being absolute that beauty invites freedom, and it is in loving beauty that we become truly free.

4. Returning to the *Commedia*: Conversion as Purifying Love

For Dante, of course, beauty took the form of a particular Florentine girl. When Beatrice appeared, Dante experienced for the first time the *surprise*, the *advent*, of a particular good; and it is Dante’s genius that he so allowed the good of this beauty to transform his love that Beatrice became the motive force of Dante’s intellectual, ethical, and moral conversion. Here is how he describes in the *Vita Nuova* the experience of encountering Beatrice for the first time:

Let me say, from that time on, Love governed my soul, which became immediately devoted to him, and he reigned over me with such assurance and lordship, given him by the power of my imagination, that I could only dedicate myself to fulfilling his every pleasure. . . . And through her image, which remained constantly with me, was Love’s assurance of holding me, it was of such a pure quality that it never allowed me to be ruled by Love without the faithful counsel of reason, in all those things where such advice might be profitable.³²

In his marvelous and underappreciated study, *The Figure of Beatrice*, Charles Williams remarks on the word “image” that Dante uses of Beatrice in the passage just quoted. Beatrice was for Dante an image in two crucial regards. In the first place, she was not a subjective disposition; she was someone *beheld*, a real and objective fact in the world that *surprised* Dante, that was there *prior to* his desire; she was, therefore, a real cause in his loving. In the second place, Beatrice was an image in the sense that she *referred* Dante to something that exceeded herself, *precisely while remaining herself*. Here is how Williams puts the matter:

Beatrice was, in her degree, an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself. But she also remained Beatrice right to the end Just as there is no point in Dante’s thought at which the image of Beatrice in his mind was supposed to exclude the actual objective Beatrice, so there is no point at which the objective Beatrice is to exclude the Power which is expressed through her.³³

In the particular intensity of his love for Beatrice, Dante shows us the unique opportunity that loving attention affords us. To quote Pieper again:

If we look to the well-documented experience of great lovers, we learn that precisely this intensity of love turned toward a single partner seems to place the lover at a vantage point from which he realizes for the first time the goodness and loveliness of all people, in fact, of

³¹ See (Schindler 2002, p. 650).

³² (Alighieri 1973, p. 2.4).

³³ (Williams 2005, pp. 7–8).

all loving beings. . . . Dante says precisely the same thing in regard to Beatrice: When she appeared “no foe existed for me any more.”³⁴

The in-breaking of the good, then, the *advent* that I mentioned above, entices the lover to actively participate in the good, precisely to the extent that it re-orientes the lover away from self-insistence, and out into an affirmation of the other as real and good. Williams summarizes the demand of love this way: “Dante himself, at the girl’s greeting, becomes love. That moment may last for the flash of her smile or for an evening or for six months. But it desires more than such a miracle; it desires the total and voluntary conversion of the lover. Dante has to become the thing he has seen in Beatrice, and has, for that moment, been in himself.”³⁵

It turns out that the *passion* of love as something *suffered* now blossoms forth into an *activity* of self-transcendence in which the lover ventures to become what he is. The philosopher William Desmond describes this movement as the transition from *advent* to *adventure*: “Transcendence comes to us as an *advent*; this is the patience of an original opening. But, one must add, what comes to us in this advent makes us, in turn *adventuring* beings, beings ventured towards (*ad*) something of which we are not sure, though we are with it, or it is elusively with us from the outset—with us, though in no sense mastered.”³⁶ One is put in mind of the enigmatic claim by Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium* that *eros* has as its goal begetting in the presence of beauty.³⁷ I have always read this as a sign that true love of beauty begins with a receptive *passio*, but then turns into a responsive *activity*, a participation in beauty that wills new and more beauty to be, and this most of all *within the lover herself*.

Dante knows that, for the Christian pilgrim, passion and endeavor, humility and creativity must go hand in hand. There is much to say about how Dante lives the tension between the endeavor of (audacious) poetic creativity and the patience of loving humility. But let us just note that perhaps it is this very tension which finds Dante the pilgrim, as he labors up the slope of Mount Purgatory, repeatedly taking the posture of the penitents, his comportment subtly mirroring the purgative penance that undoes each vice in turn. I mention one instance, although we need not look far to multiply the effect.³⁸ On the first terrace, the Terrace of Pride, Dante witnesses “crouching figures” “hunched over more or less,/depending on the burdens on their backs,/and even he that showed the greatest patience/weeping, seemed to say: ‘I can no more.’” This sight causes Dante the poet to interject:

O vainglorious Christians, miserable wretches!
Sick in the visions engendered in your minds,
you put your trust in backward steps.

Do you not see that we are born as worms,
though able to transform into angelic butterflies
that unimpeded soar to justice?

What makes your mind rear up so high? (*Purgatorio* 10.121–127)

³⁴ (Pieper 1997, p. 200).

³⁵ (Williams 2005, p. 37). Earlier, in commenting on Dante’s description of the effect that Beatrice’s ‘salutation’ had on his soul, Williams makes the point that the two particular virtues the girl’s greeting engendered in Dante—humility and charity—these can only develop when one turns away from oneself and towards a greater good: “The sight of Beatrice . . . filled him with the fire of charity and clothed him with humility; he became—and for a moment he knew it—an entire goodwill. Neither of these great virtues is gained by considering oneself; and the apparition of this glory, living and moving in Florence, precisely frees him from the consideration of himself. Love is greater than he: his soul was right when it exclaimed: ‘A stronger than I dominates me’ and trembled” (Williams 2005, pp. 22–23).

³⁶ (Desmond 1995, p. 5).

³⁷ *Symposium* 206b.

³⁸ We might consider, for example, the pilgrim’s declaration to Sapia, on the Terrace of Envy, that on his next “visit” to Purgatory, he will spend a longer time on the Terrace of Pride below (*Purgatorio* 13.136–138). There is also the “real,” rather than virtual, purgation that Dante the pilgrim undergoes in passing through the final wall of fire at the summit of the mountain (*Purgatorio* 27.14–57).

In this memorable metaphor, we see illustrated the very point that Virgil will go on to make in his discourse on love: the proud man, the one who longs that “from his greatness his neighbor be brought low,” suffers from a failure of vision, desiring an imagined but counterfeit good that seems to move the lover forward, but only drags the sinner away from his true good. Dante’s “angelic butterfly” is the one who is transformed in mind and heart, cooperating with grace to grow the wings of unencumbered and true desire. The means of this transformation is the purgative suffering that the penitents here undergo, “purging away the darkness of the world” (*Purgatorio* 11.30), bending the knee in humility under the weight of their previous sin. As Dante encounters these humbled penitents, Virgil announces him as one who is likewise encumbered: “he that comes here with me,/burdened with the weight of Adam’s flesh,/though eager to ascend, is slow at climbing” (*Purgatorio* 11.43–45). This weighty pilgrim, slow at climbing, must bend down his face to converse with sinners, taking on the penitential posture, “all hunched, trudg[ing] on beside them” (*Purgatorio* 11.78). Dante the poet does not spare himself the penance of humbly acknowledging, in word and in imaginative deed, that he suffers from the disordered love of pride. To write himself into the poem in this way is to begin to redirect his love toward the Beauty that alone is salvific.

I present a final example of the way in which the weight of love can be brought to bear on particular moments in the *Commedia*. Recall that the midpoint of the poem, the Terrace of Sloth, is a place of transition from disordered love to rightly ordered love. From this point forward, desire will only intensify, until it finds its satisfaction, and its perpetual increase, in the Beatific Vision. As love gains strength, of course, there is the accompanying possibility that it might become excessive with respect to lesser goods. But that is to anticipate; here on the Terrace of Sloth, the problem is no longer one of desiring what is not to be desired; here, instead, the problem is that of apathy, indifference, spiritual torpor—*acedia* in Latin, *accidia* in Italian.³⁹

In this way, the Terrace of Sloth recalls that other great liminal space in Dante’s theologically saturated world. Canto 3 of the *Inferno* is one of the more imaginative constructions in Dante’s underworld. Here, we are not yet quite in Hell proper, even though we have entered through that gate which promises only woe and everlasting pain. We are, so to speak, in the antechamber of Hell, the waiting room of the damned. This is the realm of the neutrals, those souls who “lived/without disgrace yet without praise.” “Loath to impart its beauty,” Virgil tells us, “Heaven casts them out,/and depth of Hell does not receive them/lest on their account the evil angels gloat” (*Inferno* 3.36; pp. 40–42).⁴⁰ Dante heaps scorn upon this enormous line of unfortunates, calling them “hateful alike to God and to His foes,” describing them as “wretches, who never were alive.” Their physical suffering—to follow a whirling banner blindly, to be stung into useless action by flies and wasps—is not so terrible, Dante seems to suggest, as the psychological torture of spending eternity *in no discernible place at all*: nameless, placeless, set adrift forever in the afterlife as they once drifted through their former life.

When I ask my students where they think they might end up in Dante’s great vision of the world to come, an overwhelming number identify themselves with the neutrals. I suspect that there is a wisdom here: indifference, neutrality, sloth; however we name it, this is the great danger of our age. I am reminded of a remark (is it Kierkegaard who makes it?), that ours is an age that has forgotten how to sin. Contrary to all appearances, and in keeping with Virgil’s discourse on love, we can now diagnose this problem as a failure to love. Ours is a thoroughly *de-eroticized age*: we confuse the petty pleasures of sexual gratification with the grand adventure of desire, and we settle for little compromises when what awaits us is the joyful ecstasy of Beauty.

The human being, like the sun and all the other stars, is moved by love. When that love lessens, when the heart loses some of its restlessness, then it is beauty and beauty alone that will rekindle the

³⁹ Hollander provides a helpful gloss on the meaning of *acedia*, i.e., “a kind of spiritual torpor accompanied by (or even causing) physical weariness” (Alighieri 2004, p. 383, n.82–87). He also lists the relevant secondary literature on the topic, including a manuscript-length study by (Wenzel 1967).

⁴⁰ (Alighieri 2000, p. 49).

flame of desire. It is not accidental that on Mount Purgatory, art—in the form of music, sculpture, dream, and image—serves to present exemplars of virtue to Dante and to the repentant sinners. As Peter Hawkins acutely observes: “One of Dante’s many innovations in the second canticle is his demonstration that art and artists play a significant role in the transformative process of salvation. The point should not be lost on us, for if this is true of craft in the purgatorial afterlife, might it not be true of the world of the living?”⁴¹ The beauty of Dante’s poetry, like the beauty of all truly great art, can surprise us, and in this shock it can awaken in us a renewed desire for the good beyond our limited imaginations.

Then, as fire, born to rise,
moves upward in its essence,
to where its matter lives the longest,

just so the mind, thus seized, achieves desire,
a movement of the spirit never resting
as long as it enjoys the thing it loves. (*Purgatorio* 18.28–33)

5. Conclusion: Love as Advent and Adventure

I conclude with an image taken from one of my own teachers, the philosopher William Desmond, whom I have already mentioned. In the following passage, he is speaking about the Greek notion of *theoria* or contemplation, a notion that accords well with what I have been referring to throughout this paper under the sign of loving attention, enjoyment, and ecstatic participation in beauty. Here is what Desmond says:

[W]ith *theoria*: the memory of its origins with the religious festival is essential. The *theoroi* were religious delegates sent by the city states to the games, which were themselves religious festivals, celebrations of the largess of being, largess evident in the great performances and deeds of outstanding humans. *Theoroi* were sent to enjoy the [excess] of being as ritualized in the religious festivals. There is a watching here, a being spectatorial, but it is a joyful vigilance; it is entirely active mindfulness that represents the divine powers of consent and celebration. Festive being is an amen to being in its gift and largess.⁴²

As Virgil teaches in his *Discourse*, as Dante dramatizes throughout his entire poem, and as Augustine developed in his philosophical reflection on freedom, conversion comes not from the screwing up of will but from the honing of loving-attention in festive celebration and “entirely active mindfulness,” a consent and celebration of the good of being. This consent is the hardest thing in the world; it is the easiest thing in the world. The more we can help our students give themselves over to that “consent and celebration,” to the “essentially joyful vigilance” that is “celebrating mindfulness of the ultimate powers,” the stronger their voices will become. Radical conversion will be the response of a soul shaken awake.

This is what I have been calling *advent*, the breaking through into the every-day of such excessive beauty that it transforms, converts, forever changes a life. As teachers, we must sing of this disclosure, must pass through the dark abyss of doubt and (even more difficult) the banal mediocrity of the “ordinary” to remember always what is Real, True, Original, Good, and Ever-Present. And for those students who can hear, what is asked in response is the adventure of finding their voice: in syllogism and lyric, in prose and poem, to witness again and again, in joyful vigilance, to what has been disclosed. Attention. Sight. Vigilance. Love. These are all in the end the same act, a stretching in the between that desires out of a full-lack, longs for what is disclosed—ambiguously, mysteriously, but truly—in the

⁴¹ (Hawkins 2006, p. 55).

⁴² (Desmond 1995, p. 42).

midst of things. To educate our students *with* love, to educate them *in and through* love, is to invite them into the dangerous, adventurous space of ecstatic self-transcendence. If we perform our task rightly, then perhaps we too might one day echo Virgil's valediction to Dante:

I have brought you here with intellect and skill.
From now on take your pleasure as your guide.
You are free of the steep way, free of the narrow.

...

No longer wait for word or sign from me.
Your will is free, upright, and sound.
Not to act as it chooses is unworthy:
Over yourself I crown and miter you. (*Purgatorio* 27.130–132; 139–142)

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