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JEFFERSON REPORT: PROBING EDUCATION

Dante and the University of Bologna

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Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. Today's article features author and politician Dante Alighieri, a famous alumnus of the University of Bologna. Dante's "Inferno," cited here, is the first of his three-part epic poem, "The Divine Comedy."

Fourth in a Series

Dante was instrumental in establishing the literature of Italy. His depictions of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven provided inspiration for the larger body of Western art and literature. He influenced English writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, and Alfred Tennyson, among many others. He is described as the "father" of the Italian language, and in Italy he is often referred to as *il Sommo Poeta* ("the Supreme Poet"). He was an activist in politics.

Dante studied at the University of Bologna, one of the most famous universities in the medieval world and oldest in Europe. Dante does not provide any additional details beyond Bologna that reveal where he studied philosophy, but in Florence in the early 1290s, there were three schools of religious orders at which he may have attended.

Although the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella did not allow laymen to pursue studies of philosophy specifically, Dante would have been permitted to attend theology classes, and in these there would almost certainly have been at least indirect exposure to Aristotelian philosophy. Most intriguingly, Dante may have had the opportunity to attend lectures of Remigio dei Girolami (d. 1319), who had studied theology at the University of Paris during the tenure of Thomas Aquinas. Remigio, like Dante, was a White Guelf [Mafioso-like], and, also like Dante, Remigio read widely in classical literature and was fond of drawing lessons in political and ethical conduct from his reading. For both Remigio and Dante, moreover, Thomas was primarily the author of the *Summa contra Gentiles* and the commentary on the *Ethics*, concerned, like Aristotle himself, to demonstrate the capacities of human reason as a means to truth.

The Bible as well as the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca were the mainstays of Dante's early culture. Of these Rome presents the most inspiring source of identification. The cult of Cicero began to develop alongside that of Aristotle; Cicero was perceived as fully exemplifying the intellectual as citizen. A second Roman idea to become an important part of Dante's culture was the love of glory, the quest for fame through a wholehearted devotion to excelling.

Dante was endowed with remarkable intellectual and aesthetic self-confidence. By the time he was 18, as he says in the *Vita nuova*, he had already taught himself the art of making verse. He sent an early sonnet, which was to become the first poem in the *Vita nuova*, to the most famous poets of his day. He received several responses, but the most important one came from Cavalcanti, and this was the beginning of their great friendship.

Despite all the conflicts and difficulties of life for Dante, first and foremost he was a poet of love, the experience of acquiring philosophical understanding has an important psychological component. By enabling us to analyze the processes of perception, philosophy brings us into contact with the true nature of things, and for Dante, as Kenelm Foster observes, the slightest such contact could have a metaphysical value.

When the human mind is fully informed by philosophy, it would appear, it becomes virtually one of the *intelligenze*, who know both what is above them and what is below, God as cause and the created universe as effect. Thus, Dante can speak of our rational nature as, simultaneously our "truly human" and "our angelic nature."

Philosophical knowledge is redirected to the purposes of social and political life, and the treatise, while punctuated like the others by numerous digressions, pursues a single sustained argument. Dante begins by explaining that social order is a necessary condition for human happiness and that it requires a single governor whose authority embraces that of all particular governors and directs

their several efforts to a single end. After a long digression on the role of Rome in the providential design of human history, he turns from political to philosophical authority, citing Aristotle as in effect the governor of the mind, “master and guide of human reason insofar as it is occupied with its final end.” From this, Dante derives the conclusion that even an emperor’s authority must be circumscribed insofar as the art of ruling and the laws it creates cannot overrule rational judgment based on the laws of nature.

The *Vita nuova*, which Dante called his *libello*, or small book, is a remarkable work. The prose commentary provides the frame story, which does not emerge from the poems themselves (it is, of course, conceivable that some were actually written for other occasions than those alleged). The story is simple enough, telling of Dante’s first sight of Beatrice when both are nine years of age, her salutation when they are 18, Dante’s expedients to conceal his love for her, the crisis experienced when Beatrice withholds her greeting, Dante’s anguish that she is making light of him, his determination to rise above anguish and sing only of his lady’s virtues, anticipations of her death (that of a young friend, the death of her father, and Dante’s own premonitory dream), and finally the death of Beatrice, Dante’s mourning, the temptation of the sympathetic *donna gentile* (a young woman who temporarily replaces Beatrice), Beatrice’s final triumph and apotheosis, and, in the last chapter, Dante’s determination to write at some later time about her “that which has never been written of any woman.”

This interest in philosophical poetry led Dante to another great change in his life, which he describes in the *Convivio*. Looking for consolation following the death of Beatrice, Dante reports that he turned to philosophy, particularly to the writings of Boethius and Cicero. But what was intended as a temporary reprieve from sorrow became a lifelong avocation and one of the most crucial intellectual events in Dante’s career. The *donna gentile* of the *Vita nuova* was transformed into Lady Philosophy, who soon occupied all of Dante’s thoughts. He began attending the religious schools of Florence in order to hear disputations on philosophy, and within a period of only 30 months “the love of her [philosophy] banished and destroyed every other thought.” In his poem “*Voi che ’ntendendo il terzo ciel movete*” (“You Who Through Intelligence Move the Third Sphere”) he dramatizes this conversion from the sweet old style, associated with Beatrice and the *Vita nuova*, to the rigorous, even severe, new style associated with philosophy. This period of study gave expression to a series of canzoni that were eventually to form the poetic basis for the philosophic commentary of the *Convivio*.

Another great change was Dante’s more active political involvement in the affairs of the commune. In 1295, he became a member of the guild of physicians and apothecaries (to which philosophers could belong), which opened his way to public office. But he entered the public arena at a most perilous time in the city’s politics. As it had been during the time of the Guelf and Ghibelline civil strife, in the 1290s Florence once again became a divided city. The ruling Guelf class of

Florence became divided into a party of “Blacks,” led by Corso Donati, and a party of “Whites,” to which Dante belonged. The Whites gained the upper hand and exiled the Blacks. Gangs have always existed, I suppose.

During these years Dante wrote important political epistles – evidence of the great esteem in which he was held throughout Italy, of his personal authority, as it were – in which he exalted Henry, urging him to be diligent, and condemned Florence. In subsequent action, however, which was to remind Dante of Boniface’s duplicity, Clement himself turned against Henry. This action prompted one of Dante’s greatest polemical treatises, his *De monarchia* (c. 1313; On Monarchy), in which he expands the political arguments of the *Convivio*. In the embittered atmosphere caused by Clement’s deceit, Dante turned his argumentative powers against papal insistence on its superiority over the political ruler – that is, against the argument that the empire derived its political authority from the pope. In the final passages of the *Monarchia*, Dante writes that the ends designed by Providence for humanity are twofold: one end is the bliss of this life, which is conveyed in the figure of the earthly paradise, and the other is the bliss of eternal life, which is embodied in the image of a heavenly paradise.

Yet despite their different ends, these two purposes are not unconnected. Dante concludes his *Monarchia* by assuring his reader that he does not mean to imply “that the Roman government is in no way subject to the Roman pontificate, for in some ways our mortal happiness is ordered for the sake of immortal happiness.” Dante’s problem was that he had to express in theoretical language a subtle relationship that might be better conveyed by metaphoric language and historical example. Surveying the Dante’s years of exile were years of difficult peregrinations from one place to another – as he himself repeatedly says, most effectively in *Paradiso* [XVII], in Cacciaguیدا’s moving lamentation that “bitter is the taste of another man’s bread and ... heavy the way up and down another man’s stair.” History of the relationship between papacy and empire, Dante pointed with approval to specific historical examples, such as Constantine’s good will toward the church.

Dante is best known for his ***Divine Comedy***. A landmark in Italian literature and among the greatest works of all medieval European literature, it is a profound Christian vision of humankind’s temporal and eternal destiny. On its most personal level, it draws on Dante’s own experience of exile from his native city of Florence. On its most comprehensive level, it may be read as an allegory, taking the form of a journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise. The poem amazes by its array of learning, its penetrating and comprehensive analysis of contemporary problems, and its inventiveness of language and imagery.

The plot of *The Divine Comedy* is simple: a man, generally assumed to be Dante himself, is miraculously enabled to undertake an ultramundane journey, which

leads him to visit the souls in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. He has two guides: Virgil, who leads him through the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and Beatrice, who introduces him to *Paradiso*. Through these fictional encounters taking place from Good Friday evening in 1300 through Easter Sunday and slightly beyond, Dante learns of the exile that is awaiting him (which had, of course, already occurred at the time of the writing). This device allowed Dante not only to create a story out of his pending exile but also to explain the means by which he came to cope with his personal calamity and to offer suggestions for the resolution of Italy's troubles as well. Thus, the exile of an individual becomes a microcosm of the problems of a country, and it also becomes representative of the fall of humankind. Dante's story is thus historically specific as well as paradigmatic.

Dante's journey to Hell represents the spiritual act of dying to the world, and hence it coincides with the season of Christ's own death. (In this way, Dante's method is similar to that of Milton in *Paradise Lost*, where the flamboyant but defective Lucifer and his fallen angels are presented first.) The *Inferno* represents a false start during which Dante, the character, must be disabused of harmful values that somehow prevent him from rising above his fallen world. Despite the regressive nature of the *Inferno*, Dante's meetings with the roster of the damned are among the most memorable moments of the poem.

The visit to Hell is, as Virgil and later Beatrice explain, an extreme measure, a painful but necessary act before real recovery can begin. This explains why the *Inferno* is both aesthetically and theologically incomplete. For instance, readers frequently express disappointment at the lack of dramatic or emotional power in the final encounter with Satan in canto XXXIV. But because the journey through the *Inferno* primarily signifies a process of separation and thus is only the initial step in a fuller development, it must end with a distinct anticlimax. In a way this is inevitable because the final revelation of Satan can have nothing new to offer: the sad effects of his presence in human history have already become apparent throughout the *Inferno*.

In the *Purgatorio* the protagonist's painful process of spiritual rehabilitation commences; in fact, this part of the journey may be considered the poem's true moral starting point. Here the pilgrim Dante subdues his own personality in order that he may ascend. In fact, in contrast to the *Inferno*, where Dante is confronted with a system of models that needs to be discarded, in the *Purgatorio* few characters present themselves as models; all of the penitents are pilgrims along the road of life. Dante, rather than being an awed if alienated observer, is an active participant. If the *Inferno* is a canticle of enforced and involuntary alienation, in which Dante learns how harmful were his former allegiances, in the *Purgatorio* he comes to accept as most fitting the essential Christian image of life as a pilgrimage. As Beatrice in her magisterial return to the earthly paradise reminds Dante, he must learn to reject the deceptive promises of the temporal world.

Despite its harsh regime, the *Purgatorio* is the realm of spiritual dawn, where larger visions are entertained. Whereas in only one canto of the *Inferno* (VII), in which Fortuna is discussed, is there any suggestion of philosophy, in the *Purgatorio*, historical, political, and moral vistas are opened up. It is, moreover, the great canticle of poetry and the arts. Dante meant it literally when he proclaimed, after the dreary dimensions of Hell: “But here let poetry rise again from the dead.” Then comes the long-awaited reunion with Beatrice in the earthly paradise. Thus, from the classics Dante seems to have derived his moral and political understanding as well as his conception of the epic poem – that is, a framing story large enough to encompass the most important issues of his day, but it was from his native tradition that he acquired the philosophy of love that forms the Christian matter of his poem.

This means, of course, that Virgil, Dante’s guide, must give way to other leaders, and in a canticle generally devoid of drama the rejection of Virgil becomes the single dramatic event. Dante’s use of Virgil is one of the richest cultural appropriations in literature. “I was a poet and sang of that just son of Anchises who came from Troy after proud Ilium was burned.” So, too, Dante sings of the just son of a city, Florence, who was unjustly expelled, and forced to search, as Aeneas had done, for a better city, in his case the heavenly city.

Wherever it may have been that Dante acquired his familiarity with philosophy and theology, his writings offer ample evidence of wide-ranging interests, if not deep expertise about every subject that is touched on in them. In particular, Dante cites a dozen works of Aristotle, apparently at first hand, and displays a particularly intimate knowledge of the *Ethics*, largely derived, no doubt, from Thomas Aquinas.

Dante’s choice to deploy Beatrice as the ultimate and explicit guarantor of the veracity and salvific potential of the text invokes and transforms the meaning of his entire corpus of writings. That is, because Beatrice and *donna gentile* are simultaneously real women and yet also allegorical tropes as early as the *Vita Nuova*, the *Divine Comedy*’s reinvention of Beatrice calls upon the reader to return to Dante’s earlier texts while also hindering any clear sense of what those texts have to offer in terms of their claims on the reader’s interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*.

In addition to poetry, Dante wrote important theoretical works ranging from discussions of rhetoric to moral philosophy and political thought. But, most unusual for a layman, he also had an impressive command of the most recent scholastic philosophy and of theology. His learning and his personal involvement in the heated political controversies of his age led him to the composition of *De monarchia*, one of the major tracts of medieval political philosophy.

The fullest expository expression of Dante's philosophical thought is the *Convivio* with only four of its treatises completed. In these surviving treatises, Dante describes the genesis of his love of philosophy, and reflects on the ability of philosophical understanding to mediate religious truth, tracing the desire for knowledge from its origin as an inherent trait of human nature to the point at which the love of wisdom expresses itself directly as love of God.

The experience of love becomes a means to self-realization, and an awareness of the hierarchy of forces operative in the universe at large, that enables the human mind to participate in the divine. Thus, in effect, the *donna gentile* is the love and perfection we desire. Through her we experience the divine goodness and God, by instilling his radiance in her love of philosophy, "assimilates" her form "to his likeness insofar as it is possible to be like Him."

Philosophy has clearly become far more than the means whereby human nature achieves self-realization, though this ideal continues to provide a framework for Dante's praise of her. She has assumed the status of Wisdom, *sapientia*, the divine mind as expressed in the order and harmony of creation. Like the separate substances and God Herself, her beauty can only be described in terms of its effects. The true philosopher "loves every part of wisdom, and wisdom every part of the philosopher, since she draws him to herself in full measure."

And it is in such terms that Dante ends his account of philosophy-as-wisdom. She is explicitly identified with the all-creating Wisdom of God as "the mother of all things and the origin of every motion" and Dante concludes in prophetic exhortation:

Oh, worse than dead are you who flee her friendship! Open your eyes and look; for, before you were, she loved you, preparing and ordering the process that created you; and once you were made, to show you the way she came to you in your likeness.

What main findings are relevant to education today? We can learn much from the great man. Dante's education was "classical" in the sense that he studied Greek and Roman history, their stories, their myths, along with their philosophies combined with a deep interest in the Bible and theology. His personal teachers were of the highest order. He wanted to merge faith and reason. He used Muslim thinkers, a rare sight today. He learned and entered about politics from observation and participation. He was an activist. He applied his learning to his own life and to the religion and politics of the city and nation. He was a pioneer in the partial separation of church and state but realized that both were necessary, and both were from God. He identified with Virgil and used Florence, from where he was unjustly expelled, and forced to search, as Aeneas had done, for a better city, in his case the heavenly city. He used the love of Beatrice to guide him during

her life and after her death. Love itself provides not only questions but answers to life's deepest problems.

His writings offer ample evidence of wide-ranging interests, if not deep expertise about every subject that is touched on in them. Philosophical knowledge is redirected to the purposes of social and political life. Dante derives the conclusion that even an emperor's authority must be circumscribed insofar as the art of ruling and the laws it creates cannot overrule rational judgment based on the laws of nature.

Purgatory is an interesting idea worthy of consideration. Why be so binary as only to believe in Heaven or Hell (and use this as a metaphor for secularists as well)? Give us some time to make amends and learn about life, even after death.

This is my argument for a broad education – one cannot be expert in everything, but there are teachable moments in every subject that can and should be used to form one's outlook on life. One searches for good teachers and relates to other students to learn from them and argue with them, developing one's life, thoughts, and actions.

He was a profound polymath with faith and love dominating his life and works. The world is grateful for him.

Addendum

From my relative Paolo Belli (Bocconi University, London School of Economics) who was brought up in the Florence area: “E-ducation, e-ducere to educate, literally means to “bring out” in English. This comes from the foundational idea that each student has an unrealized – and frequently unknown to her/himself – potential. That the role of the educator is to help her/him bring it out, help him/her fully develop it. In other words, education in this ancient exception of the term is not mainly about imparting notions, but rather it is about helping students understand who they are, what they want, help them develop their talents/inclinations. Turn them into responsible, independent adults.”[1]

[1] Paolo Belli, personal email

The above account is a pastiche of three important reflections on Dante, backed up by years of scholarship and peer reviews.

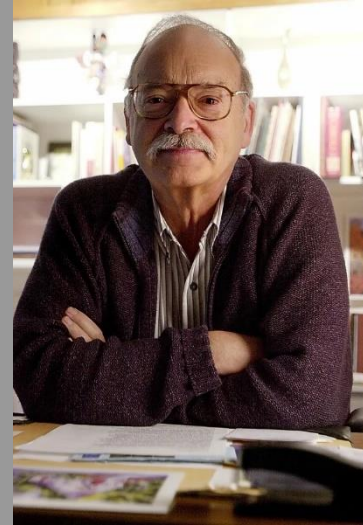
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