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Reflecting on my Unexpectedly Digital Dante Experience

Even though online learning has posed many challenges for me, it has also offered enlightenment in my thinking about Dante and his *Paradiso*. Online learning gave me a glimpse into the conditions of exile in which Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy*. Online learning also carved out additional space and time for reflection. Furthermore, online learning represented an abrupt change that was entirely out of my control; yet, it afforded me an enhanced understanding of certain aspects of Dante's poem, specifically, the eagle of justice which first appears in Canto XVIII. Moreover, not only did online learning somehow heighten my understanding of Dante, studying Dante virtually also helped me cope with the trying circumstances raised by the coronavirus.

When online learning was first mandated, I did not know what to think. I did not yet know that I would be forced to leave my undergraduate institution, SUNY Geneseo, and return home. However, since I spent four years of my life learning and growing at Geneseo, it had become another home for me. My exile from Geneseo allowed me to understand, to a degree, what Dante felt while writing the *Divine Comedy* in exile. In particular, the opening of Canto XXV took on a new meaning for me in light of my own exile. "If it ever happens that this sacred poem.../ Overcomes the cruelty that bars me from / the lovely sheepfold where I slept as a lamb" (XXV.1-5), Dante writes, expressing his wish that his poem might one day be celebrated in Florence, his home, and that the beauty and truth behind his work will earn him an end to his exile. I resonate deeply with these lines and can empathize with Dante, who writes with the wish

of both honoring and returning to his home. Indeed, I found that I put increased effort into the work I crafted during this time of online learning in an attempt to connect with Geneseo, the home from which I felt exiled. Thus, I now understand one aspect of why Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy*: to glorify his home in the hopes of an eventual return. I also now understand why Dante's work is so powerful; I experience every day the powerful desire to exalt and recover my home in Geneseo by writing to the best of my ability. I hope that this translates into my work, despite the circumstances under which I am writing.

In addition to offering me insight into Dante's experience of exile, online learning also afforded me greater space and time to reflect on Dante's work, particularly, his *Paradiso*. The *Paradiso* itself is quite preoccupied with the actual act of reflection, therefore, it was fitting that I should, through online learning, have the opportunity to perform further experiments of reflection. Additionally, the coronavirus caused my daily life to slow down a great deal. Instead of going from class to class and attending various clubs and activities, I found myself with more free time that I put towards deepening my thinking about *Paradiso*.

As a result of this increased time for reflection, my thinking, and, therefore, my understanding of Dante's eagle of divine justice, in particular, was heightened. The eagle once represented a major source of frustration for me with its decree that divine justice cannot be comprehended or controlled by human beings. However, online learning and the space for reflection it carved, allowed me to reflect more on my frustrations with the eagle. Through reflecting, I realized that my frustrations with the eagle's indeterminable definition of divine justice mirrored my frustrations with the indeterminable nature of the coronavirus, the impetus to the transition to online learning. In this way, online learning informed my understanding and acceptance of the eagle's words. This acceptance allowed me to then focus on the eagle's

assertion that divine justice can be influenced by “living hope” and “fervent love” (XX.95). These entities became my guides through online learning and helped me to continue feeling connected with my peers.

While my understanding of Dante was definitely deepened by online learning, my coping with online learning, was, in turn, aided by my understanding of Dante. The transition to online learning made me reflect on the sense of community that is integral to many college classes. In *Paradiso*, Dr. Herzman, the class instructor, often pointed the class’s attention to instances of souls cooperating and collaborating to create harmonious communities in the Celestial Rose and the various Heavenly spheres. Because of the losses associated with online learning, I learned what is at stake when communities can no longer readily cooperate and collaborate. Indeed, the risks and rewards displayed by Dante in his *Divine Comedy* can teach us, as a global community, how to proceed in the wake of the coronavirus. Throughout the world, people are collaborating by collectively giving up their old ways of life to safeguard the lives of their fellow community members. Though it is uncomfortable now, this collaboration is done with love, in the hope that, when this is all over, we will all emerge once more to see the stars.

Overall, I find that online learning has indeed informed Dante. But, I also find that Dante has given me the ability to cope with the changes and losses that the coronavirus has ushered into my life. Because of online learning, and my being exiled from my home of Geneseo, I find that I better understand Dante in his exile. Furthermore, while it is likely I would eventually have ameliorated my frustrations with the divine eagle, online learning aided me in doing so. And, while *Paradiso* would have certainly taught me the value of cooperation, collaboration, and community, the current reality, comprised of online learning and the global crisis that caused it,

has taught me what is at stake when these three entities are threatened. Poets like Dante and works like *Paradiso* are vital in these unprecedented times.