

ROY ROSENSTEIN

With Dante in Hell on 9/11

“That Day We Read No Further”

UNTIL “THAT DAY” I thought I had seen everything in the Dante classroom. I had taught *Inferno* in a windowless underground room at The American University of Paris (AUP) amid stale odors from the street and cafe above. I had quoted *Paradiso* to Dante della Terza one starry night on the roof of the Harvard observatory. But no Dante gathering, not even the

inspired National Endowment for the Hu-

manities Dartmouth Dante Institute, would be as electrifying as the first session of my own class in the fall semester of 2001. And I can't claim

any credit for the pedagogical innovation of that day.

Here is the short version of what happened on the first day of the Dante and Medieval Culture course, as recounted by one student in telegraphic style, a film script with just her raw summary of events:

Italian literature, Day One. We all settle down, get out Dante's *Inferno* and you say, “Welcome to hell.” Somebody runs into the room saying, “They've bombed New York! They've bombed New York!” Shock. Silence. Several people in the class are from New York. Somebody starts crying. We have a television in the room. Somebody turns it on. People outside of our class start trickling in. We watch the smoke and flames in silence. More people cry. We all watch the second plane fly into the side of Tower Two. More crying. We sit in silence for I don't know how long.

Almost fifteen years later, I'm still writing the long version as I hear from the last few students

who had not yet shared their memories of that day. Below, I cite their words in reflecting on what happened to us all that day: live, in real time, in class time. That day had enduring pedagogical and psychological impact. September 11 entailed more than an interruption by the day's headlines. It meant integrating new media in the classroom. It reworked the semester's planning and day-to-day dialogues. It changed forever the way I teach Dante. Above all, it affected the lives and careers of the students who were in class that fateful day.

Day one, ground zero

Whenever I teach the upper-level Dante course, I warn my students that they must prepare for a strenuous, stressful semester as we push through the entire *Comedy*. But nothing prepared their teacher for our debut class session in the fall semester of 2001. To be sure, I always spend the first month with my students in *Inferno*. But this year, none of us was ready for the global context of our first class. In this case, we felt as though we too were watched, as if our course acquired meaning beyond the curriculum, that the sky might continue to fall and the world crumble about us if we did not read our Dante closely. That day, I, a native New Yorker with British and Lithuanian passports as well, met with my international class in Paris just as the World Trade Center attack began to unfold in Manhattan. Given the time zone shift, our course began that Tuesday at 1:45 p.m. Paris time.

As played by Woody Allen in his *Annie Hall*, Jewish New Yorker Alvy cannot bear to miss the first minutes of a movie. In Alvy's spirit, I believe the first day of class is critical, far more so than any anticlimactic wrap-up class.

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Gustave Doré,
illustration for *Inferno*

All hope abandon, ye who enter here.
Canto III., line 9.

The tone for the entire semester's work would be established as twenty registered students settled into their seats. Here was a typically eager and diverse group representing a dozen nationalities—American, Italian, Argentine, British, South African, French, German, Dutch, Greek, Swedish, Lebanese, and Canadian. An hour into class, students had identified themselves, and we had spoken a bit about Dante's subject: how man becomes immortal, "*come l'uom s'eterna*." When I asked students about their expectations for the course, one senior uncannily said that she wanted to learn "*come l'uom s'eterna o no*," focusing instead on our mortality. By then it was 2:45 p.m., or 8:45 a.m. New York time. "*LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA, VOI CH'ENTRATE*. ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER." was inscribed in black on the whiteboard.

"Welcome to hell," I said. Then all hell broke

loose. I responded to an insistent knock: "*Avanti!*" Faculty, administrators, and students erupted into our classroom.

Was I reliving May 1968 at

Columbia University from the other side of the lectern? "Something is happening in New York!" They hijacked our wide-screen television, the largest in the building. As Francesca da Rimini says in *Inferno*, "That day we read in it no further."¹

Instead we watched CNN in horror, all the more startled because we in that class, having first been transported back to April 7, 1300, were then teleported forward to September 11, 2001: "It is another path that you must follow," said Virgil to Dante and to us.² The shaken professor felt less himself than like Dante in Canto 1. Students saw how disbelieving and speechless I was, like the Pilgrim at times when visiting *Inferno*. We watched the second plane crash into the twin tower. This was an attack against America—and, by extension, against The American University of Paris. Or was it some hell-born promotional campaign in favor of Dante? One student reports that her classmates initially had their doubts about whether this was serious: special effects or reality TV?

It was pandemonium in our Paris classroom, not just on New York television. Students were sobbing, while a few were cursing and pounding their fists on their desks or their heads against the wall. Never in all my years of teaching have I seen such Dantesque wailing and anger, such groaning and gnashing of teeth in a Dante

class—not even when I return midterms or research papers. Professors have witnessed these sentiments around the Pilgrim in *Inferno*, but not until then had I seen them in my classroom.

Another student writes, "Since that day I have been in two horrific car accidents as well as a third stint in surgery for what the doctors thought was cancer . . . but I have never felt fear as I did on that horrible day." He echoes the defining semantic field of Canto 1, in which the key word *fear* appears four times. Student and Pilgrim became one. The student continues, "My face must have gone pale white. After you dismissed the class I ran into my Shakespeare professor . . . and without my having said a word to him he told me to calm down and not be so nervous, and that, as late as my paper was, I could still manage to get a passing grade if I turned it in by the end of the week!" Beyond our Dante class, no one could understand what we had just lived, as if we had died.

Still another student could not contact her father at the Pentagon or her uncles at the State Department and the Securities and Exchange Commission. By the time she was able to reach her grandmother down on the farm, the student was in such a state that when she asked whether the family was safe, grandma sucked in her breath and said, "Honey, have you been drinking at lunch, like they do over theah?" In Paris, reading Dante and watching CNN, we were ahead of most of the United States. The West Coast was not even awake. Among her friends, the same student says she was "the only one who was primed by Dante for what we were about to see." Ours was a Dantesque response to a Dantesque event. We resembled the Pilgrim in our introduction to new, previously uncharted ground, the twenty-first century. We shared not only his fear but his shock and horror, his disorientation and inability to grasp the unfamiliar new world around him.

Students say that many people don't remember where they were when they heard the World Trade Center was attacked, but my students certainly do: "in Dante," they invariably say. They often tell the story of their professor's "Welcome to hell," and then BOOM! All were approaching Dante with enthusiasm, not in apprehension, as they would have, given what was to come. Students planned to visit hell from a safe vantage, not personally but secondhand, in translation, through the Pilgrim's disbelieving, uncomprehending eyes. Now they discovered

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it also through my own stupefaction. I was to be their Virgil, yet I was no less appalled than they were. They looked at me and at each other, struggling to make sense of what was happening. But like them I was Dante, not Virgil that day: visitor, not guide. “What the hell is going on?” yelled one panic-stricken student in the hallway. I was still in class trying to calm us all. Others like him found everything incomprehensible. A day like this does not happen; events were at once real and unreal, like Dante’s dream vision.

In the choking, ashen smog that covered all on television, Dante students saw a stunning overlap between the worlds of the quick and the dead, followed a bit later by striking images of the final crossing of a river. One student remembers that I said, “We’re really in Inferno now.” In our classroom that day we, too, tasted stifling fumes, witnessed grown men sobbing, visited their dead city in flames, shared their limited visibility and global disorientation. That was not Dante’s Inferno, that was New York City: pungent air, men in tears, their world covered in ash, with zero visibility at ground zero. Here was not Dante under the rain of fire, but in our classroom, not our Italian text with facing English, but in an all-English broadcast. Here’s how one student described it:

The news broadcast from the streets of New York showed the ashes raining down and everyone holding their faces in their hands and covering their eyes—this was, perhaps, the eeriest resemblance to the version of Inferno that our class cut short to make room for the cathode rays, for the version of Inferno in Manhattan, in real time. In their stumbling and muttering, the impromptu characters in the real version exposed what I guess is one of the primary shams and challenges of literature, that language falls short in its capacity to articulate the truly gut-wrenching. But there was chaos and anguish and the touching disbelief in everyone’s face on the streets, like they just couldn’t fathom that things could be this bad.

Among those on screen, one unidentified man was interviewed “live” on the dead streets that were silent but for the shrieking of sirens, motionless except for his fellow lost souls. He became a member of our class through his intrusive presence on television, speaking with terror and conviction to an unlimited audience around the world that

included our class in Paris. He found only one descriptor for the swirling devastation around him: “It’s Dante.” As if to say, “this is Dante Alighieri speaking to you from ground zero.” This latter-day Dante looked directly at the camera and therefore at us, into our classroom, as though he were speaking only to our class, for our class.

Then, later, the first and only bodies recovered and seen by the world that day were brought to the tip of lower Manhattan to make their final river crossing. Not only the dead awaited passage by ferry; the living, too, seeking to escape a no longer recognizable Manhattan, congregated on the bank, fleeing the nearby towers, hoping to escape our world on a boat bound for the other shore. Were a few seen falling into the East River in the confusion, as I am told, or were they conflated with those jumping from the Twin Towers? None of us saw those scenes until after class, when I had had enough of Dante television for a lifetime. Here was a contemporary rather than medieval vision, close to home and not foreign, oral and in our spoken language, not in a Tuscan text by a Florentine poet.

The immediate effect on the class was emotionally trying, and the explicit on-screen references to Dante and hell were riveting. Those students who expressed themselves other than with incomprehension or tears or fists voiced their devastation and their empathy that day and in the class that Friday, by which time we had still not recovered, if we ever would. But that day we read no further, said no more, because Dante was swirling all around us, in us, and did not require comment, could find no explanation.

Aftershocks

Counseling is available on campus, but I cannot know how many students availed themselves of our psychological services. When a literature professor from off campus who is also a practicing psychotherapist offered a series of free consultations to any students who were interested, I relayed his offer and three signed on. Those three comparative literature majors are now doing very well. One is working in journalism for the World Association of Newspapers after a not at all traumatic publishing internship in the United States. Another, from Athens, is running an international wine import business

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in Greece. And the third went on to take her master's degree in modern languages at Cambridge, did more graduate work at Brown, and is earning her PhD in comparative literature at Harvard, focusing on trauma studies throughout her graduate career. Might her academic orientation have been set that day? Let me survey what other students from our class have been doing since their tour of duty in hell with Dante on 9/11.

That semester two students wrote their research papers on Dante in *Seven*, a film in which Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman pursue a serial murderer who is punishing exemplars of the seven deadly sins. A third student went deeper into criminology. She headed directly to the police academy in The Hague, specializing in law enforcement and counterterrorism, then served three years on the force in Holland. Did that career track predate Dante and 9/11? After practical experience in the field, she went to study at Leyden and work in criminal law as a forensic consultant.

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She expects to continue her career in international crime—not practicing, but teaching. Two other students went to law school, not law enforcement. Not divine law, but human law, which they are practicing in San Francisco and London. One of them, after graduation, worked first as an editor at BBC News, more or less the European CNN.

Concerning divine law, one student was particularly traumatized: “I think about it all the time.” A medieval studies minor, she had run out of the classroom. Her family’s company, where she had worked, was at the top of the World Trade Center. “Everyone there perished. It was the largest loss of one single company in both towers, several hundreds,” she wrote. “My family lost so many people on that day, so it was much more personal for us.” Later that semester, she requested my recommendations on divinity schools: I suggested Yale, where she could study with senior Dantista Peter Hawkins. She eventually did her graduate studies in comparative religion elsewhere and now works in Israel. She recently asked, “Are you still teaching the Dante class?” as if guessing I might not. Indeed, for a few years I could not.

Is that a typical list of graduate studies and career orientations for a dozen comparative literature majors? Not one among over two



hundred other graduates in comparative literature has gone into trauma studies or criminology or comparative religion or law enforcement. We know that comparative literature alumni are snatching the jobs from the communications, film, and business majors because humanities majors with their language arts, cultural experience, and interpersonal skills are the new meritocracy. But the fields chosen by the 9/11 bumper crop of Dante students remain exceptional. To be sure, in this group there is still the Athens wine merchant. She joined her family business, which explains this reasonable outcome for a survivor of our 9/11 *Inferno*. The other veterans of our 2001 Dante course have career orientations that make me wonder whether some of their lives were changed, not by Dante, but by one class in Dante that changed our world forever.



Other profoundly affected parties on campus perhaps found no new career orientation as a result of 9/11 but were equally in need of therapy, if not more so. Later in the semester I told my class—still trying to talk about 9/11 and resolve its horror—how three AUP faculty of as many nationalities had been affected. All three—American, French, Iranian—had sons, firstborn or only sons, who worked in the Twin Towers. Miraculously, all three from the next generation survived. I’ve written to the one of the three students I know personally. He, like his father, is an alumnus of AUP. But he has not responded to my query. No doubt he lost too many coworker friends that day to share his feelings, still raw years later. He survived the conflagration of the Twin Towers, without taking Dante, in which he had expressed interest in a previous year. What might have been

his thoughts had he taken the course at AUP before graduating to work at the World Trade Center? He might not have lived the connection in New York as we did in Paris.

Those who did attend the Dante class that semester all survived, as I flatter myself to think most students usually do my courses. One student withdrew for health reasons; she was at the first class, but did not come back to the second, like two other students who later resurfaced to complete the course. Thereafter, she had several excused absences until she “withdrew” entirely. The word here takes on more psychological shades of meaning than its purely academic acceptance. She came back to AUP only years later but has not yet accepted to talk to me about her feelings “that day.”

Other students who continued in the course were marked, perhaps not as deeply, by the

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experience of Dante in ways previously inconceivable to them and their supposedly all-knowing professor, woefully underprepared for a new context to our old text. Their willing, even eager testimonies bear witness to mixed memories of that fatal day. One who defended her doctoral dissertation in comparative literature and became a university professor was among the first to reply to my query. Others since have echoed her sentiment: she remembers it “as if it were yesterday.” Another student in her own letter writes “I remember” four times, like a refrain, in chronicling her recollections. These students’

unique encounter with Extreme Dante cannot be extrapolated to a new pedagogy or methodology: it is to be hoped that no other Dante class will ever experience what we did that sinister afternoon, vicariously through television but also collectively in our class.

Since 2001, whenever I go into the first Dante class of the semester, it is not without fear and trembling. Just a few years ago, for the tenth anniversary, the first class again was held on September 11, and the penultimate class fell on December 7, the anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. At least I know now what needs

to be done even if every time I read Dante, every time I teach the first class, the fear is renewed in my thoughts. There is also a professional modesty in the aftermath of my experience in reading Dante with students so sensitized to the presence of the Dantesque in the twenty-first century, as present perhaps as the Rabelaisian in the carnivalesque sixteenth century or the Kafkaesque that defined the neurotic twentieth. Dante is all around us, may explode upon us at any moment, as the new tribalisms and renewed fundamentalisms attest. The enduring proximity of Dante is not a rhetorical ploy to highlight his pertinence in our contemporary world. That demonstration has been forcefully made for me and my students, once and for all. No other words would have been so appropriate from the man in the street as “it’s Dante.”

Coda

Only at the end of the course, with the conclusion of the Pilgrim’s Easter journey and the coming of our own Christmas break, came relief with our sense of order and faith partially or fully restored in *Paradiso* after the traumatic start we had shared with the Pilgrim. After *Inferno*, *Paradiso* is always a bit anticlimactic. There are fewer realia and figures, fewer class sessions, fewer students at that busiest time of the semester. *Paradiso* is by nature more ethereal. But this particular semester, some of us were left behind, still dragging our feet and our feelings in the smoke and ash. If I didn’t abandon students in *Purgatory*, the biggest no-no in teaching Dante, I hadn’t quite succeeded in pulling them all completely out from our *Inferno* either. We still had before our eyes the fireworks of the first day. When we had run our course in the last days of the semester and we read together the concluding lines of *Paradiso*, we felt a sense of relief and accomplishment to have completed our journey of this life.

I began by citing the events of 9/11 as experienced and recounted by one of my students. I close in quoting another, one who wrote me on a recent Easter Monday to express her reactions:

You say “that day we read no further,” but to me, it was the day we were compelled into the work with an urgency to understand and connect the dots that stemmed from the most earnest and human of motives for picking up a book: a turn to “then” for insight into “now.” We did continue on, reading our way through and past hell and a growing happened

during that journey with Dante that matters to this day. It was one of those moments we’re rarely “in sync” enough to apprehend but which surely occurs daily, everywhere—a moment when fiction grows real, when inscriptions of the past step off the page and engage us in the immediate interpretation of the present. A concomitance, uncanny as it may seem, that justifies to me the passing down of “knowledge” by demonstrating in an instant how history is never over, how words are part of our toolbox to gauge, reflect, and act on the present. Dante provided that toolbox for us at a moment we desperately needed other words to grapple with images beamed out to us “live” of a destructiveness most students in that class had never witnessed. I have never found our classroom to be quite so pertinent to our world beyond the classroom as on that day. And vice versa: never were the media events so appropriate, never were the visuals, the teaching aids, so pedagogically on target, even if I certainly did not choose them. I cannot say that here was the high point of my teaching career; it was more like the nadir. Yet this was a moment of crystallization between life and art that has not been matched in this professor’s long experience. □

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NOTES

1. Dante, *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 5.138
2. *Ibid.*, 1.91