theories and methodologies

Attica Educations: Dante in Exile

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ONE DOESN'T GET TOO MANY TEACHING MOMENTS LIKE THIS: I AM STANDING BY THE WATER FOUNTAIN OUTSIDE OUR CLASSROOM. ONE of the students taking a break from the final exam in the course in Dante's *Divine Comedy* looks up at me from the fountain and says, "When I read this stuff, it's like I'm out of here."

"Here" is Attica Correctional Facility, home to what was at that time the largest and most violent prison riot in American history, a maximum-security prison where seventy percent of the inmates have been convicted of a violent crime, and thirty percent have taken a life. When Bill Cook and I taught our Dante course there twice in the early eighties, we were part of an inmate-education program that had been put in place in large part as a response to the riots. The program itself, which granted both associate's and bachelor's degrees to the inmates, did not last, for a variety of complex reasons, and teaching Dante in Attica was not always as sublime as this magic moment—how could it be?—but over twenty years later it remains a central event in my teaching life and an event that I come back to over and over in my reflections on the nature of teaching and learning.

We came to it almost by accident. Cook and I were in charge of a grant from the National Humanities Faculty for our neighbor down the road, Genesee Community College (GCC). (Then as now we teach at the State University of New York College at Geneseo, he in the history department and I in English. Then as now we team teach the Dante course at Geneseo, part of a collaboration in our teaching and writing that has been going on for over thirty years.) In talking to the faculty at GCC, we were told over and over that the best teaching they did was in their inmate-education program. So we volunteered. Geneseo had just put in place a great-books humanities course, and so it seemed logical that we should do a version of that course in Attica. But the dean at GCC said, "Why do something that our own faculty can cover? Why not do Dante?" And so Dante it was. But one of the most intriguing aspects of our choice was that while the *Commedia* was at the center of our teaching life together, it turned out that our

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students had never so much as heard of Dante. They took the course because the administrators of the program talked up two new professors who were going to be giving an interesting course, but they hadn't the slightest idea who Dante was or what he had written or why he is considered important. I have often wished since then such an opportunity would present itself when I teach Dante (or Shakespeare or Chaucer or any of the other canonical biggies) to my more conventional undergraduates, and especially when I teach Shakespeare, where presuppositions about who he is and how one is supposed to respond to him often get in the way of engaging with the text.

But of course it meant that our first responsibility was to convince our students that Dante was someone worth investing a lot of time and energy in. It turned out to be an easy sell: to talk about Dante as poet of exile, and his poem as the fruit of that exile, was to connect him immediately and deeply with students' own lives. As we explained it to them, when Dante was exiled from his native Florence in 1302 for being on the wrong side of a political squabble, he was forced to leave behind everything that he held dear. To return to Florence was to face a death sentence, and so for the last nineteen years of his life he had little access to his family, his friends, or his possessions, like our students during their incarceration. The parallel between Dante's life and their own meant that they were willing to give Dante the benefit of the doubt as someone who was not trying to con them, a huge concern. It was a connection they never lost, and it goes a long way to explaining why the course was so enriching on both sides of the desk.

A somewhat less-than-sublime teaching moment: we are in the middle of a discussion, deep in the bowels of the *Inferno*, and a guard walks into the classroom. "The lieutenant wants to see you," he said to me. We were well into the course, indeed, this was during the second time we were teaching the course, and no guard had ever set foot in our classroom before. So the subliminal uneasiness that always accompanied us as we passed through the thirteen sets of locked doors to get to our classroom each week, and which stayed with us until we did the sequence in reverse and found ourselves outside again—Cook and I confessed to each other early on our latent fear that one of these days they would forget to let us out, or that one of those thirteen sets of doors would just not open—quickly rose to the surface, and was not alleviated in any way when the guard took me beyond the corridor and into a stairwell. The thought crossed my mind that it might be days before they found me. So I met the lieutenant. He looked at me with grave seriousness, and with a total lack of irony said, "We don't take our shoes off in class. It sets a bad example for the men."

Taking my shoes off in class is an old habit of mine, and one that I saw no reason to modify in Attica, all the more because Cook and I had intuited early on that staying loose in class would be a real key to our success. Living in a universe that was bound by rules on every side, our students saw the classroom as a place, perhaps the only place, where they could kick back and relax. So for example (this was back in the eighties, when smoking in public was far more common), there was a "no smoking" sign in the classroom, but it never occurred to us to enforce it.

Walking back to the classroom, I was busy processing the absurdity of the situation: folks are in here because they have taken a life, or because they have committed some other violent crimes, and the lieutenant thinks that somehow they will be corrupted by the example of a shoeless teacher. But when I got back I was surprised by their take. The first thing that happened of course was that we all had a good laugh. They had figured it out and knew exactly why I was called on the carpet. So I put my shoes back on and was pretty careful to keep them on from then on. I had assumed that this lesson in classroom discipline was no more than a mild form of harassment

on the part of yet one more official who objected to the whole idea of inmate education. The guards themselves, after all, were mostly without a great deal of formal education, and there was real resentment over the fact that inmates were given free access to an education that they never had. We were never overtly harassed, but the authorities had made it clear to us that we had to follow the rules implicitly, and in a manner no different from the inmates themselves. (One result of this strict regimen was that it helped us bond more easily with our students; in this admittedly minor way, we were both on the receiving end of the same treatment.) So I was genuinely surprised when I was told by one of our students that the lieutenant who called me out into the stairwell was in fact one of the supporters of the program, not one of its opponents. He liked the program, and apparently what he wanted was for it to be done right.

I think that if the lieutenant had been asked to articulate the purposes of the inmate-education program at Attica, he would have said that the point was to give skills to the prisoners that could be useful in the outside world. Among those skills he certainly would have included discipline. But it was clear to us that our students were interested in something different: meaning. In some ways, they fit the profile of the ideal liberal arts student better than anyone we have taught before or since. So, for example, a reasonable expectation might be that their favorite part of the poem would be the *Inferno*. For one thing, Dante's system of hell is not all that different from the way they were living from day to day inside the walls of Attica: hell and Attica are both systematic, hierarchical, and impersonal. And the endless rounds of locked gates in Attica are a reasonable substitute for Dante's circles. For another, both the characters in the *Inferno* and their punishments resonated with our students' own lives, in ways that made our classroom discussions both immediate and compelling. At many key points along the way in the *Inferno*, they not only got it more quickly than our more usual undergraduate students, they sometimes got it more quickly than we did, a point that I want to come back to in a moment. Yet for them, the best part of the poem was not the part that they understood intuitively. The best part was *Purgatorio*, because *Purgatorio* in a fairly insistent way is about moral improvement. What they wanted from Dante, what they wanted from their education, what they wanted from us was a way of talking seriously about the possibilities of moral improvement, and Dante and our discussion of him provided them with it.

As I say above, often our students "got it" more quickly than we did. They were particularly well attuned to the fact that the most consistent behavioral pattern of the great dramatic characters of Dante's hell is the placement of blame on someone or something else. So it was an exciting place to be, our classroom, as the moments of insight that came from our students were frequent, genuine, surprising, and deep. Looked at simply from the point of view of depth of insight, the group of students in our Dante course at Attica was as sophisticated as any other group to whom I have taught the poem over a period of thirty years, and that includes first-rate undergraduate and graduate students and participants in eleven National Endowment for the Humanities seminars on Dante, as well as a good many adult learners in less formal circumstances. Life experience counts, and with Dante in Attica the connection between life and art almost overwhelmed us with its intensity.

But of course that is not the only way to look at a formal course for college credit in a degree-granting program. To be admitted to the college program in Attica, one needed a high school diploma, but many inmates had earned theirs a long time ago, and others had earned their General Education Development degrees while in prison. This is not to say that our students came to the course without any of the tools necessary to read Dante. Our Muslim students in particular, who were a disproportionate percentage of the class, knew

the Bible as well as we did. "Isn't that from 2 Maccabees?" one of them said as we were text crawling. Cook and I just looked at each other. Nevertheless, more often than not, there was a lag between their street smarts and their book smarts, and the way the two came together has given me much to think about.

We wanted our course to mirror the Dante course we teach on our own campus. But this was even more important to them: they were obsessed with credentials, ours in particular, and with whether this course was comparable to other Dante courses that were being taught in "real" colleges around the country, and they had a hard time believing us when we told them that it was. We even brought in the Geneseo bulletin, which listed, among other things, teaching awards we had won to convince them our credentials were for real. They were so used to getting what was left over—as we found out when we had occasion to eat with them—that they had a hard time believing we were the real thing. This came out in another interesting way as well. Toward the end of our second time teaching the course, the dean at GCC told us that there was some extra state money lying around, and we decided to use it to have a conference. We invited several distinguished Dantist friends of ours to Attica to give formal presentations on Dante to the inmates. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only Dante conference ever held inside the walls of a maximum-security prison, and it was by and large successful. (Though not as successful as it might have been. A stunning testimony to prison bureaucracy is that to get to the conference inmates had to first get to the sign-up sheet. Cook and I naively assumed that the audience for the conference would consist first of our students, namely those who had taken the course the previous year and those presently taking the course, and then the remaining places—determined by the size of the conference room—would be filled by other inmates. But once we got to the conference room, we found that several of our students past and present were not there because they did not get to sign up. Fortunately, the conference was held on the same day as class, and the speakers were at least able to connect with our present students that night in class.) The week before the conference, our students asked us what they should call the speakers. We said, how about Bill (William Stephany of the University of Vermont), Julia (Julia Bolton Holloway, then of the University of Colorado), Rachel (Rachel Jacoff, of Wellesley College), and Bill (William Gohlman, our Islamicist colleague at Geneseo). But no: they wanted to know whether to call them doctor or professor, and would not even consider our suggestion to call them by their first names.

Though we read all three parts of the *Commedia*, we were not able to cover quite as much material as our regular Dante course, not because of any inadequacies on the students' part, but because our three-hour time block included the logistical problem of getting all the students to the classroom from their respective cell blocks, which invariably bumped into our classroom time, and it included a longer break than we would have given at home. Because this was the only time that we could see students, our break became for all practical purposes a combination break and office hour. Thus our three-hour block was, for teaching purposes, a two-hour block. We assigned blue-book exams and assigned a paper. Their written work was not on the same level as their spoken work. Clearly no small part of the problem was the deficiencies of their previous formal education. Undoubtedly, another part of the problem was that some of them had not done this sort of thing for a long time. But they also suffered from the fact that Dante mattered so much, and from the fact that their work as students mattered so much, perhaps the one area in their lives where they had an opportunity to excel. The result was that they had text anxiety and a kind of writers' block, perhaps more than any other students I have taught. We brought in several colleagues to work with them one-on-one with drafts of their papers; in fact we

spent an entire class period, which is to say a class week, running this workshop. Though we were never able to truly bridge the gap between their spoken and written work, they did improve, and some of what they said on paper was more than respectable. But they were constantly second-guessing their pens in a way that they never did their mouths.

There is no question that in determining their final grades we depended more on what they said than we ever do in our more regular teaching. I was convinced it was the right thing to do, but nevertheless felt a bit uneasy about it, as if somehow we were not being rigorous enough. I no longer do. Or to put it another way, my current uneasiness is more about the fact that I don't similarly give the benefit of the doubt to those students at Geneseo (and there have been more than a few) who have terrific insights in class but who don't turn them into sustained and polished papers.

Teaching Dante in Attica took an intuition and turned it into a certainty: great texts like the *Commedia* can and should be taught to any audience. Or to put it another way, there is no reason not to teach Dante anywhere, anytime, any place. But Dante, to put it gently, is a poet who comes with footnotes. He came with footnotes in the fourteenth century, as the early manuscripts of the *Commedia* testify, and their numbers have increased exponentially as a commentary tradition unmatched by any text save Scripture reminds us. So teaching Dante has always been about trying to balance the scholarly Dante with the "real" Dante—the powerful questions of politics and morality, of spiritual vision and spiritual corruption, of exile and hope that the poem uniquely embodies. Teaching in Attica showed me how it can be done without the footnotes, that it is OK to jump in to the heart of Dante's concerns and see where they meet the concerns of our students. And perhaps paradoxically, it gave me more incentive to work with the footnotes, that is, to write about Dante for the specialized audience of my peers. Somehow I intuited that the more I had to say to my peers, the more I would also have to say to those who don't care about the footnotes.

The poem allowed our students to talk about what they really did care about. And they also knew that they would have to work hard to get at Dante's take on those issues. It was not unusual for students to come to us at the beginning of class, point to a passage in the poem, and tell us that they weren't getting it, even though they had read it five or six times. I mention this to make the point that Dante was not simply a convenient excuse for them to talk about whatever was on their minds. They worked very hard to meet Dante on his terms. But his terms were the starting point for what turned out to be very personal reflections. To put it mildly, it is considered bad form to ask an inmate what he is in for. But as it turned out by the end of the semester, we pretty much knew what most of them were there for without our asking—because it had come out naturally in their discussions of the poem. "Yes, that's what I did. That's why I'm here." And perhaps even more interesting, no one used these discussions as an opportunity to proclaim his own innocence or to rail against the system. (They had ample opportunity to deal with the system when we asked them to update the *Inferno* and put people who had lived since Dante's time into Dante's categories. The warden did not do particularly well.) They seemed rather to agree with Dante's assumption that people need to be held accountable for their actions. No one wanted to argue with Dante on that point. I have heard several distinguished Dantists say that what they most appreciate about spending their scholarly life with the *Commedia* is that it holds them to higher standards. Our students, distinguished Dantists in their own right, would have totally agreed. Serious inmate education probably does more to stop recidivism than anything else that has come down the pike. Teaching Dante in Attica certainly showed me why. It says something about our current situation that there is a lot less of it going on than there should and could be.