

MyDante and Ellipsis: Defining the User's Role in a Virtual Reading Community

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Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogical concepts and technological framework underlying the MyDante Project (<http://dante.georgetown.edu>), developed by the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship at Georgetown University. We argue that MyDante, essentially a Web-based, interactive hypertext edition of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, represents a distinctive approach to designing spaces in which readers interact with texts. Always acting on the principle that the technological design should serve the pedagogical goals of the project, we have created an environment to facilitate deep engagement with Dante's poem within the context of a particular method of study known as contemplative reading. MyDante encourages the reader to experience the poem in a way that is profoundly personal, while at the same time enabling a collaborative experience of the shared journey by a community of readers, and creates a record of that journey.

After exploring the interplay between the pedagogical aims and technological structure of MyDante, we briefly describe the current development of Ellipsis, a new iteration of the application which will be customizable for a wide range of texts, disciplines, and pedagogical approaches. Finally, we provide some examples of how students experience MyDante, and conclude with further reflection on the distinctiveness of MyDante's approach.

Keywords

MyDante, Digital Humanities, pedagogy, technology, contemplation

Introduction

If we think of any reading experience as a meeting of a text and its context with a reader and his or her context, then we might say that those of us in the Digital Humanities have tended to focus much of our energy on understanding, marking up, and making available the first half of this equation. That is, the field of Digital Humanities writ large has often been defined by textual projects that emphasize the importance of the texts and their contexts (alternative versions, supplemental texts, historical documents, and so on). The past twenty-plus years of research projects within the Digital Humanities have made available to the humanities scholar a wide range of historical, literary, and cultural texts, marked up for quick searching, complex linguistic analysis, and archiving. We believe that, in many respects, the MyDante project (<http://dante.georgetown.edu>) represents an alternative approach to the Digital Humanities, to our focus on the text and its primacy, and to our understanding of the relationship between the reader and the text.

The MyDante project began a little over ten years ago with the primary goal of providing students with a contemplative space in which to engage with Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*, specifically within the context of the undergraduate philosophy class "Dante and the Christian Imagination" at Georgetown University. Many of the previously available online versions of the *Commedia* focus on markup, searching, and archiving the text. From

the beginning, the MyDante project was designed to enable students to understand the text through their interaction with it, their reflection on it, and their engagement with their peers around it. Inspired by the metaphor of the medieval illuminated manuscript, we aimed to allow students to see the text of Dante's poem as a palimpsest, as a place where their ideas and their writing share the same space as the poem; where they could engage with and rethink the poem just as a monk in the Middle Ages might have done through marginalia and illuminations. We created and continue to develop a variety of tools, such as an annotation tool, a journaling tool, and a multimedia editor, to encourage students to interact with the poem and share their ideas with others, much in the way the marginalia of a medieval manuscript would influence future readers. MyDante simultaneously encourages deeply personal reflection as well as scholarly collaboration focused on the text.

Dante's poem is particularly well suited to this type of contemplative experience, but we see this process being extended to virtually any text. MyDante gives us a powerful model that can be localized to the classroom or extended to larger communities interested in reading interactively and reflectively. To facilitate this type of reading experience within a wide range of contexts, we have created a digital publishing platform we call Ellipsis (see Section 2). In many ways, the types of tools we attempted to create ten years ago prefigured much of what has become standard practice on the Web as we've moved from a read-only Web to a read/write Web. Social networking tools such as Diigo, YouTube, and Wikipedia encourage all Web users to see the Internet as a shared text to be viewed reflectively and even at times contemplatively.

1. The Pedagogy Underlying MyDante

The goal of the MyDante project is to make available a Web-based, interactive hypertext edition of Dante's epic poem that allows each reader to develop an illustrated, annotated, personalized copy of the text over the course of a lifetime. More than just a technology, MyDante offers a pedagogy of reading and reflection designed to illuminate and document the reader's experience of the poem. Dante wrote the *Commedia* as an invitation to undertake a journey of self-discovery. MyDante serves as a permanent record of accepting that invitation and sharing Dante's journey. It makes the poem profoundly personal, while at the same time enabling a collaborative experience of the shared journey by a community of readers.

A fundamental principle of the project from the beginning has been that technology by itself, no matter how engaging, is only an instrument and must be given a humane purpose. The pedagogy that informs the MyDante project, inspired in part by Dante's "Letter to Can Grande della Scala," is essentially the method of allegorical interpretation developed by the Jewish and Christian traditions to read the Scripture faithfully and which was perfected by the contemplative culture of medieval monasticism. All aspects of the medieval monastic culture were pedagogically integrated around its central purpose and activity: contemplation. The monks developed practices of active engagement with Scriptural texts, from meticulous manual copying to artistic illustration and scholarly commentary. From the manuscripts the monks produced, we can clearly discern how closely connected technology, action, and contemplation are in the fabric of a human way of life.

What must a reader do to experience Dante's poem contemplatively? How does reading as a contemplative practice work? The first requirement is to recognize that, just as Dante told his

patron Can Grande della Scala, there are multiple levels of meaning simultaneously at work in the poem, each of which necessitates a different kind of understanding; the second requirement is to learn how to move progressively from:

- The **literal, narrative level** of the story of **Dante the pilgrim's** journey from the Dark Wood to the Final Vision. The goal of reading at this first level is clear **comprehension** of the characters and plot. From here to
- The **ironic and metaphoric level** communicated by the artistic choices **Dante the poet** makes regarding characters, episodes, images, and themes. The goal is to arrive at an **interpretation** of the poet's message to the reader; that is, to explore the questions, Who is Dante the poet? What is he trying so hard to tell me? Then, from this level to go to
- The **reflective level**, contained in the **reader's personal responses** to the poet's confession, witness, and testimony, in the form of a dialogue between poet and reader. The goal of this level of understanding is **personal reflection**. The meaning of the poem is not finally understood until reader and poet find themselves standing face to face, in the presence of all others who confront the same questions of personal identity, freedom, and responsibility. To do this requires the reader to imagine how one's own journey is the same as the poet's, how both are "universal," the same for all persons, despite every difference of time, place, and culture. To understand the poem, then, is to become part of the poem by recognizing oneself in it and by making it genuinely one's own by responding to the question "Who am I?"—not simply as an individual, but as a person who is both the same as and singularly different from every other person in such a way that, as the poem tells us from the beginning, the story it recounts is truly the story of "our life."

Readers can move among these three levels of understanding by using MyDante's tools, which include:

- Side by side Italian and English texts and an Italian audio recording of the poem
- General introductions to each of the Cantiche, including some in video format
- An Image Gallery, containing illustrations of the *Commedia* and a wide range of images with thematic connections; users can also upload their own images.
- An annotation tool, mirroring the function of manuscript marginalia, allowing the reader to comment on specific lines and read others' comments
- A journaling tool that enables readers to embed extended reflections into MyDante, creating personal records of their relationship with the poem
- A Biblioteca, which houses digital copies of other works by Dante and relevant texts by other authors, as well as chronologies, maps, and other resources
- A Chapter Room that includes a space for interactive discussion

Given the broad pedagogical goals outlined in the three levels of reading above, in what follows we shall focus on a specific question we faced in developing MyDante: to what extent can digital media effectively guide readers in comprehending, interpreting, and reflectively appropriating the significance of texts, either as an enhancement of the role of human teacher or, in certain cases, as an alternative to direct contact with a personal guide?

First, one clarification: this question is not properly subsumed under the heading of "distance learning," or delivering content and evaluating student mastery of materials or skills online. In the context of Ellipsis/MyDante, the scenarios we envision are either the enhancement of live teacher effectiveness through the transfer of certain components from the classroom to students' independent work outside class—so as to free classroom time for different and arguably more advanced learning activities—or, on the other hand, the creation of a community of readers who are not enrolled in any formal academic program and who are not receiving direct personalized guidance or evaluation from an instructor.

In other words, we asked ourselves how much learning at the level of direct engagement with literary texts could be achieved via a pedagogy that subsists solely within the structure of a digital platform, and to what extent this platform could open up new possibilities for further learning. The challenge we faced was how to deliver digitally not just a broad array of diverse content material, however well organized and intuitively accessible, but to deliver such content in the context of an artfully designed pedagogy that provides the student/reader with skilled guidance that would otherwise be either absent or less efficiently and effectively delivered in person.

One of the most challenging questions we addressed was how to activate and deliver the pedagogical design that would guide students through the threefold dynamic of comprehension, interpretation, and reflective appropriation outlined above. The solution was to develop a Guide function that could overlay the text and be turned on or off by the reader. More than a commentary or scholarly investigation, the Guide would directly engage students in a series of activities, such as listening to the poem in Italian, dwelling on the details of an illustrative work of art, reading commentary on the metaphoric range of a particular symbol or theme, writing a journal entry reflecting on the larger human significance, for example, of Dante's placement of Ulysses in Hell—activities that would both model learning behaviors for students and stimulate them to repeat and develop those behaviors for themselves.

Both technically and pedagogically, developing an effective Guide format proved even more of a challenge than the team had anticipated and required various stages of experimentation, implementation, evaluation, and revision over the course of two years and two iterations of the class "Dante and the Christian Imagination" at Georgetown. The highest hurdle was how to get students started using the site and to become quickly at home with MyDante's pedagogical tools and practices. The solution we are now testing is an introductory "Getting Started" Guide, designed to supplement class lectures and demonstrations. By combining video segments, audio commentary, screen-capture tutorials, thematic commentary, and a reflection on contemplative reading, we believe we have taken a substantial step toward giving students access to not only a rich body of content but also a progressive, self-regulating pedagogy with which to approach this vast literary monument of human culture and even to draw on for future study of other texts.

2. Designing Technology to Support Pedagogy

In order to serve the pedagogy outlined above, the MyDante application needed to enable and encourage certain types of activities by the users. First, the site had to direct users inward, toward a deepening contemplation of the primary text, even as it facilitated comparisons among a broadening scope of related texts (in various media—documents, images, sounds, videos, and even animations). Second, MyDante needed to engage readers with one another

as a community of scholars, encouraging them to explore one another's emerging perspectives as a way of continually rediscovering their own interpretations of the poem's significance.

Consideration of the philosophy behind the pedagogy played no small role in developing the application's functional design. Rather than focusing on creating a sophisticated markup to encode a particular domain of inquiry around the poem, or on providing an entirely open-ended discussion forum, we chose to integrate several simple actions, which we felt best supported the invitation to students to deepen their personal involvement with the text, within the context of a coherent pedagogical framework. This choice reflects a conviction that readers are ultimately the repository of the deepest meanings in a text. It is the interpersonal connections among a community of readers, moved by a text in similar and different ways, that ensure its survival as a work of art.

The Guide function described above, although by no means the only tool designed to invite students into a deeper reading of the text, allows us to trace how the application supported each level of reading. The Guides address the first level of comprehension by providing contextual historical and literary information in the form of brief annotations similar to footnotes. At the second (metaphoric) level of reading, Guide materials interspersed throughout the poem encourage specific readings of particular themes and symbols, and point out resonances among different sections of the text. Finally, at the third (reflective) level, the Guide asks open-ended questions which prompt directed reflection by the students on how the poem might relate to their own lives.

Our intention was to provide a self-contained digital cloister within the chaos of choices available on the Web. We discovered that by creating ways to link parts of documents with one another, documents that comprise a system of meanings according to a clear pedagogy, we were able to channel the energy of browsing into a directed activity of probing. We realized that this capacity for focusing a reading community's activity around and concentrically toward the meanings of a text would be very powerful in a wide variety of educational contexts. To that end, we have abstracted the functionality developed for MyDante into an application framework we call Ellipsis. Ellipsis promises to provide, for a wide variety of texts in a wide variety of media, a sharable space for study and reflection. The basic tasks of making a statement about a text or some selection within it, and relating it to some other text (or selection of text), whether from primary materials or those generated within the community, are abstracted to apply similarly to images, sounds, video and other media. In addition, collaboration between faculty is encouraged by allowing multiple overlapping spaces, where community members can easily move into and out of collaborative exercises with members of other communities centered around the same system of related texts.

3. Evidence of Student Learning

Throughout the project, we have collected feedback and suggestions from students through surveys and interviews, and we have gathered evidence of student learning from their work on the site. Student response to MyDante has generally been extremely positive. For example, one student explained that "it added a different dimension to the class that there was so much that you could experience outside of it. It was a very holistic learning experience, and it added a whole new level of discussion—it was like having twice as much class time."

Another student finds himself drawing on MyDante's approach long after completing the course: "MyDante's comprehensive resources and scholarship will always be something I turn to, and the site is an ideal model for both how to read such a vast work and how to contemplate its richness. . . . My experience with MyDante is invaluable in continuing to interpret the poem's meaning and in forming strategies for evaluating other texts."

After we implemented the Getting Started Guide in the fall of 2009, it became clear that the students were demonstrating a better understanding of the material than students had at analogous stages of earlier semesters. They had digested and integrated the various components of the Guide and were relatively comfortable with both the technological and theoretical practices involved in using the site effectively. This deftness was evidenced both by their comments in class and their contributions to the site, in the form of discussion board posts, annotations, and journal entries, in which they applied the concept of the three levels of reading to their interpretations of the text. The students also showed a high degree of engagement with one another on the site and in class. Many of them spoke in class in addition to contributing to the site, and many of them responded to their classmates' posts on the site. For example, after only four class sessions, a student's 1250-word post entitled "Why the Catholic Cosmos?" elicited more than 1700 words of comments by five classmates.

As the site evolves, we are continuing to evaluate student responses to various features of the site and to gather evidence of student learning. For examples of student work demonstrating particular pedagogical goals, and for more testimonials from students about their experiences with the site, please see http://dante.georgetown.edu/student_learning .

4. Conclusion

We see the MyDante project as representing a genuinely new approach to designing a space for interaction with texts. This approach enables a distinctively individual reading experience characterized by depth, richness, and intensity, an experience which is further enhanced by the collaborative dimension of reading within a virtual community. MyDante memorializes the reader's journey in a way that is simultaneously imaginative and technological in character, so that each reader's record acts as a personalized archive of meaning. As we continue to develop MyDante and Ellipsis, we remain committed to the principle that technology is subordinate to pedagogy in our aim to transform and enrich the ways in which readers engage with texts of all kinds.

106 Love led the two of us unto one death.
Caina waits for him who took our life."
These words were borne across from them to us.


Amor condusse noi ad una morte:
Caina attende chi a vita ci spense».
Queste parole da lor ci fuor porte.

Notice the triple repetition of the name Caina in the first line of the sonnet (the first line of the sonnet in the courtly love tradition in the sonnet in the first line of the sonnet in the heart).

109 When I had listened to the poet
I bent my head and he asked of me
the poet asked of me.

112 When I replied, my words were
how many gentle thoughts
had led them to the a

Clearly Dante is recalling the Vita Nuova. But he may be referring to the Vita Nuova. Perhaps this exposes a difference between the Vita Nuova and the Vita Nuova.



115 Then I addressed my words to her
and I began: "Francesca, my love,
move me to tears of sorrow and of pity.

a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio.

118 But tell me, in the time of gentle sighs,
with what and in what way did Love allow you
to recognize your still uncertain longings?"

Ma dimmi: al tempo d'i dolci sospiri,
a che e come concedette Amore
che conosceste i dubbiosi disiri?».

described in painful detail in his guide or to himself.

La Porte de l'Enfer (The Gates of Hell), by August Rodin

CLOSE X

Screenshot of MyDante (<http://dante.georgetown.edu>) showing the image viewer tool. Note the guide sections interspersed within the poem text.