FEATURE

The Historical Presidency
JFK's Dante

DEBORAH PARKER

John F. Kennedy was a voracious reader and he put his reading to work in his speeches. His favorite quotation was from Dante: "The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in times of moral crisis preserve their neutrality." Throughout his career, he cited Dante more than 25 times. This essay traces Kennedy's deployment of two Dante quotations and analyzes their sources and the rhetoric surrounding them. Kennedy employed famous authors like Dante in a campaign of persuasion. Kennedy's allusions to Dante attest to his belief that poetry and politics could enhance one another.

Keywords: John F. Kennedy, Dante, poetry, politics, neutrality, Cold War

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and other historians have documented John F. Kennedy's reading habits extensively (Schlesinger 1965, 105, 107, 717–19). Reading, indeed reading avidly, had been a practice for Kennedy since his youth, when he was bedridden with asthma and scarlet fever.[1] While he read some novels and poetry, Kennedy preferred books of history and biography. Among his favorite works and authors were Winston Churchill, especially the biography of Marlborough; John Buchan's *Pilgrim's Way*; Herbert Agar's *The Price of Union*; and Samuel Flagg Bemis's *John Quincy Adams*. His favorite literary works included passages from Dante's *Inferno*, Tennyson's "Ulysses," the St. Crispin day speech from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, and Alan Seeger's "I have a rendezvous with death." While politicians of his day often adorned their speeches with quotations from a wide variety of historical and literary sources, Kennedy as well as his brother Robert F. Kennedy did so more pointedly, desirous as they were to elevate themselves above Boston's class-conscious politics.

Deborah Parker is a professor of Italian at the University of Virginia. Her research focuses on Italian and Mediterranean visual and print cultures in the medieval and Renaissance periods. AUTHOR'S NOTE: I would like to thank the John F. Kennedy Library for the Theodore C. Sorensen Research Fellowship that allowed me to do research for this study. I am also grateful to Joseph F. Kett, Marc J. Selverstone, and two anonymous readers for their comments on an earlier draft of this study.

1. Jacqueline Kennedy (Kennedy 2011, 41), seeking perhaps to burnish the image of Camelot, described her husband's reading habits to Schlesinger years later, when he interviewed her in 1964:
[H]e read in the strangest way... He'd read walking, he'd read at the table, at meals, he'd read after dinner, he'd read in the bathtub, he'd read—prop open a book on his desk—his bureau—while he was doing his tie. . . . he'd open some book I'd be reading, you know, just devour it. He really read all the times you don't think you have time to read.
The tapes and transcript of the interviews were released in 2011, 50 years before their scheduled date. See also O'Brien (2005, 790–809) on Kennedy's mind and personality.

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Dante's judgments of the damned in particular resonated with Kennedy. In the foreword to the memorial edition of *Profiles in Courage* (1964), Robert Kennedy (Kennedy 1964, 11) mentioned his brother's fondness for one Dante quotation in particular:

> This book tells the stories of men who in their own time recognized what needed to be done—and did it. President Kennedy was fond of quoting Dante that "the hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who, in a time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality." If there is a lesson from the lives of the men John Kennedy depicts in this book, if there is a lesson from his life and from his death, it is that in this world of ours none of us can afford to be lookers-on, the critics standing on the sidelines. Thomas Carlyle wrote, "The courage we desire and prize is not the courage to die decently but to live manfully."

Robert Kennedy attested to his brother's affinity for this quotation again in a 1968 speech he gave at Columbia University while campaigning for the senate seat of New York.[2] In addition, a brochure at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, *The Kennedy Library: In Memoriam*, highlights the importance of the Dante quotation for Kennedy. It appears in the midst of an observation made by Kennedy at the beginning of his presidency:

> We have found (the executive branch) full of honest and useful public servants—but their capacity to act decisively at the exact time action is needed has too often been muffled in the morass of committees, timidities and fictitious theories which have created a growing gap between decision and execution, between planning and reality. He once quoted the poet Dante (he very often spoke the words of great men to make a point), saying: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a time of moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."

The author of the brochure goes on to note, "Nothing galled the President more than an inability to make a decision." Bureaucratic impasses, it would seem, constitute their own kind of hell.

JFK, Dante, and Neutrality

These attestations affirm Kennedy's admiration for Dante's condemnation of neutrality. But Kennedy's citation has an unusually dense and varied history. This essay explores Kennedy's strategic deployment of quotations adapted from Dante's *Inferno*. Kennedy's first citation of the Dante phrase appears in a notebook of favorite quotations he assembled in 1945–46, when he was 28. Keeping such a notebook was something of a Kennedy family tradition. Rose Kennedy had one, which she referred to as her "black book," and she encouraged her children to create their own. All these quotations are flamboyant and memorable, but the Dante citation seems to have found particular resonance for Kennedy: "The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those, who, in a period of moral crisis, maintain their neutrality" is the fourth quotation on the page. It is the only one

2. In his Columbia speech, Robert F. Kennedy mentions the Dante quotation around the 24:49 minute mark.

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with an asterisk next to it. It follows a transcription of Lord Acton ("Few discoveries are more irritating than those which expose the pedigree of ideas"), Huck Finn's reaction to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress* ("the statements are interesting—but steep"), and G. K. Chesterton ("Don't ever take a fence down until you know the reason it was put up"). The last quotation on the page is "When Huey Long was asked if we would ever have Fascism in this country–, we said sure, but we'll call it anti-fascism."[3] Clearly, the black book exemplifies the Kennedy family's conscious attempts to project refinement within the stratified social world of Boston, but Kennedy also mined his book for speeches later, putting his favorite quotations to use.[4]

It is helpful to review the particulars of Dante's condemnation of neutrality. The Florentine poet places the neutrals—undistinguished, pusillanimous souls who never took a stand in life—in the area just inside the Gate of Hell. The cowardly neutrals do not even merit a place in Hell proper. Virgil dismisses these "sorry souls" with a brief account of their cowardice (Alighieri 2004 [1980], 23):

> And he to me: "This miserable way
> is taken by the sorry souls of those
> who lived without disgrace and without praise.
> They now commingle with the coward angels,
> the company of those who were not rebels
> nor faithful to their God, but stood apart. (*Inferno* 3.34–42)

Composed largely of the neutral angels, those who stood on the sidelines during the war in heaven that followed Satan's rebellion against God, the neutrals are unworthy of any attention. Virgil tells the pilgrim to "look and pass" (*Inferno* 3.51). Nevertheless, Dante scrutinizes the spectacle, noting the banner these ignominious souls follow, recognizing one sinner from the nameless crowd, and describing the insects and horseflies that sting the sinners so that blood mingles with their tears. Those who never stood for anything are condemned to run behind a banner with no insignia, mercilessly goaded by a hoard of beastly insects.

Kennedy's Dante quotation has a convoluted history. His immediate source might have been Henry Powell Spring's 1944 *What is Truth?* (Spring 1944, 272). Spring, a follower of the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, wrote the work to inspire meditative thought. Spring's version differs from Dante's treatment of neutrality in some notable ways. He locates the neutrals in the wrong place, putting them in "the hottest places in Hell," not, as Dante does, just inside the Gate of Hell. Spring's citation seems to combine

3. Some of Kennedy's favorite quotations are in this file: JFKPOF-130–012. Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President's Office Files, Personal Secretary's Files, JFK Library.

4. It is not clear if Kennedy had read the *Inferno*. During his first two years at Harvard Kennedy took courses in English, French, and Fine Arts, but the only mention of Dante in his undergraduate records is an optional question on Machiavelli and Dante's *De Monarchia* in the 1937–38 exams in the Division of Government, History, and Economics. For Kennedy's Harvard-related materials for 1939–40, see JFKPP-002–006.Papers of John F. Kennedy, Personal Papers, Harvard, Harvard Records, Academic records, 1939–1940. The question on Dante and Machiavelli can be found in file FKPP-004–017. Papers of John F. Kennedy, Personal Papers, Harvard, Harvard Notebooks, Division of History, Government, and Economics: Division Examinations for A.B. degree, 1934–1939, JFK Library. Records for courses that Kennedy took at Choate, a private boarding school, do not reveal any reference to Dante.

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language drawn from a later encounter. Conversing with the glutton Ciacco in *Inferno* 6, Dante asks about the fate of some prominent Florentines—Farinata, Tegghiaio, Arrigo, Mosca, and Jacopo Rusticucci. Ciacco informs him that they are among "the blackest souls" (*Inferno* 6.85) in Lower Hell. Spring fuses elements from this passage and the lines in *Inferno* 3 that describe the shameful state of the neutrals. Lastly, Spring redirects the quotation with a bit of plausible but not textually accurate expansion: his version states that these souls maintain their neutrality during a "period of moral crisis." Kennedy's transcription follows Spring's idiosyncratic wording exactly.

What is paramount in our consideration of Kennedy's use of this citation, however, is not so much his familiarity with the *Inferno* or the accuracy of the allusion, but the tactical use to which he put the quotation as it came to him. Dante's vilification of pusillanimity seems almost calculated to appeal to Kennedy's predilection for concise expressive statements and disdain for indecision. "He loved pungent expression," observed Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kennedy's former special assistant and author of *A Thousand Days*.[5] The Dante quotation fulfills Kennedy's affinity for trenchant sayings perfectly. Kennedy's use of this variation on Dante—which he wields as if it were authoritative—represents a bold reorientation that has acquired a fame of its own. Kennedy deployed Dante to his own ends. Ultimately, tracing what we might call the career of this refashioned statement provides unusual insight into the workings of a live tradition—how appropriations by later adaptors can reorient our relation to a source. Kennedy responds to Dante's concise and vigorous expression. But behind these features looms the larger context of Dante's poem—the *Inferno* depicts not only sins, but eternal punishments for each sin. Spring's reworking of Dante emphasizes this aspect of the poem emphatically.

The reasons for Kennedy's harsh views on neutrality are complex. Some answers may lie in his misgivings about the Neutrality Acts of the 1930s–1950s and his father's stance of appeasement when England was on the brink of entering World War II. Kennedy's *Why England Slept*, the 1940 book based on his undergraduate thesis, whose title recalls and plays upon Winston Churchill's *While England Slept: A Survey of World Affairs, 1932–1938*, examines the failures of the British government to take stronger steps to prevent World War II. While Kennedy does not denounce Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany in the book, he later became more openly critical of appeasement as a diplomatic policy. This is not to say that Kennedy did not recognize the value of neutrality within a Cold War framework. But he deplored the indecision of the Eisenhower administration before some foreign policy issues (Schlesinger 1965, 473–82).

While a senator, Kennedy made repeated use of the Dante quotation. For Kennedy, the quotation was not merely decorative: it encapsulated, framed, and punctuated points he wished to make. Kennedy's first public reference to Dante occurred on February 17, 1956 when he was one of three Bostonians honored at a dinner hosted by the National Conference of Christians and Jews for distinguished service in the field of human relations. The other two guests were General Robert Cutler, National Security Advisor under Eisenhower, and Harry A. Wolfson, a Harvard professor of philosophy. In his speech, Kennedy condemned religious intolerance and bigotry and praised three men who took

5. Schlesinger, as cited in O'Brien (2005, 803).

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strong stances in difficult situations—George W. Norris, the Republican and Protestant senator of Nebraska who supported Al Smith, the Catholic Democratic nominee for President in 1928; Oscar W. Underwood, who advocated the explicit condemnation of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1924 Democratic convention, a move which alienated him from the rest of the Southern delegation; and Louis Brandeis, Woodrow Wilson's nominee for the Supreme Court. Brandeis, the first Jew to be nominated, encountered great opposition from eminent Boston families. Kennedy quoted Brandeis's letter to a friend: "What has seemed to me the really serious features of the attitude of this community were not the attacks of my opponents, however vicious and unfounded, but the silence or acquiescence of those who were not opposed or were actually in sympathy with me."[6] Brandeis's condemnation of such pusillanimity coincided with Kennedy's contempt for "lookers-on, the critics standing on the sidelines." Dante's authority, refashioned to fit with his own beliefs, became a powerful tool to challenge indecision. For Kennedy, making one's commitment a public act and not holding it as a private sentiment was paramount.

In his conclusion to the speech Kennedy cited the Dante quotation and added: "This question of the basic right of each citizen to be permitted to develop his talents to the maximum regardless of race or creed is a moral question. I'm proud to be associated with those who during these critical years are not maintaining their neutrality, but are joining hands together and moving forward."[7] The broad parameters for Kennedy were set: he continued to link morality, personal responsibility, and the importance of public commitment, and he clinched this argument with Dante's vilification of neutrality. Kennedy went on to explore these themes and others in *Profiles in Courage* (1957). One of the men praised at the February 1956 dinner, George W. Norris, appeared as one of the profiles: Kennedy lauded Norris's decisive actions, his courage in standing up to powerful individuals. Norris opposed Woodrow Wilson's bill to arm American merchant ships because he felt such a bill was largely intended to get the United States into a war with Europe. Kennedy mentioned Norris at both the February 1956 dinner and in a later speech in 1959. In his preface to *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy acknowledged that his greatest debt was to his research associate, Theodore C. Sorensen. (First hired in January 1953 as Senator Kennedy's chief legislative aide, Sorensen was President Kennedy's speechwriter and a trusted advisor.) Years later Sorensen revealed in *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History* (2009) that he wrote the first draft of most of the profiles (Sorensen 2008, 146).[8] Kennedy and Sorensen developed the themes that pervade *Profiles in Courage*—the importance of displaying moral courage in the face of constituent pressures, demonstrating publicly one's

6. Papers of John F. Kennedy, Pre-Presidential Papers, Senate Files, Speeches and the Press, Speech Files, 1953–1960, National Conference of Christians and Jews, Boston, Massachusetts, February 16, 1956; JFKSEN-0895–002, JFK Library. An article on this appeared in *The Boston Globe* the next day: "Kennedy, Cutler, Wolfson Feted by Anti-Bias Group," *Boston Globe*, 17 February 1956, 4.

7. Ibid.

8. While Kennedy oversaw the writing of *Profiles in Courage*, provided input, and drafted the first and last chapters, Sorensen did most of the writing. Sorensen reveals: "While in Washington, I received from Florida almost daily instructions and requests by letter and telephone—books to send, memoranda to draft, sources to check, materials to assemble, and Dictaphone drafts or revisions of early chapters" (Sorensen 2008, 146). He added that Kennedy "worked particularly hard and long on the first and last chapters, setting the tone and philosophy of the book." Herbert Parmet noted the extent of Sorensen's contribution (Parmet 1982) many years earlier.

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convictions, and fighting for freedom. Hence while Sorensen likely furnished the details of George W. Norris's courageous actions, Kennedy, whose affinity for the Dante quotation was evident since its appearance in his notebook in 1945, likely recommended its inclusion in the speeches. In successive references to Dante's damnation of neutrality, a stance that Kennedy expanded to denounce indecision, Kennedy and Sorensen honed the use of the quotation and the rhetoric surrounding its citation.

Kennedy gave similar speeches at different events. He was an efficient recycler of material—be it a trenchant quotation to frame a particular message or historical examples to buttress a claim. The Dante quotation appeared in Kennedy's preparatory notes for a speech at which he was honored in 1959.[9] While the occasion is not specified, the notes and typescript reveal that the content and phrasing are strikingly similar to the speech made at the 1956 Boston dinner. Both speeches mention the magnanimity of George W. Norris, praise his opposition to the Klan, acknowledge the slow pace of change in politics, and assert the basic right of each citizen to develop his talents regardless of race or creed.

Over the next six years, Kennedy's views on neutrality became more expansive, and his use of the Dante citation more highly charged. About a year and a half after the Boston dinner, Kennedy, in his role as chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on United Nations Affairs, delivered an incendiary speech in the Senate on July 2, 1957, "Imperialism: The Enemy of Freedom," in which he rebuked the Eisenhower administration for its unwillingness to condemn French actions in Algeria. Earlier that year France had sent 400,000 troops to Algeria to crush Algerian nationalists, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). Many Americans adopted the official French line of considering Algeria an "internal matter" (O'Brien 2005, 357–58). In the United Nations, the United States had supported France, its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally. Kennedy, however, argued that the Algerians had the right to self-determination and proposed that the Eisenhower administration support independence for Algeria and help facilitate talks between France and the FLN. What Kennedy derided as Eisenhower's "head-in-the-sands policy" was damaging America's image throughout the third world.

> No, Algeria is no longer a problem for the French alone—nor will it ever be again. And though their sensitivity to its consideration by this Nation or the U.N. is understandable, a full and frank discussion of an issue so critical to our interests as well as theirs ought to be valued on both sides of an Atlantic alliance that has any real meaning and solidarity.
> This is not to say that there is any value in the kind of discussion which has characterized earlier U.S. consideration of this and similar problems—tepid encouragement and moralizations to both sides, cautious neutrality on all real issues, and a restatement of our obvious dependence upon our European friends, our obvious dedication nevertheless to the principles of self-determination, and our obvious desire not to become involved. We have deceived ourselves into believing that we have thus pleased both sides and displeased no one with this head-in-the-sands policy—when, in truth, we have earned the suspicion of all.
> Is an early resolution possible without U.S. Action?

9. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Personal Papers. Doodles, 1959, KS1-KS7. The other items in the folder include Kennedy's signed AMVETS membership card and a variety of notes that include ones made during a Senate discussion of a labor bill to curtail the power of Jimmy Hoffa, for a speech prior to accepting an award, and on labor and foreign relations legislation.

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> It is time, therefore, that we came to grips with the real issues which confront us in Algeria—the issues which can no longer be avoided in the U.N. or in NATO—issues which become more and more difficult of solution, as a bitter war seemingly without end destroys, one by one, the ever fewer bridgeheads of reasonable settlement that remain. With each month, the situation becomes more taut, the extremists gain more and more power on both the French and Algerian sides.[10]

Kennedy's point here is clear, but the expression is not particularly memorable. While urgent, the speech is full of clichés (e.g., "full and frank discussion," "cautious neutrality," "came to grips") and the use of repetition (e.g., "obvious dedication," "obvious desire") is flat. These aspects of the speech, however, do not detract from its powerful message. Kennedy had researched America's past and current approach to many African nations' desire for independence carefully. This was easily the most contentious speech Kennedy gave as a senator. While subsequent events largely support Kennedy's observations and recommendations, his harsh criticism of the French and the neutrality of the current administration on this issue elicited much criticism in the press and strong rebukes from French officials, Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Dean Acheson. The *New York Times* characterized it as "perhaps the most comprehensive and outspoken arraignment of Western policy toward Algeria yet presented by an American in public office" (Rakove 2014, 31).

The speech also resonated strongly within the Arab world. No American politician had spoken so forcefully against imperialism. His opening declaration that the single most powerful force in the world is "man's eternal desire to be free and independent" burnished Kennedy's image throughout the third world. Nor did the emerging postcolonial world forget Kennedy's opening to their aspirations. When Kennedy was assassinated, there was an outpouring of grief from Egypt, Algeria, India, and Indonesia, less formal condolence than what one American diplomat described as "a sense of universal tragedy." An editorial in an Arab paper stated that Kennedy had changed the United States from the "repugnant rich brother" to the "cherished rich brother of the human family" (Rakove 2014, xvii). Despite the many criticisms of his speech in the first world, Kennedy held firm, conceding only that Algeria was a "complicated problem" and "that, of course, the Soviet Union is guilty of far worse examples of imperialism" (O'Brien 2005, 359).

Roughly 16 months later on November 23, 1958, Kennedy reiterated the consequences of remaining neutral on the Algerian war at the end of a speech on the evening's honoree, Senator Herbert H. Lehman of New York, whose name would now grace the newly created Herbert H. Lehman Institute of Ethics. After relaying notable contributors to Talmudic discussions of ethics, Kennedy pivots to a discussion of the gulf between "words and deeds" and stresses the importance of applying ethical principles to current events. Near the end of this speech, Kennedy asks if ethical principles informed the conduct of American foreign policy.

10. Transcription of "Imperialism: The Enemy of Freedom," Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy in the Senate, Washington, DC, July 2, 1957.

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> None of us, I am sure, would use the term "wicked" to describe the conduct of our foreign policy today or those who bear that responsibility. But the gulf between words and deeds is perhaps nowhere greater than in this area of applying ethics to international affairs. I do not say that ours is an immoral policy using unethical tactics to strive for improper goals. But I do say that we have all too often failed to recognize the great moral issues that shape and shake our world today more than either the Communist or the atomic revolutions.
> I do not think we have always recognized the moral principles of self-determination for those still under foreign rule. I do not think we have always recognized that the equality and dignity of every nation, large or small, as we pursue a course that too often ignores their fears and aspirations. I do not think, in trying to remain aloof from the Algerian and similar controversies, in the United Nations and elsewhere, that we have remembered the words of the poet Dante: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."

The rhetorical force of this speech is notable as is his deployment of Dante (who is not mentioned in the February 1956 "Imperialism: Enemy of Freedom" speech). Kennedy does not employ Dante ornamentally: the quotation is summative. Dante's relegation of the neutrals to "the hottest places in hell" is the punchline to the speech, a culturally freighted phrase that clinches the political arguments. Note the rhetorical flourishes: the anaphora (the repetition of a word or phrase in successive verses or sentences) of "I do not think" and the deliberate repetition of words that evoke morality (ethical, moral). As in the earlier speech he asserts the Algerians' right of self-determination. Just as Kennedy had stressed "man's eternal desire to be free and independent" as the single most powerful force in the world in the July 1957 speech, so does he emphasize at the Lehman dinner that Algerian independence is a moral and ethical issue. Omitting any allusion this time to Eisenhower's "head-in-the-sands policy" and America's past attitude toward African independency, Kennedy emphasizes moral imperatives and in so doing deftly deploys Dante to emphasize that neutrality is more than an error; it is a damnable sin. To persist in this policy is to risk eternal punishment. Dante's appeal becomes ever more manifest: *Inferno* outlines the wages of sin—not simply God's judgment, but the gruesome punishments suffered by the damned.

Kennedy cited Dante on neutrality on two other occasions. He delivered another speech on foreign policy one month before the Lehman dinner. Entitled "The Challenge Abroad," this speech outlines guidelines for a more proactive attitude toward international relations than that being shown by the Eisenhower administration. This speech addresses the China Straits, a contested area between the Republic of China (ROC) and People's Republic of China (PRC). On August 23, 1958 the PRC bombarded the Kinmen (then known as Quemoy) and Matsu islands. Kennedy begins by deploring a "lack of decisive leadership" in the Eisenhower administration. Eisenhower had responded to the ROC's request for aid by deploying the U.S. Navy Seventh Fleet in the area and had asked the Navy to equip the ROC planes with newly developed AIM—Sidewinder air-to-air missiles. Skeptical of the provision of military assistance in an area in which the United States had no vested interests, Kennedy makes four points—that the United States should control the issues of war or peace in which it engages, oppose a policy of appeasement in such situations, recommend that any future U.S. military commitments should be made

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with the support of allies, and avoid involvement in "local brushfires." Toward the end of his speech, he recommends strengthening American military defenses, especially missile defenses and bases. In his concluding remarks, he declares:

> But this is not a time to keep the facts from the people—to keep them complacent. To sound the alarm is not to panic but to seek action from an aroused public. For, as the poet Dante once said the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality... it is not we who are selling America short—not those of us who believe that the American people have the capacity to accept harsh facts of our position and respond to them... It is the little men with little vision who say we cannot afford to build the world's greatest defense against aggression—it is those who say we cannot afford to bolster the free world against the ravages of hunger and disease and disorder upon which Communism feeds.[11]

Assuming a more diffuse stance than in the two speeches advocating the independence of Algeria, Kennedy criticizes Eisenhower's leadership as indecisive. Kennedy inserts the Dante quotation between an exhortation to apprise Americans of political actions the government might take and a condemnation of the "little men with little vision" who do not see such action as a moral imperative. The Dante quotation neatly expresses the risks of inaction and of failure to boost America's military defenses and to enlist the public's support in these endeavors. At a time when some emerging nations were aligning themselves with the Soviet Union or the United States, Kennedy calls for a more visionary foreign policy.[12] Given that Soviet nuclear capabilities were believed to be superior to those of the United States, Kennedy believed that the indecision, wavering, and incoherence of the Eisenhower administration on foreign policy issues had resulted in a missile gap. In this context, Kennedy deploys the Dante quotation to enjoin an enlightened American public to support the building of a stronger and "better America," one muscular enough to match the Soviets nuke for nuke, and one generous enough to provide aid for struggling nations.

The Florentine poet whose moral vision informs his treatment of the state of souls after death offers the perfect authority to a politician who sought to emphasize moral principles. But there are other reasons—more broadly cultural—that explain Kennedy's affinity for Dante. First and foremost, Dante's achievement would have been familiar to any undergraduate at Harvard in the 1950s. Harvard had been a hub of Dante activity for American admirers of the poet. In the nineteenth century prominent Harvard professors such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, William Dean Howells, Charles Eliot Norton, and Oliver Wendell Holmes formed a kind of "Dante club" to promote the poet's relevance to Americans. Nor should the influence of T. S. Eliot, a vociferous promoter of Dante during Kennedy's formative years, be overlooked. Eliot had great cultural currency, influence far beyond poets of our present moment. He drew vast crowds

11. Papers of John F. Kennedy, Pre-Presidential Papers, Presidential Campaign Files, 1960, Speeches and the Press, Speeches, Statements, and Sections, 1958–1960, Foreign affairs: The Challenge Abroad, On the China Straits.

12. Kennedy wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* in 1957 that outlined his views on what he thought America's position should be in a postcolonial world (Rakove 2014, 32; see also Lefebvre 1999).

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as a speaker. In 1956, 14,000 people flocked to the football stadium of the University of Minnesota to hear his lecture on "The Frontiers of Criticism." Dante had a resonance that other writers simply did not, especially in New England, and Americans were receptive to public discussions of poetry.[13]

Kennedy's only documented reference to Dante while president took place on June 24, 1963 while he was in Bonn for the signing of a Charter Establishing the German Corps. He places the new charter in a global context. Noting the millions who live in poverty around the world, he recalls the establishment of the American Peace Corps in 1961, and he explicitly links such efforts to the struggle against communism. Poverty is a powerful recruitment incentive for Russia and China; those living in free societies must show greater devotion to the cause of poverty. In urging Germans to join the Peace Corps, he praises the skills that would enable them to recognize the "great issues that tear the world apart." "I believe," he adds,

> that you are greatly needed and that you will . . . find your greatest reward in a service in these very difficult times. Dante once said that the hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in a period of crisis maintain their neutrality. This is a moral crisis. This is an opportunity, and I am confident that the German youth and I hope the older citizens of this country will find their greatest reward not here, pursuing merely their private pursuit, but in some far-off country. In some small village, they will lay a seed which will bring a rich harvest for us all in later days.[14]

The exhortation is a variation on Kennedy's rallying cry "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." As in the speech he gave at the 1956 Boston dinner, Kennedy interweaves the themes of morality, public service, decisive action, and personal responsibility. This is a less complex deployment of the quotation. But its relative crudity (linking Dante, moral crisis, and opportunity) strips the force of the quotation—at least for Kennedy—to its essentials. The reference to Dante puts a moral context on inaction.

Kennedy incorporates Dante's damnation of neutrality to denounce religious intolerance and bigotry, proclaim the right of individuals to self-determination, enlist the support of Americans to increase the country's missile program, create a more visionary approach to foreign policy, and stress the importance of alleviating the suffering of the poor. Kennedy frames these topics as moral issues that speak to the higher goals of freedom and independence for all. He could have easily made all these pronouncements

13. Kennedy's use of Dante is pragmatic and differs notably from scholarly work done on the poet in the 1950s that tended to focus on subjects such as allegory and Dante's symbolic imagination. In my view, Kennedy's fondness for the Dante quotation is not related to his Catholicism. Sorensen described Kennedy's attitude toward religion as one of "respectful independence" (Sorensen 1965, 112). Throughout the *Divine Comedy*, Dante excoriates corrupt churchmen, associating them with the sins of avarice, prodigality, simony, and hypocrisy, decisions which did not endear him to many Catholics readers. Protestants were among the poem's many admirers and the members of the Dante Club sought to promulgate an American rather than Catholic Dante. On the way in which Kennedy's religion affected his campaign for the presidency, see Carty (2004).

14. President Kennedy also cited the Dante quotation at a fundraising dinner in honor of Senator Smathers on March 10, 1962, but the allusion is more light-hearted. In referring to Dante Fascell, a Miami congressman, Kennedy notes that Fascell is not neutral.

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without referring to Dante. The poet's authority, however, makes his exhortations to take a stand on social issues more forceful. Kennedy uses Dante instrumentally—deploying opportunistically what he thought Dante had said about neutrality to advocate more decisive action on issues that mattered to him—and, no less importantly, to underscore the risks of inaction. In so doing, Kennedy enters the tradition of responses to Dante by boldly repeating an altered version of Dante's condemnation of neutrality. Neutrality is no longer a marginal sin: it is one of the worst and punished in "the hottest places in Hell."

Roosevelt, JFK, and the "Dante Sequence"

While still a senator Kennedy alluded to another passage from the *Inferno*. Kennedy himself reveals the source of this other quotation—Franklin Roosevelt's 1936 speech before the Democratic convention:

> I think Franklin Roosevelt put the choice for us just about as sharply and clearly as any American has ever put it when he came before 100,000 people in Franklin Field Philadelphia, in 1936, to accept his second Presidential nomination, and in that speech, he said: "Governments can err, Presidents do make mistakes, but the immortal Dante tells us that divine Justice weighs the sins of the cold blooded and the sins of the warm hearted in a different scale. Better the occasional faults of a government living in the spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference."[15]

In this Dante reference Roosevelt notes that God punishes cold-blooded sinners more harshly than those he deems "warm-hearted." After noting this difference, Roosevelt turns to another distinction concerning government, contrasting the "occasional faults of a government living in the spirit of charity" (Democrats) and "the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference" (Republicans). Roosevelt cleverly extends a distinction made by Dante in the *Inferno*: those who committed sins of incontinence (lust, gluttony, avarice, wrath) are punished in Upper Hell and those who committed sins of violence, fraud, and treachery are relegated to Lower Hell.[16] While the violent commit their sins in the heat of the moment, without forethought, treachery requires planning, a calculated cold-hearted application of violence. The traitors, who are condemned to the ninth and lowest circle, are frozen in the lake of Cocytus; their treachery toward kin, party, hosts, and benefactors results from a cold-hearted indifference to the bonds of humanity that unite us. This allusion offers anyone seeking to create a contrast between two phenomena a vivid image of difference. Kennedy, clearly liking the captivating image of cold-hearted sinners frozen in a lake of ice, embraces the

15. Papers of John F. Kennedy, Pre-Presidential Papers, Presidential Campaign Files, 1960, Speeches and the Press, Kennedy for President Press Releases, 1960, Press releases, May 1960, 11–31.

16. While no soul in Dante's *Inferno* is described as "warm-hearted," Roosevelt may have had in mind the hot-blooded wrathful who attack one another while submerged in a muddy putrid swamp.

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quotation to encapsulate points for his audience. But the punishment also interests him, as it did Roosevelt.

While campaigning for the presidency in 1960 Kennedy cited this quotation more than 15 times to distinguish himself from Richard Nixon. Theodore White has aptly termed these allusions to the Florentine poet "the Dante sequence" (White 1968, 187).[17] Kennedy employed the allusion repeatedly to emphasize the same theme—Nixon and his fellow Republicans are frozen in indifference and inaction. Often beginning his remarks with the Dante quotation, Kennedy would then quickly compare the legacy of the Democrats, the party that introduced Social Security and the Housing Act, which advocated for the establishment of a minimum hourly rage, the party of Wilson's New Freedom, Roosevelt's New Deal, and Truman's Fair Deal, and Kennedy's own New Frontier with the Republicans, a party of anodyne slogans (i.e., "stand pat with McKinley," "Keep cool with Coolidge," and the "return to normalcy" of Harding), which had voted against all these measures. As Kennedy put it to one audience in Ohio, "What does this country want? Does this country want a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference, or do we want a government that will move, that will care for our people, that will set before the American people the unfinished business of our society?"[18]

A more generous foreign policy agenda would include accepting students from Africa; extending aid to countries like India, whose progress might provide a bulwark against Communism in the Far East; and establishing embassies in emerging nations. As with the quotation on the fate of the neutrals, a striking image—whether it be souls burning in the hottest places in Hell or cold-hearted souls frozen in a lake of indifference—allowed Kennedy to frame his points concisely and dramatically. In each case, these quotations pivot from Dante's original to make a slightly different point, invoking Dante's authority as they transform it. This is not so much a failure of transmission as evidence of a live tradition in which a source provides a theme upon which new speakers improvise. Here we see some of the productivity of allusion and citation, in which a live tradition distorts but also develops the text. And like all live traditions, the question is not so much accuracy as currency. The present makes the past it requires.

Kennedy's tactical use of Dante exemplifies Schlesinger's observation that "[h]e delighted in quotations which distilled the essence of an argument" (Schlesinger 1965, 104). Kennedy's biographers describe him as someone imbued by a wide (if not deep) erudition. But this erudition also recalls the kind of tradition that T. S. Eliot imagines in his famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." There Eliot contrasts the difference between pedantic competence—thorough, accurate, and static—and something more like a "feel" for literature and artistic expression (Eliot 1975, 38–40). We might conceive of Kennedy's affinity for Dante in this vein. This kind of appreciation informs Kennedy's

17. White notes that Robert F. Kennedy referred to Dante's image of cold-blooded sinners frozen in a lake of indifference while campaigning for the presidency when he was at a loss for words. Both brothers considered indifference a sin.

18. FKCAMP1960–1059-009, Pre-Presidential Papers, Presidential Campaign Files, 1960, Speeches and the Press, Press Secretary's Speech-Statement File, 1960, Ohio, 1960, September 25–October 9. Kennedy came under frequent criticism, including from Martin Luther King, during his first two years as president. The author of *Profiles in Courage* was criticized for not showing courage in standing up to Southern intransigence.

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admiration for two other works—the St. Crispin's Day speech given by King Henry before the Battle of Agincourt in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Act IV, scene 3 and Tennyson's "Ulysses," two heroic set pieces. With respect to the former, Jacqueline Kennedy would occasionally recite the speech for him and the Kennedys invited the British actor Basil Rathbone to recite it at an April 1962 White House dinner honoring Nobel Prize winners.[19]

Kennedy's fondness for the St. Crispin day speech and Tennyson's "Ulysses" is readily comprehensible for a politician imbued with a keen sense of the cultural power of great works. Both are dramatic calls to action, nothing less than two of the most famous literary summons to rise to a greater cause. On the morning of the Battle of Agincourt, King Henry galvanizes his men, calling on this "band of brothers" to fight to glorious victory. And they did: although the French army outnumbered Henry's soldiers by a sizable margin, the English crushed the French in one of the greatest military victories of the Hundred Years War. Tennyson's "Ulysses" is no less inspiring. Roused by a profound desire to explore the unknown parts of the world, Ulysses exhorts his men in a moving and exhilarating speech to "Follow knowledge, like a sinking star,/Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." It is no surprise that these two works appealed greatly to a president who saw himself and his cabinet as embarking on a New Frontier.

No other American president cited Dante with greater frequency or conviction. At state dinners honoring Italian statesmen or at events such as the annual gala for the National Italian American Foundation Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H. Bush alluded to Dante, along with Michelangelo, Verdi, and Leonardo, as examples of Italian genius, but their allusions were perfunctory and determined by the occasion. These presidents cited Dante largely for decorative purposes. Kennedy's allusions to Dante, on the other hand, were hortatory, part of a campaign of persuasion, and provided an index of his understanding of the power of culture.

Sixty years after Kennedy made his first public allusion to Dante's damnation of neutrality, the president's repurposed version still resonates, albeit with less profound consequences.[20] Most recently, Dan Brown employed it as the epigraph to his 2013 thriller *Inferno*. Kennedy's version has acquired a life of its own, not unlike popular sayings such as Yogi Berra's "It ain't over til it's over" and Machiavelli's "the ends justify the

19. The John F. Kennedy Library lists both of these works of literature under the category of John F. Kennedy's Favorite Poems—"Ulysses" (Tennyson). Kennedy also admired Alan Seeger's "I have a rendezvous with death."

20. Kennedy's allusion to Dante's condemnation of neutrality has one other singular distinction: others, most notably Martin Luther King in his 1967 speech "It's a dark day in our nation: Why I am opposed to the War in Vietnam," have deployed it strategically. As he lays out a long history of oppression with respect to Vietnam, King urges his audience to oppose the war. King's use of Dante shows further the workings of a live tradition: exploiting his famous rhetorical skills, King uses the Dante quotation to frame his remarks. Vincent Harding wrote the speech at King's request (Harding 1966). Such a meme can also wind back, as a more recent appearance of the quotation shows clearly. Dan Brown cites Kennedy's version of the quotation as the epigraph to his 2011 thriller *Inferno*. The placement of the quotation in so prominent a place in the novel asks readers to consider the repercussions of neutrality. The contentious issue in Brown's novel is overpopulation, a problem, which in the mind of Zobrist, Brown's antagonist, will make Earth a Hell (Parker and Parker 2013, 165–98). Brown's epigraph encourages readers to come to terms with repercussions of neutrality before large global problems. Brown and his antagonist—not unlike Kennedy and King in their deployments of the poet—harness Dante to make their concerns about the repercussions of neutrality explicit.

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means." Neither Berra nor Machiavelli spoke these words. In Chapter 18 of *The Prince* Machiavelli speaks of attending to results, but this advice is not presented as a maxim. "In the actions of all men, and especially of princes," he writes, "where there is no court to appeal to, one looks to the end. So let the prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone." While Berra did say "You're not out until you're out," he did not say "it ain't over till it's over." Yet this saying has become one of the famous Yogi-isms (Mather and Rogers 2015, B16). But such details seem immaterial in the afterlife of some quotations. Kennedy did not invent the reformulation of the Dante quotation, but he attributed it to the Florentine poet—and others have followed in his wake. In its reconstituted form, neutrality is denounced as a reprehensible sin punished in the lowest depths of Hell. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot observes, "Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it" (1975, 40). Reorientations of famous quotations, be they those of eminent literary authorities or a famous athlete, remind us that a live tradition is light footed. A facile, supple absorptive nature and a keen nose for the capacity of an allusion to move an audience matter more than rote knowledge of a work.

Poetry and Politics

Among Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's personal papers is a page of typed citations that include three from her husband, one from Thomas Jefferson, and one from Aristotle. While the sheet is unlabeled, it seems part of a collection of quotations and photographs for potential inclusion in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library's museum exhibits. One citation, attributed to Kennedy himself, expresses the extent to which he believed poetry and politics might serve one another:

> If more politicians knew poetry,
> And more poets knew politics,
> I am convinced the world would be
> A little better place to live.[21]

On October 26, 1963, upon receiving an honorary degree at Amherst College, Kennedy addressed the way in which poetry and power might serve one another more directly. His visit coincided with the groundbreaking of the Robert Frost Library. After citing Frost's famous line, "I have seen the night," which describes the poet's understanding of darker realities, Kennedy spoke about how poetry can serve as a check on power and in so doing affirm its cultural capital in the political sphere.

> It is hardly an accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power, for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of its limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concerns, poetry

21. Kennedy's quotation can be found among Jacqueline Kennedy's papers at the JFK Library: JBKOPP-SF072. Another page of citations includes the Dante quotation on neutrality.

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> reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of human truth.[22]

Few politicians today would speak so openly about how those in power might benefit from the insights offered by poetry. Kennedy's statement, admittedly written to appeal to its audience, acknowledges that poetry, and by extension other works of literature, can plumb depths of human truths with surprising precision. Literature concentrates, clarifies, and, even if it arrives at no specific conclusion or resolution, insists that we respect the complexities of human experience. The limits of power have to be imagined.

On the eve of Kennedy's election in 1960 Robert Rauschenberg, who had been working on his own illustrations of Dante at the time, created a drawing that he entitled *Election*. He sent it to the president and Mrs. Kennedy with the following note:

> Dear Mr. President:
>
> This drawing should belong to you or me. If you enjoy it I would be deeply honored if you accept it. My concern with the election, primarily your becoming our next president, interrupted a 2 1/2 year project of illustrating Dante's *Inferno*. That fact + a need to celebrate your victory in my own medium is the subject. It is the only drawing in which the Dante image is used outside of the illustrations. (Small figure, lower right hand corner next to large D). The Greek head and Washington reiterates that the content of the drawing is art and politics. Red, white + blue is your color. The headlined, televised, radioed purple is Jacqueline's. The rest is, I think, self-explanatory, including the formal fading waves of "Dick + Pat" in the upper right.[23]

Rauschenberg's pairing of Kennedy and Dante was uncannily prescient. It is nothing less than a harmonic convergence—a highly felicitous tribute to "art and politics" created for a president who believed that these two arenas could enhance one another.

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22. For the audio and transcript of this speech, see JFKWHA-234–003. Throughout his political career, Kennedy upheld this belief in words and deeds: he invited distinguished persons from the arts to his inauguration; hosted dinners for André Malraux, France's Cultural Minister and for Nobel laureates; referred often to eminent writers in his speeches; and advocated for the establishment of the U.S. National Arts Foundation. The National Endowment for the Arts was created by Congress and President Johnson in 1965.

23. For the text of Rauschenberg's letter, see the entry under April 15. 1961 in the Chronology of the artist's life. For Rauschenberg's Dante illustrations, see Rauschenberg (1964).

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