FRIENDSHIP IN *INFERNO* II

by

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What is here to the point is to study the changes that occur in *Inferno* 2 with respect to Dante's union with Virgil and Beatrice, understood as distinct types of friendship. What is proposed is an understanding of friendship in Dante as a dialectical synthesis of classical, humanistic premises, grounded in human reason and virtue, and Christian premises, grounded in divine grace and *caritas*. In this manner, friendship will here be explored in relation to such categories as reason and theology, philosophy and revelation, distance and proximity. Moreover, friendship in *Inferno* 2 acquires significance in relation to activity and change, distance and proximity, isolation and inclusion. The salvific power of friendship is reflected in the changes and discourse that transpire in the course of the canto.

Inferno 2 brings to the foreground the importance of friendship in the wayfarer's journey. The canto begins in fear, uncertainty, isolation, and through the experience of friendship it ends in hope, affirmation, and inclusion. *Inferno* 2 thus celebrates the interplay between friendship and spiritual happiness. To a great extent this is the canto of compassion and friendship. It is an act of friendship that draws Dante out of his spiritual misery to experience eternal happiness. Dante's movement toward ultimate happiness and the good must therefore be examined in relation to his union with Virgil and Beatrice, two benevolent and active friends. They do not merely wish Dante good: they become integral parts of his goodness. Beatrice descends into Limbo to enlist Virgil's assistance so that Dante may ascend to heaven. Virgil leaves Limbo and arrives in the dark wood so as to lead him toward the right path. Compassion moves Virgil to action, *nel primo punto che di te mi dolve* (*Inf*. 2, 50-51). And, compassion moves Beatrice to act on Dante's behalf, *Oh pietosa colei*

che mi soccorse! (*Inf.* 2. 133). Friendship in Inferno 2 is here studied, therefore, in relation to compassion, discourse, and movement.

My discussion of Inferno 2 centers on three key moments in the canto. The first is to be found at the beginning, when feeling alone despite Virgil's presence, Dante refers to himself as *e io sol uno* (*Inf.* 2, 3). The second passage is located at the point when speaking to Virgil in Limbo, Beatrice refers to Dante as *l'amico mio e non de la ventura* (*Inf.* 2, 61). The third passage appears as Beatrice terms love the force behind her descent to Limbo, as with her speech, *Amor mi mosse che mi fa parlare* (*Inf.* 2, 72). Each of these pivotal passages places Dante's spiritual journey within a context of friendship and each stresses the role of Beatrice and Virgil as true friends to Dante. Indeed the first also places Dante outside of friendship, at least from his vantage point. The second passage sees Dante's identity defined in relation to someone other than himself, or in relation to Beatrice. In the third passage the relationship of love and friendship is implicitly established.

At the opening of *Inferno* 2 friendship is indirectly evoked through Dante's sense of isolation. Despite Virgil's presence, Dante describes himself as being alone, *e io sol uno* (*Inf.* 2, 3), a phrase which permits the reader to enter the depth of Dante's loneliness. His preoccupation and an obsessive concern with his personal I, (*io*)-a pronoun used five times in the span of four lines, portrays the magnitude of his isolation. Commentators have read the verse *e io sol uno* (*Inf.* 2, 3) in various ways. Some find in it an affirmation for an allegorical interpretation of Virgil as Reason,[i] while others hear classical literary echoes. [ii] Against Buti's allegorical interpretation and calling attention to Virgil's historical identity, Hollander understands the line in a moral sense: despite Virgil's presence, Dante is morally alone.[iii] The notion that Dante is morally alone, since he alone can change, may amount to a valid excursus, though it may diminish the power of Virgil as friend. While it may well be the case that change ultimately lies with Dante himself, it is Virgil who, through his discourse, draws Dante out of his *stasis* and isolation and instills hope and courage. In contrast to Buti's allegorical reading and Hollander's moral reading of the line, it must be

argued here that at the beginning of *Inferno* 2 Dante stands alone because of his own wrong choices.

The claim that at the beginning of *Inferno* 2 Dante is alone because, lacking in faith, Virgil cannot provide moral support, seems to overlook a few important points. First, it does not seem to take into consideration that in choosing Virgil as his guide Dante confirms, to a certain extent, Virgil's moral authority. While fallible in spiritual matters, Virgil is the epitome of moral excellence and earthly perfection. While it is true that Virgil can rise no further than the Earthly Paradise, it is also true that he sets Dante on the path to Beatrice, thus taking him closer to spiritual perfection. As Auerbach observes, Virgil is chosen both for his poetic mastery and his moral excellence, his *iustitia* and *pietas*.[iv] As the epitome of human *iustitia* and *pietas*, therefore, Virgil is more than qualified to offer moral support. At the beginning of *Inferno* 2 Dante is morally alone, because he does not yet comprehend the power of *caritas*. He does not yet understand that his journey is a gift of divine grace and *caritas* rather than a reward for good behavior.

It is also true that in *Inferno* 2 Dante still sees Virgil primarily as the poet from whom he learned his own poetic style, *Poeta che mi guidi* (*Inf.* 2, 10). Dante errs in believing that the love of poetry he shares with Virgil will get him out of this spiritual mess and that secular knowledge is the path to redemption. Fortunately, by the end of *Inferno* 2 Dante learns to view his will as one with Virgil (*Inf.* 2, 139). Moreover, he begins to learn about the limits of poetry and human reason. Notwithstanding the immense value of human wisdom, spiritual perfection is obtained by means of divine grace. More importantly, by the end of the second canto Dante will have learned to view Virgil's compassion and friendship in relation to the compassion and friendship of Beatrice, *O pietosa colei che mi* soccorse! / *e te cortese ch'ubidisti tosto / a le vere parole che ti porse!* (*Inf.* 2, 133-135). He will have learned to understand Virgil's *cortesia* in relation to Beatrice's *pieta`*.

In her plea to Virgil, Beatrice describes Dante as her friend rather than a friend of Fortune: *l'amico mio, e non de la ventura, / ne la diserta piaggia e` impedito* (*Inf.* 2, 61-62). Beatrice's famous declaration of friendship in *Inferno* 2 has stirred

no fewer than seven interpretations.[v] In an enlightening study of *Inferno* 2, Rachel Jacoff and William A. Stephany provide a rather thorough overview of the interpretive history of the line.[vi] While studying the line in relation to friendship and in an effort to place it within a history of literary interpretation, a summary of the authors' overview is here provided. The more obvious and literal interpretation of the line is that Dante is a friend of Beatrice although he is a victim or an enemy of fortune. This interpretation, as noted by Jacoff and Stephany, dates back to Jacopo della Lana, Boccaccio, and l'Anonimo Fiorentino.[vii] As the authors also note, a common argument against this interpretation is that in 1300, the fictive time of the *Commedia,* Dante was in fact blessed with good fortune.[viii] One of the major contributions that Jacoff and Stephany make is to expose the faultiness of this argument by pointing out the Boethian resonance in Dante's line. The authors call attention to the similarity between Beatrice's words and those of lady Philosophy in her discussion of fortune and friendship in the *Consolation of Philosophy*.[ix] In the beginning of Book II of the *Consolation*, lady Philosophy warns Boethius against the deceptions of Fortune and of her friendship: *Intellego multiformes illius prodigii fucos et eo usque cum his quos eludere nititur blandissimam familiaritatem, dum intolerabili dolore confundat quos insperata reliquerit* [x] (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, II, i). Philosophy teaches Boethius a lesson about the paradoxical nature of good and bad fortune: good fortune deceives while bad fortune, through the constancy of her fickleness, instructs about the fragility of happiness. Philosophy concludes, *Nunc et amissas opes querere; quod pretiosissimum diuitiarum genus est amicos inuenisti*"[xi] (*The Consolation of Philosohy*, II, viii). In losing what appeared to be his good fortune, wealth, power, and riches, Boethius found the most valuable asset, that is true friendship. The love of friends is a constant through fortunate times and unfortunate times. During unfortunate times false friends disappear while true friends remain faithful in their love. While emphasizing the Boethian resonance in Dante's line, Jacoff and Stephany argue that in 1300 what then appeared to be Dante's good fortune in reality was his bad fortune.[xii] had good cause to turn her back on Dante, yet she remained steadfast in her love for him.

A second interpretation of this passage, one adopted by l'Ottimo, Guido da Pisa, Buti and by most sixteenth-century commentators, understands Dante's line as a reference to his love of Beatrice in her role as Theology or Revelation.[xiii] Still a third reading, one promoted by Benvenuto, understands the line to mean that Dante is the true friend of Beatrice, whose love is not subject to the whims of fortune.[xiv] In 1943, Mario Casella understood the line as a sign of Dante's disinterested love of Beatrice, not dissimilar to his love of the Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*.[xv] Sharing in Benedetto Croce's hostility toward any allegorical interpretation of poetry [xvi] and favoring Casella's reading, Mazzoni argues that all allegory is *forzatura interpretativa che nuoce alla poesia*.[xvii] He rejects all allegorical interpretation of Beatrice.[xviii] In favor of the literal sense, Mazzoni understands the line to mean that as a friend to Beatrice, Dante is not a friend to Fortune but not that he is a victim of Fortune.[xix] Both Casella and Mazzoni note that Dante loves Beatrice with a kind of selfless love that bespeaks complete friendship. Mazzotta interprets, *l'amico mio, e non de la ventura* (*Inf*. 2, 61) as preparation and prefiguration for their union in the Garden of Eden.[xx] Whatever interpretation one may favor, it seems sensible not to ignore the Boethian echo. Echoing the words of Lady Philosophy in Book II of the *Consolation*, the contrast between friendship and Fortune in Beatrice's line parallels the contrast between true and false friendship. A union grounded in selfless love and virtue, true friendship is constant through good times and bad times. By contrast, grounded in extrinsic and mutable attributes, false friendship alters in times of bad fortune.

The point needs to be made that while his union with Virgil resembles classical friendship, in the *Commedia* Dante neither quotes Aristotle nor Cicero in describing his relationship with the pagan poet. The relationship between Virgil and Dante is a noble and steady union grounded in human wisdom and virtue, in character and moral excellence. It is a union that looks to moral rectitude. Virgil is described as *magnanimo* (*Inf*. 2, 44), an essential attribute of classical friendship. From their first encounter in *Inferno* 1 one senses great solidarity grounded in common interest, in their love of poetry and in their inclination toward the good (*Inf*. 1, 82-85). Dante holds Virgil in the highest regard as the poet who more than any other influenced his

poetic style (*Inf.* 1, 86-87). It was his deep love and admiration for Virgil that pushed him to seek out the *Aeneid* (*Inf.* 1, 84). Notwithstanding the numerous Virgilian echoes, in the *Commedia* Virgil is much more than a source of poetic inspiration: he is an active participant in search of Dante's good. As Mazzotta observes, "Virgil gratuitously shows himself forth to rescue the wayfarer from his despair."[xxi] While it is true that Virgil is sent by Beatrice, it is also true that he willingly and graciously accepts the challenge (*Inf.* 2, 79-81). Notwithstanding the importance of Virgil for Dante, it is Beatrice who teaches Dante how to love another in God.

An important passage, perhaps the most important, in *Inferno* 2 occurs in the exact center, the twenty-fourth of the forty-seven *terzine*. With its insistence on love as the primary force of movement, this *terzina* establishes the relation between love and motion. The *terzina* also establishes the close link between love and friendship, placing the entire journey within the context of *caritas*. While noticing the relationship between love and motion,[xxii] compassion and motion,[xxiii] commentators overlook the relationship between *amor* and *amicitia*. Love moved Beatrice to compassion, love moved her to action, and love makes her speak: *amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare* (*Inf.* 2, 72). By referencing love as the ultimate force of her compassion, her movement and her speech, Beatrice is indirectly referencing the relationship between a*mor* and *amicitia.*[xxiv] Both *amor* and *amicitia* lead Beatrice to active goodwill. Her love for Dante cannot be separated from her compassion and friendship. The full significance of the line *amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare* (*Inf.* 2, 72) is grasped once understood in relation to *l'amico mio, e non de la ventura* (*Inf.* 2, 61). Her love for Dante moves her to act and speak on his behalf. Her love moves her to compassion and to action. She is his friend because she loves him, truly. Love moves her to compassion and to friendship. This referencing of *amor* in this *terzina*, thus, is an indirect referencing of *amicitia*, and more particularly to *caritas*. Beatrice loves Dante in her love for God; she is a friend in God. In this sense her friendship must be understood as *caritas*. It originates in divinity, (*Inf.* 2, 94-96), and it returns to divinity (*Inf.* 2, 71). That *amor* acquires significance in relation to *amicitia*, and more specifically in relation to *caritas*, becomes ever more clear in the sphere of

Venus. A good case in point in *Paradiso* 8. 55-57 is Charles Martel as he recognizes Dante's love for him while still on earth, *Assai m'amasti, e avesti ben onde; / che s'io fossi giu` stato, io ti mostrava / di mio amor piu` oltre che le fronde* (*Par*. 8, 55-57). The repeated use of *amore* and *amare* in the sphere of Venus at first makes us think of Veneral love (of Dido at the very beginning of the canto), only, once we reflect, to be seen to be equal to Christian friendship.[xxv]

The twenty fourth *terzina* of *Purgatorio* further establishes the role of Virgil and Beatrice in a hierarchical order. Love moves Beatrice to compassion and action and she in turn moves Virgil. While witnessing Beatrice's *caritas*, Virgil himself is moved, first to compassion and then physically toward Dante: *Poscia che m'ebbe ragionato questo, / li occhi lucenti lagrimando volse, / per che mi fece del venir piu` presto. E venni a te cosi` com'ella volse: / d'innanzi a quella fiera ti levai / che del bel monte il corto andar ti tolse* (*Inf.* 2, 115-120). *Inferno* 2 establishes Beatrice's authority over Virgil. It is Beatrice that descends from on high and moves Virgil. Without Beatrice's intervention Virgil would not have been drawn into the action of the poem in the first place, nor would he have known about Dante's perilous state. In *Inferno* 10, 100-108, the reader is informed that the damned are not privy to events that transpire on earth. It is simply a fact that Virgil would not have known about Dante's perilous state. It is Beatrice and not Virgil who initiates movement and action in the poem (*Inf*. 2, 40-51). His response to Beatrice's request for assistance is testimony to her greatness and her power: " *e donna mi chiamo' beata e bella, / tal che di comandare io la richiesi* (*Inf.* 2, 53-54). Virgil responds with an immediacy that bespeaks deep respect and admiration: *tanto m'aggrada il tuo comandamento, che l'ubidir, se gia` fosse, m'e` tardi; / piu` non t'e` uo' ch'aprirmi il tuo talento* (*Inf.* 2, 79-81).

The hierarchical relation between Virgil and Beatrice is echoed in Virgil's reference to Beatrice as, *anima fia cio` piu` di me degna* (*Inf.* 1, 122). While emphasizing his own unworthiness, Virgil is simultaneously underscores the worth of Beatrice. This discrepancy in their authority parallels a discrepancy between philosophy and theology, human reason and divine Wisdom.[xxvi] Vested in Christian

truth, Beatrice is a worthier, more perfect friend; she loves Dante through God. Lacking faith, Virgil is a virtuous but fallible friend. Notwithstanding the importance of his role as mediator and messenger of grace, Virgil cannot speak the Word directly. His discourse conveys a limited and imperfect truth. According to Hollander, even at his first introduction in the poem Virgil is presented as one who failed to speak the Word. [xxvii] Accordingly, *chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco* (*Inf.* 1, 63) emphasizes Virgil's inability to speak the Word. If Virgil's initial silence emphasizes his distance from the Word, indirectly it emphasize the power of *caritas* in the face of such distance. It is an act of friendship, more particularly of *caritas* that bridges the distance between Dante and the Word.[xxviii] If Virgil's silence represents his inability to speak the Word, as Hollander suggests, it also represents his ability to confirm its truth.

If *Inferno* 2 begins the process of undermining Virgil's authority, as Hollander also asserts, it likewise begins to reassert the authority of Beatrice, previously undermined in the *Convivio* by the *donna gentile*.[xxix] Virgil's subordinate role is clearly to be understood in relation to Beatrice's authority. As Beatrice gains more authority, Virgil begins to lose some of his. Virgil is *savio* (*Inf.* 2, 36), yet in Dante's poem he is put in Hell. By contrast, Beatrice is *loda di Dio vera* (*Inf.* 2, 103) and resides among the blessed in Heaven. As mentioned above, it is Beatrice who begins the action in the poem and not Virgil. Beatrice moves Virgil to compassion and action and not the other way around, *I' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare* (*Inf.* 2, 70). Virgil is more than happy to accept her authority and obey her orders (*Inf.* 2, 79-81).

The distinction between Beatrice and Virgil as friends is further reflected in their linguistic style. For the most part Beatrice's language is immersed in divinity and mirrors religious truth. By contrast, Virgil's language is immersed in poetic rhetoric and mirrors secular truth. Virgil refers to Beatrice's speech as *soave e piana* (*Inf.* 2, 56), while she in turn refers to his as *parola ornata* (*Inf.* 2, 67). The stylistic distinction between *soave e piana* and *parola ornata* establishes the distances between divine and human language.[xxx] Beatrice's speech reflects the humble style

adopted in the *Commedia*, while Virgil's speech reflects the high style adopted in the *Aeneid*.[xxxi]

By means of a distinct speaking style, a particular type of speech, each friend leads Dante to a different level of truth.[xxxii] Virgil's elevated speech is the language of humans, which may be prone to human pride, and as Mazzotta observes, to duplicity.[xxxiii] Virgil's speech is fallible, as fallible as his understanding of the truth.[xxxiv] By contrast, Beatrice's speech is *soave e piana* (*Inf.* 2, 56) and she speaks *con angelica voce* (*Inf.* 2, 57). Her humble and sweet speech is the language of God, it mirrors divine truth and is infallible. Friendship with Beatrice is grounded in divinity, thus it is infallible.

The changes that transpire in *Inferno* 2 have been studied in direct relation to the compassion and intercession of Virgil and Beatrice as two benevolent and distinct friends. More generally, an attempt has been made to show that *Inferno* 2 begins the process of unlearning to be "bound fast in the friendship of mortal things." [xxxv] Dante's friendship with Virgil have been seen as a preparation and prefiguration for his union with Beatrice in the Garden of Eden (*Purg.* 30, 11-19). It has in fact been argued that as a pagan friend Virgil leads Dante to the experience of earthly happiness, but cannot lead him to transcendence.

NOTES:

[i] Buti (1385): "si deve intendere che Virgilio non era con Dante se non quanto alla lettera, per seguitamento che Dante seguiva la sua poesia, et allegoricamente s'intende la ragione umana…che non era altro che Dante" (Buti quoted by Robert Hollander) cf. Robert Hollander, "The 'Canto of the Word' (*Inferno* 2)" in *Lectura Dantis Newberryana* (1990).

[ii] Robert Hollander, "The 'Canto of the Word' (*Inferno* 2)" in *Lectura Dantis Newberryana*, p. 101. See also Robert Hollander, "Le opere di Virgilio nella *Commedia* di Dante," in *Dante e la "bella scola" della poesia*: *Autorita` e sfida poetica*, ed. A. A. Iannucci (Ravenna: Longo, 1993), p. 256.

[iii] Hollander, p. 101.

[iv] Erich Auerbach, "Figural Art" in *Dante*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 27.

[v] Francesco Mazzoni, "Il Canto II dell'*Inferno*," in *Saggio per un nuovo commento alla "Divina Commedia." Inferno, Canti* I-III (Firenze: Sansoni, 1967), pp. 256-277.

[vi] Rachel Jacoff and William A. Stephany, *Lectura Dantis Americana Inferno II*, pp. 44 – 46.

[vii] Jacoff and Stephany, p. 44.

[viii] Jacoff and Stephany, p. 44.

[ix] Jacoff and Stephany, p. 86.

[x] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V. E. Watts (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 54: "I know the many disguises of that monster, Fortune, and the extent to which she seduces with friendship th very people she is striving to cheat, until she overwhelms them with unbearable grief at the suddenness of her desertion."

[xi] Boethius, *The Consolation*, p. 77: "So you are weeping over lost riches when you have really found the most precious of all riches—friends who are true friends."

[xii] Rachel Jacoff and William A. Stephany, *Lectura Dantis Americana Inferno II*, p. 86.

[xiii] Jacoff and Stephany, p. 44.

[xiv] Jacoff and Stephany, p. 45.

[xv] Jacoff and Stephany, p. 45.

[xvi] Benedetto Croce, *La poesia di Dante* (Bari: Laterza, 1921), pp. 13; Rachel Jacoff and William A. Stephany in *Lectura Dantis Americana Inferno II* (1989), pp. 45-46.

[xvii] Francesco Mazzoni, "Canto II dell' *Inferno*," *Saggi per unnuovo commento alla "Divina Commedia*" *Canti* I-III, p. 277.

[xviii] Rachel Jacoff and William A. Stephany, *Lectura Dantis Americana Inferno II*, p. 45.

[xix] Francesco Mazzoni, "Il canto II dell'*Inferno*," *Saggio per un commento alla "Divina Commedia." Inferno, Canti* I-III, pp. 256-268.

[xx] Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 119

[xxi] Mazzotta, p. 152.

[xxii] Robert Hollander, *Studies in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1980), p. 82. Hollander notes that the close relation of love, discourse, and motion in *Inferno* 2 is also stressed in *Purgatorio* 24, 52-54.

[xxiii] Rachel Jacoff and William A. Stephany, "The Canto of the Word," in *Lectura Dantis Americana Inferno* II, p. 6.

[xxiv] Cicero, *De Amicitia*, trans. William A. Falconer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), viii. 26-28, p. 139: "For it is love (*amor*), from which the word "friendship" (*amicitia*) is derived, that leads to the establishing of goodwill."

[xxv] On this point see Robert Hollander's note to *Par*. 8, 55-57. See Lino Pertile, "Quale amore va in Paradiso?" in "*Le donne, I cavalieri, l'arme, gli amori*": *Pema e romanzo: la narrativa lunga in Italia*, ed Francesco Bruni (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), p. 60. For the relationship between Charles and Venus

see Patrick Boyde, *Perception and passion in Dante's "Comedy"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 285.

[xxvi] Robin Kirkpatrick, *The Divine Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 50.

[xxvii] Robert Hollander, *Il Virgilio dantesco: tragedia nella "Commedia"* (Florence: Olschki, 1983), pp. 69-70. For further clarification of the same line Hollander points to Giorgio Brugnoli's article on *Inf.* 1. 63 in *Letteratura comparata: problemi e metodo: Studi in onore di Ettore Paratore* (Bologna: Patron, 1981), 3:1169-82.

[xxviii] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Random House), p. 72: "In divining and keeping silence shall the friend be a master."

[xxix] Rachel Jacoff and William A. Stephany, *Lectura Dantis Americana Inferno II*, p. 84.

[xxx] Benvenuto da Imola, ed. *Inferno*, p. 63: "Et dicit: et ista Domina *Soave e piana*, et bene dicit, quia sermo divinus est suavis et planus, non altus et superbus, sicut sermo Virg. Et poetarum, *cominciommi a dire con angelica voce*" (Benvenuto first quoted by Auerbach and then by Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante Poet Of The Desert*, p. 158, see note 20).

[xxxi] Robert Hollander, "The 'Canto of the Word' (*Inferno* 2)," *Lectura Dantis Newberryana* Vol II, p. 107.

[xxxii] Rachel Jacoff and William A. Stephany, "The Canto of the Word," *Lectura Americana Inferno II*, p. 17.

[xxxiii] See Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante Poet of the Desert*, p. 159.

[xxxiv] See Robert Hollander, "Dante's Pagan Past: Notes on *Inferno* XVIII," *SIR*, 5 (1985).

[xxxv] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, IV, VI, p. 164: "miser eram, et miser est omnis animus vinctus amicitia rerum mortalium, et dilaniatur, cum eas amittit, et tunc sentit miseriam, qua miser est et antequam amittat eas."

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Marsilio, 2001, pp. 59-70.