

# **SYLLABUS FOR ITL. 410: DANTE'S *COMMEDIA* Spring 2016**

Mon/Wed 9:00-10:20

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## **COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

In this course we will undertake a close reading of the first two of the three canticles of Dante Alighieri's poem, the *Commedia*. We will focus our class discussions upon specific episodes (in bold on the calendar below) in order to draw out and discuss the contemporary significance of this complex text from our Occidental culture's Medieval past. We will seek to uncover the ways in which the poet blends elements of classical pagan literary culture with his own medieval literary traditions as well as his Christian belief system in order to create a text that still generates interest today, poetically, ethically, politically, historically, and simply as a pleasurable read. Several catabatic precedents from both classical epic poetry and medieval mystical literature will supplement our study of the *Commedia* in an effort to further illuminate the literary backgrounds of the poem. We will also work on our essay writing technique and hopefully hone our reading and interpretive skills (what we mean when we say "critical" skills in literary circles).

Therefore the measurable objective of the course will be for you to demonstrate that you are capable of writing two convincing short critical essays upon the *Commedia* or a topic related to the study of the poem (*i.e.* the poem's approach to history, to theology, to ethics, to mysticism, its genre, its inter- or intra-textuality, its imitators, its *fortuna*, etc. etc.).

## **REQUIRED TEXTS**

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* both the *Inferno* and the *Purgatory* (Any translation is acceptable as all have strengths and weaknesses. Generally speaking, the more foot and/or endnotes the better—a facing page translation that includes the original text also doesn't hurt. Most importantly, however, is the readability of the translation. Read a few lines of the different translations and buy the one that sounds best to you. If you want to try reading the whole or sections in Italian—for which indulgences will be given—get a scholastic (high school) edition with lots of helpful notes and commentary, e.g. Bosco/Reggio or Sapegno.)

In my opinion the best *Inferno* translation is that of Pinsky, but he hasn't translated the other two canticles. Robert and Jean Hollander's translation is the most recent and easily has the best apparatus of all English translations. Both Mandelbaum and Ciardi's translations are far superior to Musa's or Singleton's prose version and are comparably quite inexpensive. Dorothy Sayers's translation is particularly sensitive to Christian theology but can be quite stilted at times.

Charles Singleton's exhaustive English-language commentary is usually available at Paperback Exchange.

Texts marked ☞ are in a photocopy packet available at Copisteria X, Via San Gallo, 72 red. Tel: 055/215367.

There are no course costs other than the book(s) and the photocopy packet.

## COURSE PROCEDURES AND REQUIREMENTS

The calendar below represents the reading for which you will be responsible for each class session; it also tells you, above each assignment, the topic we are most likely to discuss about the reading. The numbers in bold represent specific *canti* upon which I would like to focus the in-class discussion—although questions and/or comments on the other *canti* are also welcome and we can be flexible if there is a general consensus to discuss episodes other than those that I have chosen. This class is a seminar and therefore I urge you once again strongly to take notes while you read and to come to class prepared to ask questions, comment, complain about, trip on, and to explore the day's reading assignment without wasting our time with pointless, uninformed commentary or lengthy personal digressions.

Beyond regular attendance, participation in the class discussions, and the completion of the requisite reading described above, students will be expected to complete two (5-7 pp.) writing assignments. These essays will deal with 2 different *canti/loci/topics/critical stances/historical interpretations* or what have you of your own choosing which approach the *Commedia* in some way. The first paper will be due on April 24<sup>th</sup> (no later than the end of that day's class session) and the second no later than the end of our TBA final exam session during the last week of May.

Grades will be based on the written work with positive or negative considerations for attendance and participation in the class discussions: roughly that's 40% for each paper and 20% for participation and attendance. Note: A student who does not complete one of the written assignments or who exceeds 5 absences will not receive a passing grade regardless of the percent values of the individual assignments on the grounds that they have not completed the course requirements.

## A NOTE ON METHOD

I do not believe that I—or anyone else—can coerce or cajole any passive student into “learning.” Rather I believe that intellectual progress is made through the sharing of ideas and interpretations. Therefore, this course will be conducted as a seminar, and will be totally dependent upon your contributions and courtesy during the class sessions. It is therefore considerably more vital in this course than in a lecture type course that each of you take control of your own education—not only for your own sakes but also in accordance with your responsibility to the rest of the participants in this seminar. You must both keep up with the reading and begin the process of digesting the material by coming to class with something either to say or ask about it. **I strongly recommend that you take notes while reading** and that you come to class prepared to challenge and/or benefit from the group's discussion. You cannot depend on me to lecture on material that you have not read, nor will I accept the role of monitor for your reading or policeman for discourtesy to the group during discussions. Concerns of this kind should be voiced and dealt with by the community during class sessions. Remember that I am only one of a group of people here to explore and learn from these interesting and challenging texts.

Social mores are always changing and in recent years I have seen people become more and more accepting of others' temporary distraction into cell phones and laptop computers in what would otherwise appear to be a face-to-face social situation. While I understand that this is becoming a part of how we interact with one another, and that such distractions are no longer considered to be as rude as they once were, I would hope that we are still capable of concentrating on the materials at hand for a mere hour and 20 minutes without “texting,” “facebooking,” “tweeting,” or other similar on-line activities, so please turn off the ringers of your phones and store them out of sight and, please, as a courtesy to us all, no open computers during our class sessions.

All of that said—I am extremely available both in class and out to offer my expertise and experience to help you experience, digest and write about this material. (I also have a lot of experience living, studying, and teaching here in Italy and I offer a sympathetic ear to culture shock concerns as

well!) This semester I will be available to speak with you individually and in-person immediately after class, or you can reach me via email at all hours, Skype (Lee.Foust) or on my cell phone the rest of the week during normal hours—except when I am holding class elsewhere. I'm also always open to addressing both my methods and the materials of our study during the in-class discussions if the group as a whole is in agreement as to the utility and feasibility of altering anything. All of this is said only to clarify from the start my particular approach—based on the assumption that we are each mutually dependent individuals demanding of respect and ultimately responsible for our own intellectual progress—and to allow the greatest flexibility in our proceeding so that the most appropriate and useful materials and methods are addressed in this course.

## CALENDAR

Feb. 22: **Course Introduction**

Feb. 24: **Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry**

Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI 📖

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI 📖

Feb. 29: **Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore and Classical Epic Poetry**

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI 📖

Anonymous, *Tundale's Vision* 📖

March 2: **Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore**

Anonymous, *Tundale's Vision* 📖

March 7: **Medieval Allegory**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I - III, I

March 9: **Lyric in the Epic**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV-VII, V

March 14: **No Class (Southern Italy field trip)**

March 16: **Structure in Medieval Didactic Texts/Aristotle's *Ethics* Personified**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto VIII-XI, XI

March 21: **Epic Motifs and the *Contrapasso***

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XII-XIV, XIII

Virgil, Excerpt from *The Aeneid* 📖

March 23: **Medieval Exempla and Sins Personified**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XV-XIX, XV

Excerpts from *The Gesta Romanorum* 📖

March 28 – April 3 **EASTER BREAK**

April 4: **Post-Virgilian Epic and the *Contrapasso* (Lucan and Ovid)**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XX-XXV, XXV

April 6: **Intellectual Autobiography? (Ulysses vs. Augustine/Public vs. Private)**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI-XXVIII, XXVI & XXVII

John Freccero, "Dante's Ulysses: from epic to Novel" 📖

April 11: **End Intellectual Autobiography? & the *Contrapasso* Revisited**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXIX-XXXI, XXVII/XXVIII

April 13: **New Religion Over Old: Isaac and the Father replace Oedipus and Jupiter**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXXII-XXXIV, XXXII/XXXIII

April 18: **The Place Between: Purgatory and Religious Folklore**

Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, “The Commemoration of All Souls” ☞

**Allegory, Exodus, Ulysseys and the *Aeneid*: the Journey to Freedom**

Dante, *Purgatory* I-III, I & II ll. 1-51.

☞ April 20: **Exercises in Rhetorical Style (first paper due)**

Dante, *Purgatory* IV-VII, V

Geoffrey of Vinsauf, excerpt from *Poetria Nova* ☞

April 25: **Liberation Day / No class**

April 27: **Classical Stories and Medieval Allegory: The First of Three Dreams**

Dante, *Purgatory* VIII-IX, IX

May 2: **Art, Writing and Fame—the Proud**

Dante, *Purgatory* X-XIII, XI

May 4: **Politics, Rivers and Envy**

Dante, *Purgatory* XIV-XVI, XIV

May 9: **Half Way Home: Theology, Love and the Christian Epic**

Dante, *Purgatory* XVII-XX, XVII & XVIII ll. 1-75

May 11: **Statius, textual Interpretation and the Christianization of Epic Poetry**

Dante, *Purgatory* XXI-XXIV, XXI/XXII

May 16: **The Last Word on Lyric Poetry**

Dante, *Purgatory* XXV-XXVIII, XXIV & XXVI

May 18: **The Bible Triumphs as *the Aeneid* Fades Away: the Return of Beatrice**

Dante, *Purgatory* XXIX-XXXIII, XXX

May 23 – 26:

☞ Final exam class TBA: Summary or make-up class. (second paper due)

**All** written coursework is due before the end of this class session.

## Cal State Attendance Policy

General Attendance Policy 2015-2016 (for classes that meet twice a week)

Attendance to all CSU courses is mandatory. Two unexcused absences are allowed during the semester but more than two unexcused absences will lower your grade (excused absences will be accepted for serious medical reasons or emergencies) as follows: 3 unexcused absences, lowers one letter grade; 4 unexcused absences, lowers two letter grades; 5 unexcused absences, lowers 3 letter grades. More than five unexcused absences will result in failure of the course.

In order not to disrupt the class, punctuality is required. Students are expected to be in class at the beginning of the class hour; any delay exceeding ten minutes will be considered an absence.

Dates of mid-term and final exams can not be changed for individual travel plans or personal needs. Students should take note of the dates and hours of the midterm and final exams and plan their trips after the last exam. It is important to inform friends and relatives about these exam dates so that no tickets are purchased for you that will interfere with these exam dates. Missing the midterm or the final exam will mean failure of the course.

During the academic year photocopies and other material may be distributed in class by the instructors. Students who were not in class are responsible for getting the material from their classmates and making their own photocopies.

Other class policies:

Use of the computer in class is restricted to oral presentations, unless previously approved by the professor.

Eating is NOT allowed in class.

Cellular phones must be turned off or placed on silent mode and stowed away during class.

### **Other class policies:**

To avoid distracting those interested in the class discussions, neither eating nor sleeping is allowed in this class. Please also try to attend to all bathroom needs before we begin and therefore avoid getting up and down and disturbing our seminar discussions. Please also do remember to **turn off** the ringer on your cell phone and put it away, out of sight before we begin.

Look on the bright side; no dress code will be enforced.

### **Office Hours:**

Teacher's Room (Office) Hours: Mon./Wed. 8:00 – 9:00 (just before class but you **must let me know beforehand** as I will not come in without a scheduled appointment) or other times by appointment. Also my e-mail, phone number, and Skype address are printed above for your convenience. Feel free to friend me on facebook if that's easier, I'm not proud.