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 *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 language).

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 Italian text also doesn’t hurt. Most importantly, however, is the readability of the translation—read a few lines of the different translations and purchase 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 humble 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 translation and are comparably inexpensive. Dorothy Sayers translation is particularly sensitive to Christian theology but can be quite stilted linguistically.

Charles Singleton’s exhaustive English-language commentary is usually available at Paperback Exchange in Florence.

Texts marked 4 are in your 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 March 25th (no later than the end of that day’s class session) and the second no later than the end of our session on the final day of class, April 29th.

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 a half without “texting,” “facebooking,” “tweeting,” or other similar on-line activities, so please turn off the ringers of your phones and store them out of site 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

Week 1
Class 1: Course Introduction

Class 2: Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry
   Homer, Odyssey, Book XI 4
   Virgil, Aeneid, Book VI 4

Week 2
Class 3: Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry
   Virgil, Aeneid, Book VI 4
   Virgil, Georgics IV, lI. 315-558 4

Class 4: Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore and Classical Epic Poetry
   Virgil, Georgics IV, lI. 315-558 cont.
   Anonymous, Tundale’s Vision 4

Week 3
Class 5: Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore
   Anonymous, Tundale’s Vision cont. 4

Class 6: Medieval Allegory
   Dante, Inferno, Canto I - III, I

Week 4
Class 7: Field trip: a peek at Dante’s Florence
Class 8: Lyric in the Epic
   Dante, Inferno, Canto IV-VII, V

Week 5
Class 9: Structure in Medieval Didactic Texts/Aristotle’s Ethics Personified
   Dante, Inferno, Canto VIII-XI, XI

Class 10: Epic Motifs and the Contrapasso
   Dante, Inferno, Canto XII-XIV, XIII
   Virgil, Excerpt from The Aeneid 4

Week 6
Class 11: Medieval Exempla and Sins Personified
   Dante, Inferno, Canto XV-XIX, XV

Class 12: Post-Virgilian Epic and the Contrapasso (Lucan and Ovid)
   Dante, Inferno, Canto XX-XXV, XXV

Week 7
Class 13: Intellectual Autobiography? (Ulysses vs. Augustine/Public vs. Private)
   Dante, Inferno, Canto XXVI-XXVIII, XXVI & XXVII
   John Freccero, “Dante’s Ulysses: from epic to Novel” 4

Class 14: End Intellectual Autobiography? & the Contrapasso Revisited
   Dante, Inferno, Canto XXIX-XXXI, XXVII/XXVIII

Week 8
Class 15: New Religion Over Old: Isaac and the Father replace Oedipus and Jupiter
   Dante, Inferno, Canto XXXII-XXXIV, XXXII/XXXIII)

Class 16: The Place Between: Purgatory and Religious Folklore

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

*Purgatory* I-V, I & II ll. 1-51.

**Week 9**

F Class 17: **Classical Stories and Medieval Allegory: The First of Three Dreams**

*Purgatory* VI-IX, IX (First essays due)

Class 18: **Art, Writing and Fame—the Proud**

*Purgatory* X-XII, XI

**Week 10**

Class 19: **Politics, Rivers and Envy**

*Purgatory* XIII-XV, XIV

Class 20: **Half Way Home: Theology, Love and the Christian Epic**

*Purgatory* XVI-XVIII, XVII& XVIII ll. 1-75

**Week 11**

Class 21: **Another Allegorical Dream and the Sins of Earthly Attachment**

*Purgatory* XIX-XX, XIX

Class 22: **Statius, textual Interpretation and the Christianization of Epic Poetry**

*Purgatory* XXI-XXIII, XXI/XXII

**Week 12**

Class 23: **The Last Word on Lyric Poetry**

*Purgatory* XXIV-XXVIII, XXIV & XXVI

Class 24: **The Bible Triumphs as the *Aeneid* Fades Away: the Return of Beatrice**

*Purgatory* XXIX-XXXIII, XXX

F Class 25: Extra class in case we fall behind. Day to collect final papers.

(All written work is due before the end of this final class session.)

**GRADING SCALE**

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<th>Score Range</th>
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