

**English 323**  
**Dante**  
**Spring 2003**  
**T-Th, 3:00-4:20**  
**Hoover 202**

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Even in our era of a vastly expanding canon, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is one of a handful of writers who make up the virtually undisputed "greats" of European literature. In a still-important twentieth-century essay, T. S. Eliot exaggerated only slightly when he wrote, "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third. . . . The majority of poems one outgrows and outlives, as one outgrows and outlives the majority of human passions. Dante is one of those which one can only just hope to grow up to at the end of life" ("Dante," in *Selected Essays* [Faber and Faber, 1932]). Dante's epic journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise is most profoundly a journey inward, a journey in which all human beings are in some sense eternally engaged. Eliot himself, indeed, described the Wasteland of twentieth-century London in lines borrowed directly from Dante's *Inferno* (Canto III):

Unreal City;  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

But if Dante's *Commedia* is (at least from an "essentialist" perspective) in some sense perpetually "relevant" to our lives, it is also the supreme literary reflection of a particular time and place--a time and place far remote from our own: Florence, Italy, ca. 1300. Dante sets his masterpiece during Easter Week of that year, and continually alludes to contemporary figures and events. Dante's Europe was politically volatile; and the *Commedia* is on one level a thoroughly political work. Its huge cast of characters includes the popes, emperors, and nobles both of the past and of the poet's own day; and all three canticles are full of allusions to parties and debates, quarrels, schisms and battles that were of tremendous and immediate importance to Dante himself.

In the midst of its nearly perpetual turmoil, however, Europe was also undergoing a great cultural renaissance. Dante was immersed not only in the politics of his time, but also in its welter of secular and religious ideas. As a lay philosopher, he responded to virtually all the issues of scholastic philosophy--to Plato and St. Augustine, to Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. As the leading poet and literary humanist of his day, he took an enormous and conscious role in the rise of Italian vernacular poetry; and, writing his *Vita Nuova* and *Paradiso* within the European vernacular tradition called "*l'amour courtois*," or "courtly love," he transformed that tradition in ways that echo (however quietly) into the twenty-first century.

Dante also lived in the decades of Giotto's new naturalism in painting, and mentions the artist, among others, in his *Commedia*. His was the golden age of Italian Gothic architecture, and his

masterpiece is often seen as the great *poetic* embodiment of the "Gothic Spirit"--imbued, like the great Florentine churches that were new in his lifetime, with all the dynamic tensions of a thirteenth-century cathedral. The *Commedia*, then, is a fourteenth-century poetic *Summa Theologica*, a love poem, and a political manifesto. It is also a poetic cathedral--one with soaring and elaborate architecture; dazzling portraiture of the living and the dead, the blessed and the damned, as well as of the Lady and Lord of the Heavenly court. Also like a Gothic cathedral, it is a work of diversity in unity, with a place for both gargoyles and rose windows; deep darkness and unfathomable light. Inspired by painters and architects of his day, Dante in turn inspired painters and architects--so much so that in "reading" medieval and Renaissance art, it is often hard to tell a biblical scene from a scene imagined by Dante.

Thus, in order to understand Dante's great poem, we must read it, at least to some extent, within its historical matrix--glancing at the development of medieval Christianity; at medieval political life; at scholastic philosophy; at Gothic architecture; and the "system" (however fictional) of chivalry and courtly love. All these aspects of European civilization illuminate Dante's thought and work. We will see that the *Commedia* can be read as a historical, and an art-historical text--demonstrating vividly what a brilliant fourteenth-century mind made of the political, intellectual and aesthetic data of his time and place. But above all we will explore the poem's canticles as Dante explored Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise: as places on a journey into the remarkably familiar--and ever human--mind and heart.

### **Required Texts:**

Dante Alighieri. *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi. New York: New American Library, 1954.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Purgatorio*, trans. John Ciardi. New York: New American Library, 1961.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardi. New York: New American Library, 1961.

In addition you will be required to purchase and read a notebook of hand-outs and brief supplementary readings (cost: \$2.50).

### **Required Work:**

(1) Prompt and regular attendance at all class sessions. If you must miss a class, you should get class notes from another student and include them in your notebook with proper acknowledgment. (Roll will be taken, and final grades dropped one step--e.g. from a B to a C--for each absence after the first two. Thus six absences will be regarded as grounds for failure of the course.)

(2) Reading assignments to be completed--including written response--*before* the dates for which they are assigned (i.e. in time for class discussion).

(3) Notebook (as described below).

(4) Satisfactory completion of three exams: two "midterms" (one of which will be take-home) and a comprehensive final.

(5) Four response papers (3-4 pages each)--on issues of interest to you in *La Vita Nuova* and in each canticle of the *Commedia*.

(6) A comprehensive final exam.

**Note:** Late work will be accepted, but will be marked down one half grade for each class day after the due date. Under extraordinary circumstances, I will consider an extension without penalty-- provided that I am consulted in advance and that the circumstances seem serious enough to warrant such an extension.

### **Reading Notebook: The Record of your Journey**

Since the course will be run largely on a discussion basis, it is essential that you read the assigned material closely and carefully before each class session, and keep a notebook (ideally one you will want to keep for the rest of your life) that includes the following:

(1) reading notes, in which you jot down the plot, along with key images and ideas, from each canto or chapter--and any questions you may want to raise about it;

(2) class notes, summarizing the main ideas discussed (by other students as well as the professor);

(3) personal commentary, giving your reactions, thoughts, and questions about both the readings and the ideas discussed. This commentary will serve not only for class discussion but as the raw material for your response papers.

You may organize these sections however you wish, but you may find it useful to divide each page into two sections, so as to carry on a "dialogue" with the course. Example:

Commentary to be added  
later upon further  
reflection and/or  
in preparation for exams

Reading or class  
notes (dated and  
identified)

Your notebook will be due at the end of the course for review by the professor; before each examination it will be shared with another student "pilgrim," who will also add comments. Thus

your writing will have a double audience and purpose: it must "communicate" first with yourself, but second--and significantly--with others, about your experience in the course.

### **Grading Factors:**

(1) Attendance, preparation, and discussion	5
(2) Notebook	15
(3) Midterms (10% each)	20
(4) Response Papers (10% each)	40
(5) Final exam	<u>20</u>
	100%

**Note:** All work must be turned in, and of a passing quality (even if it is turned in so late as to have fallen--theoretically--to an F), in order to result in a passing grade in the course.

### **Grading Options:**

1. A - F
2. Credit/No Credit (non-majors only)

### **Manuscript Style:**

Papers are to be typed double-space in a 12-point font (this syllabus is typed in 12-point Times), and printed on a laser-quality printer. They should be handed in on separate sheets of 8 1/2 X 11 bond paper, stapled in the upper left-hand corner. Margins should be one inch; paragraphs are to be indented five spaces. Spaces should not be skipped between paragraphs. Any notes or bibliography you may want to use must follow the *MLA Handbook*, copies of which are available in both the library and the bookstore.

Always keep hard-copies of all your work. Documents can get lost--both from my desk and from your disk, whether hard or floppy. Should this occur, I will expect you to be able to produce a copy *immediately*; otherwise, I will be forced to count the paper as late beginning with the day of your failure to do so. (See above for general policy on late papers.)

**Note:** Electronically submitted work will not be accepted. It is your responsibility to leave enough time to submit a clean hard copy for evaluation.

### **Academic Honesty:**

Plagiarism occurs whenever the true author of a piece of prose, of an idea, or of a line of thought is not the person who claims to be the author. Plagiarism can occur in varying degrees, and will be penalized--in this class as in all others at the College--in proportion to its severity. Papers in which plagiarism is sufficiently serious will receive an F, and student's name will be turned in to the Dean of Students. A repeated act of plagiarism will result in an automatic F in the entire

course, in addition to any action taken by the Office of Student Life (which can include suspension from the College). A number of such serious sanctions have been imposed in recent years.

A particularly common and egregious form of plagiarism is the down-loading of materials from papers posted by others on various web sites. Please be aware that faculty have the tools to identify any work unfairly borrowed from the web--as well as other sources.

If you are in doubt about the need for documentation of borrowed material, please feel free to consult me or any other professor on campus. Also be sure that you have mastered the material in the 2001-2003 College Catalog, 25-28. Ignorance of this material will not be regarded as an excuse.

### **ADA Policy:**

If you have any disabling condition that may require some special arrangements in order to meet course requirements, please begin by contacting the Office of Learning Support Services. I will be happy to provide any accommodations regarded by the Director as appropriate, but am not in a position to offer such accommodations independently. Short of actual accommodations, however, please feel welcome to talk with me about anything I can do to help you succeed in the course.

### **The Final Exam:**

The final examination will be given only at the published time (Friday, May 16, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.), so plan your departure for the summer accordingly. Plane ticket purchased by students not consulting the schedule (or not informing their families of the schedule) will not be accepted as an excuse for missing (or rescheduling) the exam. If you should find yourself scheduled for three final exams on a single day, you are (as the catalogue notes) entitled to request an adjustment from your professors.

### **The Schedule:**

#### **I. Backgrounds to Dante's *Commedia*.**

- Feb. 6 Introduction to the course: visualizing Dante's Florence and reconstructing his intellectual universe (SR, 1-10).
- 11 Courtly Love and the *dolce stil nuovo* (SR, 12-41).
- 13 *Vita Nuova*, Musa, 3-86. Recommended: Musa's essay, 87-174.

- 18 *Vita Nuova*; introduction to *La Commedia*. Read Selections from Dante's "Letter to Can Grande della Scala" (SR, 43 ff.) and *Inferno*, Canto 1 (27-33): The Dark Wood of Error.

## II. *La Commedia* (1): *Inferno*.

- 20 *Inferno*, Cantos 2-4 (34-56): The Descent; the Vestibule of Hell; the Virtuous Pagans.
- 25 *Inferno*, Cantos 5-8 (57-86): The Hell of the She-Wolf: the Circle of the Carnal; the Gluttons, the Hoarders and Wasters; the Wrathful and Sullen; the River Styx.
- 27 *Inferno*, Cantos 9-12 (87-117): The Hell of the Lion: the City of Dis; the Heretics; the Circle of the Violent: (1) against Neighbors. First response paper due.
- Mar. 4 *Inferno*, Cantos 13-17 (118-55): The Violent: (2) against Self; (3) against God, Nature and Art; Geryon and the Descent to the Hell of the Leopard: the Fraudulent and Malicious.
- 6 *Inferno*, Cantos 18-22 (156-96): Malebolge--the Panderers and Seducers; Flatterers; Simoniacs; Fortune Tellers and Diviners; the Grafters ("Gargoyle Cantos").
- 11 *Inferno*, Cantos 23-30 (197-256): The Hypocrites; the Thieves; the Evil Counselors; the Sowers of Discord; the Falsifiers.
- 13 *Inferno*, Cantos 31-34 (257-88): The Central Pit of Hell.
- 18 Midterm examination on the *Vita Nuova* and the *Inferno*.

## III. *La Commedia* (2): *Purgatorio*.

- 20 *Purgatorio*, Cantos 1-4 (31-64): The Shore of Purgatory and the beginning of the ascent; Ante-Purgatory--the Late Repentant (1). Second response paper due.

## March 22-30: Spring Break.

- Apr. 1 *Purgatorio*, Cantos 5-9 (65-111): The Late Repentant; the Negligent Rulers and the Gate of Purgatory.
- 3 *Purgatorio*, Cantos 10-15 (112-169): The Cornices of the Proud and the Envious.

- 8 *Purgatorio*, Cantos 16-19 (170-203): The Cornices of the Wrathful and the Slothful.
- 10 *Purgatorio*, Cantos 20-24 (204-52): The Cornices of the Avaricious and the Gluttonous.
- 15 *Purgatorio*, Cantos 25-30 (253-309): The Cornice of the Lustful and Dante's ascent to moral and spiritual freedom; the Earthly Paradise; the Heavenly Pageant; the disappearance of Virgil and the revelation of Beatrice. Third response paper due.
- 17 *Purgatorio*, Cantos 31-33 (310-38): Beatrice's rebuke and Dante's confession; the masque of the Church Militant; Dante's final purification. Take-home midterm on the *Vita Nuova*, the *Inferno*, and the *Purgatorio*. Due Thursday, April 24.

#### **IV. *La Commedia* (3): *Paradiso*.**

- 22 *Paradiso*, Cantos 1-4 (23-61): Dante's Ascent to Heaven; the Sphere of the Moon--the Inconstant.
- 24 *Paradiso*, Cantos 5-9 (62-116): The Sphere of Mercury--the Seekers of Honor; the Sphere of Venus--the Amorous. Take-home midterm due.
- 29 *Paradiso*, Cantos 10-14 (117-69): The Sphere of the Sun--the Doctors of the Church; the ascent to Mars.
- May 1 *Paradiso*, Cantos 15-20 (170-233): The Sphere of Mars--the Warriors of God; the Sphere of Jupiter--the Just Rulers.
- 6 *Paradiso*, Cantos 21-26 (234-96): The Sphere of Saturn--the Contemplatives; the Sphere of the Fixed Stars; the Garden of Christ's Triumph; Dante's examinations in Faith, Hope, and Love.
- 8 *Paradiso*, Cantos 27-29 (297-326): The Primum Mobile and the Orders of Angels.
- 13 *Paradiso*, Cantos 30-33 (327-67): The Empyrean; the River of Light; the Mystic Rose; and Vision of God. Fourth response paper due.
- 14 (Wednesday) Reading Day. Optional review session.

**May 16 (Friday) 1:00-3:00 p.m. Final Exam. Notebooks due (to be returned by campus mail. If you would like to have your notebook sent to your home, turn in a self-addressed envelope with enough postage to cover its return.)**