

“A te convenien tenere altro viaggio.../se vuo’ camper d’esto loco selvaggio.”

Course Description:

This course is intended to guide participants through all three volumes of Dante’s fourteenth century masterwork, the *Divine Comedy*, journeying with the poet-pilgrim through the three realms of the afterlife. In the *Inferno* (Hell) Dante’s portrait of the lost souls in torment serves as a meditation on the emotional and spiritual destruction we unleash in our own lives when we choose selfishness over love—and on the ways in which that destruction ripples outward, poisoning our communal institutions of religion and government. In *Purgatorio* (Purgatory) Dante re-examines suffering through the lens of hope, exploring the possibility that a life of discipline and self-surrender can re-train our desires and open the way to a new kind of freedom. Finally, in *Paradiso* (Heaven) Dante reveals to us the vision of moral virtue, cosmic community, and all-encompassing beauty toward which we have been journeying through all three volumes. Just as Dante tries in his poem to connect the Greco-Roman and Biblical literature of his cultural past to the urgent questions of his own day, so our course will focus on the way that Dante’s writing (at the very beginning of the modern age) continues to speak to us in the twenty-first century.

Course Goals:

- The first and foundational goal of this course is that each of us read Dante’s entire *Commedia* in a single semester—a feat that is by itself something to celebrate. When you have finished its 14,233 lines of poetry, you can each take pride in having read and engaged with a work regarded as one of the greatest in Western Literature.
- As we read, our second goal will be to recognize and articulate the strategies by which the *Divine Comedy*—both in its overall architectural design and in the specific details of its many key episodes—finds meaning in the vexing spiritual, political, and artistic dilemmas of Dante’s life and times.
- Our third goal will be to use that understanding of the *Divine Comedy* as both a **window** through which to consider the vexing spiritual, political, and artistic dilemmas of the world we live in and as a **mirror** that helps us recognize and address these same dilemmas in our own inner lives.
- Finally, this course will ask you to apply and extend the reading and writing skills you have developed over your first three years in SLUH English to writing tasks that demand independent exploration, synthesis of multiple fields of study, & engagement with scholarly sources.

Texts:

Tales from Ovid, trans. Ted Hughes (summer reading)—ISBN 978-0374525873

Inferno by Dante Alighieri, trans. Robert Pinsky—ISBN 0-374-52452-1

Purgatorio by Dante Alighieri, trans. W. S. Merwin—ISBN 978-1556594618

Paradiso by Dante Alighieri, trans. Mark Musa—ISBN 978-0-14-044443-8

Please make sure to have the right translations of these texts (some have changed from previous years).

Grades:

A+	95 & above	B+	85-89	C+	75-79	D	65-69
A	90-94	B	80-84	C	70-74	F	64 & below

Your grade is the quotient (expressed as a percentage) of the total number of points you earn on your assignments divided by the total number of points possible for the course. That percentage, applied to the grading scale above, will tell you whether you are meeting the expectations of the course (B), exceeding those expectations (A), falling short of those expectations (C), in danger of failing or actually failing to meet the minimum requirements of the course (D and F respectively). Speaking of minimum requirements: you must submit passing work (not counting any late penalties) on all three of your major papers to pass the course—even if you don’t need the points to bring your average into the passing range. Failing essays will have to be redone before the end of the course (12/19).

Assignments & Assessments:

1) Reading Quizzes, etc.—

Please keep up with the daily readings. The reading assignments are not usually very long, but the poetry can be difficult. Read slowly. Reread where necessary. If you like, listen to an audio recording while you read (I know there is a good recording available for our translation of *Inferno*; the others may not be so well represented). Consult the notes in the back of the text. But do not cheat yourself out of the experience of reading the primary text in its entirety (as opposed to, say, giving up and reading on-line summaries instead). I will test your level of daily preparation with frequent reading quizzes and other exercises.

2) Objective Exams—

One of the challenges of reading the *Divine Comedy* is the rapid accumulation of important information—the details with which Dante builds an entire world for us. Names, dates, terms, historical background, literary allusions, important quotations—sometimes the details can seem trivial, but the structure of the whole work depends upon our remembering early encounters and using them as points of comparison for understanding later episodes. To encourage you to take good notes and review them frequently, your quarter and semester exams will consist of both a multiple-choice section that asks you to identify and locate key people within the structure of the text and a short-answer section that asks you to explain key concepts or unpack important episodes. Throughout the course, I will try to provide clear guidance about what to focus on as you prepare, but I recommend that you use Quizlet or some similar on-line flashcard maker to train your memory.

3) Major Papers—²

As we finish each of the three parts of the *Commedia*, I have set aside significant time³ for you to write a paper that explores a connection between some specific part of Dante's text and some specific phenomenon of the modern world. In response to the *Inferno*, I will ask you to write about an example from the world we live in that mirrors Dante's vision of hellish social corruption. In response to the *Purgatorio*, I will ask you to design a plan for applying Dante's vision of redemptive suffering and spiritual growth to your own life. In response to the *Paradiso*, I will ask you to write your own canto, translating some part of Dante's conceit into modern terms. In each case, papers should demonstrate a specific understanding of Dante's text, using his language, his imagery, and his way of thinking about his world in order to refine your understanding of the world you live in. More specific details for each of the three papers will follow in time. Use the essays as a chance to explore topics that are interesting to you, to tell stories that matter to you, and to make meaningful intellectual contributions to the course. I am happy to help you sort out your ideas and to guide you toward resources if you see me during the writing process. Passing all major papers is one of the minimum requirements of the course.

4) Peer Teaching—⁴

Toward the middle of the semester, I will ask you to work in groups to make yourselves experts in one part of Dante's *Purgatorio* (one capital vice or so-called "deadly sin") and then to design and execute a class plan that will give everyone a chance to learn from your expertise. I'll provide you with guidelines and resources, and I myself will be one of those resources, working with each group to answer questions and offer advice. This is a graded exercise, and the whole class will be held accountable for the material you teach.

5) Bonus Recitation—

To encourage you to savor the language of Dante's poetry—as best we can in translation—I will offer bonus points for memorization and recitation of passages of your choosing. Pick a passage of 10 or more lines that you find powerful, interesting, or beautiful. Memorize the passage thoroughly—sentence by sentence. Learn the words so well that you don't have to think about them. Be able to say them as though they were your own words, your own thoughts, your own poetry. Make an appointment with me; bring a copy of the text. Recite your passage for me, and I will give you up to half a point per line for good work. I will give no credit for bloodless, mechanical recitation, but I will give you as many chances to redo it as you need up to the deadline—so start early. The last day to recite a passage from the *Inferno* for bonus credit will be 10/4. The last day to recite a passage from the *Purgatorio* for bonus credit will be 11/15. The last day to recite a passage from the *Paradiso* for bonus credit will be 12/13. You may recite one passage for each of these three parts of the *Commedia*.⁵

WINDOW ON THE WORLD: “THIS HELL IS TODAY’S HELL”*

For your *Inferno* essay I want you to focus on one particular character or one particular sin and its contrapasso and place it side by side with some person or situation in the modern world that makes for a useful comparison and/or contrast. Choose a topic that matters to you and use the essay to try to gain a greater understanding of that topic. Let Dante’s poem teach you something about the world you live in. Let the world you live in teach you something about Dante’s poem.

Your idea for the essay might begin with your attraction to some particular part of the *Inferno*—a character that reminds you of someone; a speech that nags at you, haunts you, or irks you; an image that you find mysteriously attractive or repulsive; a simile that is more complicated than you first imagined; a moment when you find yourself angry with Dante and his crazy book; a list of people that strikes you as odd; a description that seems out of place; a situation that you can easily re-imagine in modern terms; an interaction that you think would never happen in our modern world—until you think about it a little more. Or your idea might start with an issue in the modern world that feels urgent to you—a news story you hear on the radio, an article that comes across on line, an issue that comes up in one of your other classes, a situation that is impacting your life or the lives of people you care about. Perhaps Dante’s text has something to say to that situation. Perhaps if you dig for it you’ll find a surprising connection or insight. (But don’t force a connection if it isn’t there yet.) Wherever the idea comes from, the best essays are those in which the writer is fully engaged with the text and fully engaged with the world.

Some Ideas for Essays:

- Where do you see the destructive impact of neutrality in the modern world? On what urgent issues do we, as a society, fail to take a stand? Pick an issue and do some research. How does Dante help us to understand?
- What contemporary leaders have been destroyed by sexual desire? Pick one of them and research the story. How do Dante’s catalogue of sinners and other details from Canto 5 help us understand him or her? How is the modern story different, and what do we learn from the difference?
- Where in our world do we find controversy about the power of art (music, literature, etc.) to corrupt? Do some research. Basing your argument on Canto 5—what would Dante say about such controversies?
- Does Ciacco’s speech about “the divided city” in Canto 6 reflect the reality of our own sometimes divided city? our divided country? our divided world? Do some research—perhaps something specific to the city of Saint Louis.
- In Canto 7 Dante’s image of the avaricious crashing rocks into one another suggests something about an economic system that is broken somehow. What modern economic problems are reflected in this image? Research on this topic might include work you are doing in an economics class, but be specific. Examine particular case studies.
- Are there places of violence in our world today that remind us of the first ring of Dante’s seventh circle—hot, bloody, patrolled by armed and vigilant overseers? Are there particular dictators whose political violence has plunged their countries or their cities into suffering? Do some reading. Find out their stories.
- How are problems like “cutting,” on-line gambling, or workaholicism related to the suicidal behavior Dante addresses in Canto 13? Do some research to see what’s really going on with these issues.
- How are the sexual abuse scandals that have come to light in churches, schools, the Boy Scouts or the military reflected in the issues Dante raises in Canto 15 &/or 16?
- What are our modern forms of usury? Study the crisis in credit card debt, student loan debt, the predatory practices of pay-day loan agencies and similar lenders. Connect them to Canto 17.
- Is there still Simony in the Catholic Church? Look up the Vatican Butler scandal. What about in other churches or religious institutions? In what ways do people profit today from other people’s need for the sacred? Are there secular religions whose priesthods are corrupt? (e.g., Is FIFA the modern papacy of soccer as a world religion?)
- What about political corruption (barratry)? How do modern forms of political corruption erode public trust and damage the common good? Is there any connection to Cantos 21-23?
- What modern thieves are most snake-like? What about hackers and identity thieves? In what ways does Dante’s depiction of the thieves in Cantos 24 & 25 speak to such modern forms of theft? What about plagiarism?
- Who are our modern Ulysses-figures? In what areas are people crossing the boundaries that ought to limit human knowledge or experience—transgressing on territory that ought to remain sacred? Where else do we see our hero codes in tension with our religious convictions?
- Who are our schismatics? Where are we suffering the most division and who is responsible for the false rhetoric—the fraudulent use of language—that drives such division?
- The *Guardian* ran a story about three years ago about Russian spies that were recently caught in Boston after living for decades in America under false identities so closely guarded that even their children didn’t know (sounds like a television show, right?). The *New Yorker* ran a story about a British woman who learned, decades later, that the man she’d married during her years as a young activist—a man who mysteriously disappeared from her life without a trace—was actually an undercover officer from British

* Quoted from the remarks of St. Louis poet Mary Jo Bang speaking at Left Bank Books in the Central West End on September 18, 2012 about her experience translating Dante’s *Inferno*. Dante depicts “Hell as a mirror of Earth,” she said. “This mirror catches all of us.”

intelligence assigned to infiltrate a political organization she was involved in. Any connections to the impersonators or other falsifiers? What about other modern examples of forgery or counterfeiting? Is there a modern equivalent of alchemy?

- Just this week the *New York Times* ran an exposé on Lisa Bloom and Gloria Allred—two lawyers, famous for representing victims of sexual abuse, who worked behind the scenes to help Harvey Weinstein conspire to discredit his victims and undermine their cases against him. Is this an example of modern treachery? What other public figures are the traitors of our day? our quislings? our betrayers of kin, country, guests, or benefactors? Who are our cannibals, metaphorically speaking?⁶
- These possibilities are only meant to get you started. Feel free to use one or come up with your own.

Research:

Notice that all of these topics ask you to do some research. This essay does require research insofar as you will need secondary sources to support the claims you make about your contemporary figure or situation. Please use sources that are reputable and reliable: top newspapers like the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*; long-form print journalism of the kind you find in the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, or the *Economist*; long-form audio journalism of the kind that the best podcasts are producing—*Radiolab*, *This American Life*, *Back Story*, *Invisibilia*, *Code Switch*, etc. Find studies, stories, interviews, some solid numbers that are relevant to your issue. Wikipedia and other broad reference sites (history.com or online encyclopedias, for example) can be a good place to get started—a way to acquaint yourself with some of the basics—but they should lead you toward more thorough sources rather than serve as an end-point to your research. Wikipedia and similarly broad reference materials should not be among the sources you cite. Let me know if you need help.

Rough Drafts:

This is not an essay that you can crank out in a night. It should take you several drafts to get to the point where you're satisfied with the result. I recommend that you start with some exploratory writing—some journaling about the connection between the poem you've chosen and the part of your life or the part of our world you want to write about. Use such journaling as a way of refining your thinking. When you feel ready, write your rough draft in this form:

1. Begin by telling the story of the problem you've identified with the modern world. Use your research—stories, statistics, cases studies—to try to create a picture for the reader of what's going on in the world with this issue or who this person you're writing about was/is. Cite specific facts. Use vivid and precise detail to evoke meaningful moments. Use similes or metaphors to enhance description. Control the tone and the pace of your narrative. If appropriate, include dialogue from interviews. Do not settle for vague and hasty description. Likewise, do not imagine that merely accumulating a great many specific and concrete details can substitute for the careful crafting of description. Keep your writing tight. Your essay should move swiftly but be powerful and convincing.

2. Switch into analysis of the poem. You are taking a leap here (or breaking a line). Transition swiftly into the poem and its details. You need not begin with a formal thesis, but you must mark the movement from one idea to the next in such a way that argument about the poem builds as you go. Think about the poem in very specific ways—down to the level of its language. Cite the text (duh!). Here and there, you may need a quick bit of summary (a sentence maybe?) to remind your reader of the part of the *Commedia* you're working on, but you should always push through summary to a discussion of the significance you perceive in the details. Your goal is to use your understanding of the ways that Dante expresses himself through symbols and metaphors to help your reader appreciate the complexity of what Dante is doing in this part of the *Inferno*. Do not reduce the poem to a vague generalization or a trite slogan worthy of a motivational poster. Explore the poem's nuances; savor its details.

3. Finish by putting the text and the world side by side. In the third section of the essay, come back to the issue you are writing about and examine it in light of Dante's poem. Let the poem raise questions about your understanding of your world. Let your understanding of a modern issue shape or reshape your reading of the poem. Use both vivid details and quoted language from the poem to get at what matters most to you about the part of the *Commedia* you are writing on. Be honest about complexities and difficulties. Recognize the shortcomings of some of your own ideas. Challenge yourself to get to an original point—new insight into the poem, new understanding of the world you live in. Of course, this is the hardest part. **Make sure that you've held back some good material to use in this paragraph. You don't want to sound as though you're just recycling what you've already covered.** (This is why it will take you multiple drafts to get it right.)

N. B.: When quoting Dante's *Inferno*, you must cite Pinsky's translation by canto and line number. Likewise, you must cite the source(s) of your research on the modern person or situation you are writing about and any opinions that have helped you form your own. Your works cited list should appear at the end of your paper. For information about citing secondary sources follow the MLA guidelines listed in Purdue's On-line Writing Lab ([OWL](#)).

Format & Submission:

As you revise your essay, feel free to move away from this outline. Perhaps you will want to reverse the first two parts, beginning with a powerful argument about the part of the *Inferno* you're focusing on. Perhaps you will want to combine the second and third parts. Experiment to see what works.

The final draft of your essay should be 900-1500 words long, typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides (approximately 3-5 pages). Use MLA format for heading, citations, and works cited page. **The essay is due in class on Monday, September 30** and should be submitted both in hard copy and digitally through **Canvas**.

PEER TEACHING *PURGATORIO*⁷

This assignment is meant to give you the chance to show what you can do as independent readers of Dante's text in a supportive intellectual community. Each group of three or four will have about thirty minutes to teach the essentials of your terrace to your classmates—the essential details and your interpretation of their metaphoric meaning. Your goal will be to help the class come to an understanding of how the key details in the language and description help us to understand...

...what this episode can teach us about the nature of this vice and the process of retraining the soul toward virtue
...how this episode is relevant to Dante's own life as a poet, a political figure, and/or a spiritual pilgrim
...how this episode remains relevant to our lives today

This is not just a practice exercise. What you teach will be covered on the final exam in December. Your classmates are counting on you.

Be prepared.

Besides reading your assigned section of the *Purgatorio* with care, you will want to talk through the usual process of interpretation with your group (see handout). Then do some background research in quality secondary sources—for example, the notes of other scholarly versions of the text⁸, entries in the Dante Encyclopedia, articles accessed through JSTOR or Project MUSE, etc. Discuss the work together. Come up with a central theme around which to organize the class (see below). Create the necessary presentation materials. Divide up roles. Practice. Come prepared to demonstrate your expertise and to make your understanding accessible to all.

Begin with a prayer.⁹

At a minimum a member of your group should prayerfully read aloud some passage from your assigned cantos (or some prayer referred to in your cantos, which you have looked up) for the whole class to reflect on. But you should feel free to be creative with this part of the class. Would the prayer be more effective if read in multiple voices? Is there a musical setting of the prayer that you could play for us? Is there a way to weave in some of the original Italian of the poem or the original Latin of the prayer? Is there some way the rest of the class could be engaged in the prayer—through repetition of a refrain, call and response, the contribution of petitions, etc.?

Provide a handout.

Organize the essential information that your fellow students need to know on one side of a single sheet of paper—names, dates, quotations from the text, quotations from other sources, etc. Get this handout to me by activity period on the day of the presentation so that I can run it off.

Organize your material around a theme or motif.

Obviously, your terrace deals with a particular vice and corresponding virtue—but what else do you notice about how Dante organizes the details of this terrace? For example, I believe the terrace of Pride keeps asking us to reflect on art—both as makers and as consumers. Ultimately it asks us to recognize the spiritual life as a combination of our own creative efforts and God's art working in us. Having this kind of thesis should help you to stay away from the sort of presentation that simply lists all the details connected to the terrace while offering passing commentary. Leave the list of essential details to the handout. Use your class time to interpret metaphors and connect the details to a unifying purpose.

Cover what seems most important to you.

You can't cover every detail from the description of the terrace. You can't explain every allusion. You can't give us detailed background on every penitent. You must choose where to shine a spotlight—on the things that matter most to your central theme. Of course, that means you have to choose a central theme that will help you cover a lot of stuff.

Command the room.

Whether you are presenting material, reading a prayer, asking questions of your classmates, or soliciting information, you should use your voice and your physical presence to command attention and communicate clearly. Be loud enough. Enunciate clearly. Make eye contact. Pace your delivery. Position yourself in an appropriate part of the room. Etc.

Use visuals to engage the class.

If you use PowerPoint or Google Slides (and you probably will) make sure they are clear, that text is legible and not overly crowded, that images are properly sized and not distorted. Above all, make sure that visual aids *support* the class you are teaching but don't take the place of teaching the class. Don't just read information from slides or imagine that assembling a slide presentation is all the preparation you need to do for the class.

Invite participation.

It's likely that some part of your class will involve presentation-style delivery of information, but it's best for everyone if you break things up for some part of the time. How can you invite your fellow students into the conversation? Be creative.

Be creative but not gimmicky.

Do not limit yourself to any one model of how you should teach this class (i.e., four people standing at the front of the class clicking through PowerPoint slides with bullet points on them). There are lots of ways to communicate information and lots of ways to get people thinking about what is meaningful in the poetry of this text. Is there some key concept that you want to demonstrate through a game? a quick role play? a drawing on the board? a short video? If you have to explain the historical background on a particular penitent, is there a modern celebrity you might compare him to? Ask yourself what will help your classmates truly understand this material. I'm open to lots of things. Something is only a gimmick if it's designed to draw attention to itself and not to the material you're trying to teach.

Share responsibility equally.

All members of your group should share responsibility for the work you do behind the scenes: researching, discussing, interpreting, planning, creating materials, and otherwise preparing for class. All members of your group should share responsibility for the work you do in front of the class: reading prayers, leading discussion, fielding questions, presenting material, and otherwise teaching your peers. Evidence of your shared responsibility and cooperation should show through in the way you conduct yourself in front of the class—where it should be clear that everyone understands what he is doing and how his part connects to the whole. There should be no redundancy and certainly no contradiction in the way you present your material. If your group is having trouble working together, please let me know early in the process.

Acknowledge your sources.

You should compile a bibliography of sources you've consulted and include it on your handout and/or at the end of your slide show. You do not need to refer every fact in your presentation back to a source while you are delivering it, but if someone else's interpretive theory is essential to your thinking about the terrace, you should give that scholar a shout out at the appropriate moment. (I'd be happy to advise you about when such an acknowledgement would be fitting.)

Manage your time.

Thirty minutes is both a lot of time and not a lot of time. We will have to keep pretty strictly to time restrictions in order not to fall too far behind. At the end of your thirty minutes, I will typically have a few quick remarks of my own.¹⁰

Share your materials.

Please share digital copies of both your handout and any visual aids so that I can in turn share them with the whole class. Again, the material you teach will be covered on the exam.

PURGATORIO PAPER: DANTE AS SPIRITUAL EXERCISE¹¹

Context: Just as Dante's *Inferno*, in describing Hell, provides a poetic (i.e., metaphoric) portrait of the actual world's corruption and decay, his *Purgatorio*, in describing the way that souls purify their wills and prepare themselves for heaven, provides a poetic portrait of the spiritual life each of us is called to live out in our time on earth. In other words, just as Hell starts now, on this earth, whenever people lie and cheat and steal and so begin to turn the world into a roiling, corrosive, cannibalistic, pit of despair, so the process of freeing oneself from the gravitational force of that pit begins now, on this earth. There is no need to wait for the afterlife. Thus, the design elements common to each terrace of Dante's Purgatory—prayer, spiritual discipline, and contemplating stories of virtue and vice—are based on real spiritual practices—practices that, in one form or another, remain relevant to this day.

Question: if you wanted to identify a vice—an unhealthy attitude of destructive habit of the mind—that is weighing you down or burdening your heart, and if you wanted to shift your consciousness away from that negative disposition and toward some virtue—some healthy attitude or creative habit of the mind—how might you use Dante's terraces as a model for some set of useful spiritual practices of your own—a plan that could be implemented for fifteen to thirty minutes per day over the course of about a month with the hope of its leading to real growth? Your paper will be your answer to this question.

A successful answer must include these **Essential Elements**:

1. Explanation of Intention—the Vice & the Virtue: what name do you give to the debilitating vice that you would like to be free of? Why have you chosen this disposition to focus on? In what concrete ways does this attitude show up in your life? How did you first develop this habit of mind, and what purpose has it served for you? What has it cost you or how has it burdened you to live this way? What name do you give to the restorative virtue that you hope to cultivate? Why do you think it would be helpful to develop this disposition? In what concrete ways do you imagine your life might be different if you put such an attitude into action? What gift do you hope to receive from practicing this new habit of mind? The first section of your paper should answer these kinds of questions using the tools of personal reflection and narrative: concrete detail, specific examples, ability to work at the top and bottom of the ladder of abstraction, etc.

2. Models of Virtue—the Who & the How: whom do you look to for inspiration in this project? Whose lives serve as exemplars of the virtue you want to learn to live by? What specific stories about such people most move you? Just as Dante chooses his exemplars from history from Scripture, and even from literature, you should feel free to be creative in sourcing your own exemplars. In this section you should not only name a few models of virtue but justify your choice by explaining specifically what it is about them that you think you would do well to emulate. At least part of your explanation should include specific references to Dante's own choices to show how yours relate. (N.B.: in honor of Dante's choice to place the Virgin Mary first among the exemplars of virtue on every terrace, I am asking each of you to include one woman among your models for imitation. I think it would be good for all of us men to think about what we can learn from the women in our lives or the women of history and literature.) In addition to making a case for who might best serve as models of virtue for you, you should also answer the more practical question of how you would provide yourself with daily reminders of these inspirational people. For example, if I were to choose Joan of Arc as one of my models of virtue (let's say I want to cultivate the virtue of courage), I might Google images of Joan of Arc, find a particularly inspiring picture, print it on my color printer, and tape it to my bathroom mirror so that I would see it every morning and evening when I brushed my teeth. Or I might commit myself to listening to Leonard Cohen's song "Joan of Arc" every day on my commute to and from school. Or, remembering my trip to the public square in Rouen where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake, I might commit myself to reciting every day as part of my morning prayers the words of André Malraux quoted on the monument in that square: "*Ô Jeanne, sans sépulcre et sans portrait, toi qui savais que le tombeau des héros est le cœur des vivants.*" Whatever my choice, I would place that choice in context by comparing it to one of the ways that Dante imagines exemplars of virtue being presented to his penitents.

3. Your Prayer—the What & the How: recall the definition of prayer I offered in class—“words spoken (or sung) repeatedly and with intention.” This is not a universally applicable definition (prayer can be many other things besides), but it’s a pretty good way of naming the kind of prayer we encounter on Dante’s terraces. What words might you speak (or sing) repeatedly and with intention throughout your own spiritual training? Is there a traditional prayer of the Church or passage from Scripture that speaks to your situation? If so, explain how. What about a poem or a song—something that is perhaps not explicitly religious but which remains applicable to your situation? Or is there a prayer or poem that you might re-translate so that it speaks to your situation—as Dante re-translates the Our Father? Or do you feel it would make more sense to write your own prayer? Whatever the case, the goal is to find a way of stating your intentions out loud and, in whatever way makes the most sense to you, invoking something larger than yourself to sponsor your endeavors. (For Dante, prayer is an important way of acknowledging that spiritual progress relies on a Grace that goes beyond our own efforts—we cannot save ourselves.) Here again, you should both identify what prayer would look like for you and connect your answer to Dante’s text by way of comparison and contrast.

4. The Discipline—the What & the When: the souls in Dante’s Purgatory undergo a penance: a specific discipline that helps make their spiritual education concrete. This is part of the paradox of Dante’s Purgatory—that although these souls are technically immaterial beings, their purgation happens in very physical ways. What is the physical practice that might best serve as a metaphor for the kind of growth you’d like to encourage in your own psyche? Consider the types of penances Dante has designed for his terraces. Is there a physical exercise (like the running of the slothful or the weight-lifting of the proud) that might help reinforce your spiritual exercises? Is there a depravation you might willingly endure in order to redirect your attention to something more spiritual (no extremes of fasting like what we find on the terrace of gluttony, please; and no sewing your eyes shut—but are there dietary changes that might be good for your soul or things you should stop looking at for a while: your phone, your social media accounts?)? Perhaps you, like the avaricious, must learn to be still or to adopt a posture of reverence. Maybe you just need to commit to getting enough sleep. Whatever the discipline, the intention is as important as the action. Almost anything can be a spiritual practice if you bring to it the right frame of mind. As with the other dimensions of your training program, you should not only describe your choice but explain your reasoning by relating it to Dante’s text.

[Optional—Cautionary Examples of Vice:] in addition to exemplars of virtue to imitate, Dante always imagines his sinners trained by counter-examples—people whose fate you can avoid by shedding your vice. I think most psychologists would tell you that positive motivators are more effective, but if you want to include a negative example or two, feel free. Maybe there’s someone close to you whose life has been ruined by the vice you’ve begun to see in yourself. Sometimes we can learn from other people’s mistakes.

As I grade your papers, I’ll be looking for the following **Evaluation Criteria**:

Inventive Understanding of Dante’s Text (*Ingegno*):

Clarity, Precision, and Concreteness of Expression (*Arte*):

BONUS opportunity: the premise of this exercise is hypothetical (“If you wanted to identify a vice…”). But what if you were to put your plan into action? Advent is coming. Stay tuned for details about how to earn a small dollop of bonus credit by trying your plan out and then writing up a brief reflection on the experience.

IMITATIO DANTI: A CANTO FROM TODAY'S HEAVEN¹²

For your *Paradiso* paper, I want you to demonstrate your understanding of and appreciation for Dante's project through an imitation of both his way of thinking and his way of writing. Specifically, I'd like you to write one canto (133-160 lines) of a twenty-first century version of the *Paradiso*—complete with the sort of scholarly notes that would accompany your canto in a modern edition of the text.

You must decide what a twenty-first century *Paradiso* would look like. You should write in the first person, imagining some version of yourself traveling through some version of Heaven. What new purpose calls the pilgrim to the journey? Who is the guide: Beatrice again or someone new? Where is this Heaven—up in outer space as in Dante or elsewhere? In what year does your fictional journey take place? (This is an important question because, unless you come up with a clever work-around, only those who have died by the fictional date of your story can appear as souls in Heaven.) You are free to make as many adjustments to the grand architecture of the scheme as are fitting to your conception—so long as these adjustments afford you opportunities to highlight your understanding of Dante's ways of think and writing. Your individual canto may not address all of these larger questions directly, but it is important that all these answers be clear in your own mind so that you can remain consistent as you write.

As for your individual canto, where does it fall within the larger text? Does it describe part of the pilgrim's experience of a sphere of Heaven—either revisiting one of Dante's original spheres or discovering one of your own invention? (Note that Dante rarely covers a whole sphere in one canto, so a partial experience may be all you have time for.) What virtue is celebrated here? What images, symbols, or other details reveals the essence of this virtue? Remember, Dante's symbolic visions don't usually work by "rewarding" virtue so much as revealing it. What saints—whether official saints of the Catholic Church or others whose holy lives you admire—best represent the virtue you wish to understand? How are they arranged? Does one or more of them speak? or do their circumstances speak for them? Whatever topic you take up, pack your canto with choices that demonstrate your understanding of how Dante goes about making meaning both in the broad organization and in the details of his poem.

In addition to imitating Dante's ways of handling content, use this paper to show me that you have absorbed something of Dante's style—at least insofar as that style has come through in translation. Like any translator of Dante's work, you must decide how many features of Dante's Italian poetry you can carry over into English: his complicated rhyme scheme (*terza rima* or aba bcb cdc ded etc.), his meters (eleven-syllable lines), his division of the poem into three-line units (tercets or *terzine*), his use of consonance and assonance (repetition of consonant and vowel sounds), his epic catalogues, his similes, his allusions to mythological and Biblical literature, his references to the act of writing the poem we are reading, his swifts shifts from one rhetorical mode to another (descriptions, questions, commands, prayers, exhortations, laments, addresses to the reader, etc.), etc. What will make your canto a poem from the Dante school of poetic ambition?

Use your scholarly notes to explain everything about your canto that is brilliant but might not be obvious to the average reader. Write in the voice of a scholar who is *not* also the poet. (I.e., pretend you are not you.) Provide background for the canto's allusions. Take note of stylistic features of its poetry. Interpret the connection between the canto's details and architecture and Dante's. In short, let the notes serve as an opportunity to demonstrate how your canto meets the goals of the assignment.

If you're looking for inspiration or ideas about what style to adopt, there are a number of student samples posted on Canvas. All of them are cantos from a twenty-first century *Inferno* or *Purgatorio*, so they will be different in both tone and substance. But I think they provide good examples of just how ambitious you can be with a paper like this one.

¹ Seniors at our school are required to choose one fall English elective from among seven or eight options, all of which are intended to be the equivalent of a college literature course (e.g., Irish Literature, Shakespeare, African-American Voices).

² Each year, I tinker with the major paper assignments, but the basic structure I've come to is to require one "Window on the World" essay in which students use part of Dante's text to understand something that's going on in the world they live in, one "Life & Literature" essay in which students connect the text to a personal story, and one creative imitation in which students make their own canto. These assignments correspond to the three lenses through which we read and discuss the text in class—the political, the spiritual, and the artistic—which are derived, of course, from Dante's identities as politician, pilgrim, and poet. I schedule each of these papers to respond to one of the *Commedia*'s cantiche, but from year to year I shuffle the order the assignments and refine the writing prompts.

³ Specifically, I give over one week of class time for each major paper—a week of independent writing and one-on-one conferencing. I've found that giving them this kind of time allows them to respond more ambitiously and creatively to the demands of the prompts.

⁴ I introduced this activity two years ago to address the kind of acedia that begins to settle over a course in the middle of a semester—a course which was admittedly becoming too monotonously teacher-driven. The idea of handing over the reins of the class to groups of students came from my own experience studying Dante in the NEH summer seminar. One unintended consequence of having peer teaching on the schedule is that it helps keep me honest in the first half of the course by reminding me that the goal isn't to teach them my reading of Dante but to teach them how to read Dante for themselves. When I sit down with groups to help them plan their time in front of the classroom, I find out in a hurry whether or not I've prepared them to think for themselves.

⁵ My actual syllabus goes on for two more pages. In the interest of space, I have spared you the procedural details of the course, the hectoring reminders, the citations from the parent-student handbook, etc. Imagine these peppered with witticisms.

⁶ I guess these possible topics can give you an idea of the kind of contemporary references I try to bring into the classroom. "The news" is kind of an unofficial second text of the course, and getting my students to pay attention to the news is a kind of unofficial goal—my modest contribution to media literacy and the lost art of civics.

⁷ By way of background, I should explain that we cover Ante-Purgatory together as a class and then I spend a couple of days teaching them the Terrace of Pride as a model of how the terraces work—what elements to expect and how to interpret those elements meaningfully. Then they get several days to work together in groups of three or four to prepare their own teaching.

⁸ Between my own collection and some recent acquisitions by our library, students have access to about a half dozen different editions of the text in English so that they can explore multiple translations and a variety of (sometimes conflicting) scholarly notes. These commentaries have proven the most useful point of access to secondary scholarship since most of the articles students can access through JSTOR or Project MUSE (wasn't that a band in the 90s?) throw around way more Italian than my students can handle.

⁹ I should mention that I teach in a Catholic high school, a context that makes questions about the compatibility of dogma and poetry strangely relevant. Last year I got it in my head that I might be able to get my students to appreciate the idea (and perhaps even the practice) of prayer a little differently if they could access it through poetry. I don't think I was very successful.

¹⁰ You're looking at version 2.0 of these instructions—which I guess is another way of saying you're looking at a list of common problems with the first round of peer teaching the year before. (I'm learning so much as I annotate my own materials.) Stay tuned for version 3.0—instructions which will have to account for a hybrid platform that combines virtual and in-person learning in a time of plague!

¹¹ OK. Now comes the embarrassing part. If this were a job interview, this assignment would be my answer to the inevitable question, "Could you describe for us a lesson that didn't go well?" I'd really rather not include this in my portfolio, but I guess honesty demands it. Here's what happened: sometimes, in the summer, I forget what it's like to be in an actual classroom confronted with actual students and I let my mind wander off into this daydream classroom populated only by students who share my interests and my temperament and my tastes. And then I plan lessons for those students, lessons that seem grand and beautiful. In this case, the grand and beautiful idea was that I was going to convince students that the *Purgatorio* is Dante's most practical book—a kind of poetic self-help book that just needed a few warnings about not trying to actually sew your eyes shut. I thought that I was modifying my Life & Literature essay assignment to give it this sort of practical urgency, but what I was really doing was eviscerating it of the meaty literary analysis that gave past papers their substance. I could tell almost as soon as I assigned it that I'd screwed up. The students were good sports about it, and we talked through some modifications on the spot to help give them a clearer structure to work with. But this one's going in the bin. A lesson for the teacher this time.

¹² In early iterations of the course, I assigned a broader "creative project" that included everything from visual art to radio plays to creative writing. Some of the projects were brilliant. One year, students painted a *Paradiso* mural in my classroom that still moves me to tears. Still, so many projects were ill-conceived and poorly executed (there is no sadness like that of a papier-mâché mountain of Purgatory made from an exam study guide). To be fair, much of the fault lay in the vagueness of the guidelines. Several years ago, I narrowed the project options down to one—to write a canto in imitation of Dante's cantos. It's a pretty traditional Dante assignment—I myself wrote a canto for Professor Bailin's Classic Lit course first semester freshman year (Michael Milken in Hell, I believe)—but it has given me the chance to clarify expectations, to give students better guidance, and to make sure that students are really learning something meaningful about Dante. "What would Dante do?" I often ask them when they come to me with a problem in writing their canto. "How would he handle it?" And then we have a chance to think creatively together. I was pleased to hit upon the idea of having students comment on their own work in a series of notes in the voice of a scholar. It gives me the chance to see what they think they're up to—and God knows I'd have no more chance of understanding their pop-cultural references without notes than they would of following references to Guelphs and Ghibellines. Interestingly, having narrowed the assignment, I am now ready to broaden it again. Last year, a student approached me with the idea of writing his canto as a musical composition—a tone poem. He made the argument based on how much we had emphasized the importance of music in *Paradiso*, so how could I refuse? He still had to submit scholarly notes that made the relationship to Dante explicit. The result was brilliant, and it helped me see how I could give students more of a choice of medium for making their canto while still keeping some common parameters in place for the integrity of the assignment.