

# World Poetry: The Power and Limits of Sight and Expression, Re-reading *The Divine Comedy* with Jorge Luis Borges

Spring 2019

Professor Julianne VanWagenen  
Office: He-er Building, 119, West entrance

Office Hours: TBD or by appt  
Email: vanwagen@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn

## Course Description

This course provides an introduction to Dante Alighieri's 14th century masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, through the lens of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges. Though written in the late middle ages, Dante's poem acts as an entry point to the modern Western world, its literature, philosophy, natural science and cosmology. Borges's essays about the *Comedy*, as well as his 1949 rewriting of the epic poem in short-prose form, will help students to conceive of the continued relevance of Dante's literary imagining. The course will utilize Dante's poem, not just to study the medieval poetic stylings of one of the most important and influential Western poets to date, but also to help students conceive of the culture and history of Medieval Europe, through Medieval Florence, a banking epicenter, and the Medieval Papacy, ruler of both spirit and land. Topics include: the return of the classics of antiquity to the Christian world; the rise of vernacular authorship and vernacular poetics during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries; high medieval manuscript culture and/in the *Comedy*; Dante, Aristotle and the natural sciences; Virgil and Ovid in the Middle Ages; myth and theology in Dante's Christian poetics. The course will mainly utilize the Durling/Martinez Oxford edition of the *Comedy* which is up-to-date and provides robust contextualization.

## Course Objectives

- Students will begin to be able to speak comfortably about the *Divine Comedy* as a whole; they will know from memory its setting and, at least, its most important characters
- Students will be able to talk about the relationship between the *Divine Comedy* and its setting and characters, and Dante's contemporary and near-contemporary world and its historical characters
- Students will be able to place the *Divine Comedy*, its groundbreaking style, language, and imaginings, in its broader historical and literary context.
- Students will be able to talk about the role of Jorge Luis Borges as a groundbreaking stylist and imaginer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and they will be able to compare and contrast the two authors.

Students will present in class, with the goal of analyzing and persuading, as well as of summarizing and explaining. Students will write short papers that respond to a prompt, which will develop their ability to think critically about a given question and to provide a well-organized, concise and convincing elaboration from the prompt. Students will rely to a minimal degree on secondary sources, rather the brunt of their written work will focus on their own ability to derive arguments from the in-class texts. Students are welcome to office-hours to discuss their first two papers, and with that help and the written feedback, they will be tasked the development of their final essay on their own.

Evaluation: Students will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

**Essays: 60%**

- Essay 1 – 20%
- Essay 2 – 10%
- Final Essay – 30%

**Presentations: 25%**

- Presentation, on Dante (his life and works): 15%
- Presentation, on secondary readings (in relation to the day's primary reading): 10%

**Attendance and participation: 15%**

Essays: Written assignments will be double spaced with standard margins. Throughout the semester, they will include one essay of 4 pages, one essay of 3 pages, and a final essay of 5 pages. Students are expected to follow a proper citation style. Plagiarism is strictly prohibited.

Dante Presentation: Beginning in Week 2, each student will present on Dante's life and works. Students will be able to choose from a list of his minor works and contemporary political and historical events. These presentations are meant to help broaden students' understanding of both Dante's poetic development, as well as contemporary events that may have, or most certainly did, influence his writing.

This presentation will begin each class. Students must include research from two secondary sources that will be cited at the end of the presentation. Students will present at the front of the class and may choose to include presentation materials such as handouts and slide shows. This presentation must be between **8 and 10 minutes long**. Presentations that are shorter or longer than the prescribed time limit will suffer from a reduced mark.

Secondary Reading Presentation: Beginning in Week 2, each student will present on one of the day's secondary texts as it relates to the day's primary text. These presentations will act as close readings that work to tease out the relationship between the medieval poem and contemporary theoretical work that has been chosen to accompany it.

This presentation does not need to include outside sources. Students will present from their seats without the use of presentation materials, such as handouts or slide shows.

This presentation must be between 3 and 4 minutes long. Presentations that are shorter or longer than the prescribed time limit will suffer from a reduced mark.

Attendance and Participation: Students must attend all classes and receive approval for missing class for any other reason than a documented sickness. Students will be graded for in-class participation. In order to receive full participation marks, students must participate in every class period by raising their hands and commenting on the text, on the professor's lecture, or on another student's presentation.

Consultation: Students are encouraged to contact the instructor with any questions about seminar material or assignments. In-person meetings may occur during the instructor's office hours, TBD.

Intellectual Property: Unless otherwise noted, the content of all lectures and supplementary materials (e.g. activity handout, synopses, agendas) provided by the instructor are his intellectual property.

## Index of Texts:

### Primary Readings

Alighieri, Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, PDF provided  
Borges, "The aleph" PDF provided

### Secondary Readings

From Jorge Luis Borges, *Nine Dantesque Essays*, PDF provided  
From Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights*, PDF provided  
From Durling/Martinez edition of *The Divine Comedy*, PDF provided  
From Rachel Jacoff ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, PDF provided  
From Rex Butler, *Borges' Short Stories: A Reader's Guide*

## Seminar Schedule

### Part I: *Inferno*

- February 25: Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I-II
- March 4: Dante, *Inferno*, Cantos III-V; XI  
Borges, "Noble Castle of the Fourth Canto" in *Nine Dantesque Essays*
- March 11: Dante, *Inferno*, Cantos XIII; XV, ll. 46-98; XVI, ll. 94-136; XVII  
Freccero, "Allegory and Autobiography" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*
- March 18: Dante, *Inferno*, XVIII, ll. 1-20; XXII; XXVI; XXX  
Borges, "The Last Voyage of Ulysses" in *Nine Dantesque Essays*
- March 25: NO CLASS
- April 1: Dante, *Inferno*, XXXI-XXXIV  
Borges, "The False Problem of Ugolino" in *Nine Dantesque Essays*

### Part II: *Purgatorio*

- April 8: Dante, *Purgatorio*, Cantos I-II; IX  
Mazzotta, "Life of Dante" in *The Cambridge Companion*  
[IN CLASS] Borges, "Purgatorio 1, 13" in *Nine Dantesque Essays*  
ESSAY 1 DUE (4 pages)
- April 15: Dante, *Purgatorio*, Cantos XVII-XVIII; XXI; XXVII, ll. 124-142  
Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical Poets" in *The Cambridge Companion*
- April 22: Dante, *Purgatorio*, Cantos XXVIII ll. 22-27, 133-144; XXIX ll. 13-99;  
XXX-XXXII ll. 1-24, 100-105; XXXIII  
Harrison, "Approaching the *Vita nuova*" in *The Cambridge Companion*  
[IN CLASS] Borges, "The Meeting in a Dream" in *Nine Dantesque Essays*

### Part III: 15 Cantos of *Paradiso*

- April 29: Dante, *Paradiso*, Cantos I-II, X  
Ferrante, "A Poetics of Chaos and Order" in *The Cambridge Companion*  
ESSAY 2 DUE (3 pages)
- May 6: Dante, *Paradiso*, Cantos XI-XIII ll.1-2, 46-51, 112-14; XIV ll.40-51, 79-84  
Najemy, "Dante and Florence" in *The Cambridge Companion*
- May 13: Dante, *Paradiso*, Cantos XVII, XXI-XXII  
Williams, "The Theology of the Comedy" in *The Cambridge Companion*
- May 20: Dante, *Paradiso*, Cantos XXVI, XXVII-XXVIII  
Boitani, "The Poetry and the Poetics of Creation" in *The Cambridge Companion*
- May 27: Dante, *Paradiso*, Cantos XXX, XXXII-XXXIII  
Borges, "Beatrice's Last Smile" in *Nine Dantesque Essays*

### Part IV: Minimal Description of the *Divine Comedy* in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Short Fiction

- June 3: Borges, "The Aleph", Part I  
"The Divine Comedy" in *Seven Nights*
- June 10: Borges, "The Aleph", Part II  
Butler, "Infinity and One" (The section on "The Aleph"), pp. 63-65, 73-79

FINAL ESSAY DUE BY June 15<sup>TH</sup> 2019 (5 pages)